

Light on Shattered Water

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On that unseasonably hot autumn afternoon the sun was riding high in an endless blue vault, coaxing heat-shimmers from stone and earth. And I was as lost as I've ever been.

My boots raised small clouds of dust as I followed the rutted and rocky little goat-trail up the hillside. Unseen insects chirped and swarmed through the sunwarmed grasses and undergrowth, the razzing of cicadas a continuous chorus in the summer air. That and the occasional cry of a distant animal were the only sounds I'd heard for a long while. The heat and humidity sucked the perspiration out of me as I worked my way around a pile of bleached sandstone rocks upon which a stunted little conifer had taken root and was putting up a valiant struggle against the elements. I wiped the sweat away and slogged on up the trail that climbed the summer-shocked hillside toward the treeline. Something in my pack was digging into my back.

In the welcome shade of the trees, among pine trunks and a carpet of fallen needles, I stopped and took the opportunity to catch my breath; and fiddle with my pack until the load was seated more comfortably. Then I looked back at the path I'd come and forward at the path still to travel and sighed. It was a trail I was following, I was pretty sure of that. It was overgrown and eroded and more suited to mountain goats in places, but it was a trail. Perhaps it'd take me somewhere that had a phone I could use.

I'd been lost while hiking before, but never like this. I mean, there'd been times when I wasn't exactly sure where I was, but there'd always been the inevitable signpost or landmark or town where I could ask directions. Now, I'd been walking for days and I hadn't even seen so much as a road. The cell link in my laptop didn't work, but there was always a chance I was outside the coverage. My maps - paper and digital - neither made sense. They didn't jive with the Vermont I was walking around in, the landscape simply didn't match up: When I thought I'd matched a hill to one depicted on my map, a river turned up that shouldn't be there or a road that should've been there was missing. I hadn't seen anyone, not a person or a building or even a contrail from a plane, not after that... whatever it was that'd happened to me. Not a sign of civilization anywhere, but there were still odder things.

On my second afternoon after waking on that hillside without the faintest idea where I was, I'd been following a ridgeline overlooking a steep little valley with a stream at the bottom. There was a family of bears down there, a large one with several cubs in tow splashing through the water. I went the other way; quickly. Later that day, I realised what I'd taken to be a black cloud was moving south, against the wind. Birds, a flock of birds. Millions upon uncountable millions of them flying south. I stripped off my sunglasses and just stood and stared slack-jawed at that unbelievable specacle until the amorphous mass was lost into the red-streaked dusk sky.

I was starting to feel more than a little bit nervous.

It was my third day of fruitless wandering before I'd stumbled across this dirt track. It might have just been an animal track, probably was: I couldn't see any traces of footprints in the dried mud, but of hoof and pawprints there were plenty. Maybe I'd wandered into a private reserve somewhere, even though there weren't any of those marked on my map and I hadn't seen any signs or fences. I'd been following that track for hours and it still didn't seem to be getting me anywhere, but at least it was something; I was already a day overdue. Jackie would be trying to call, she'd be getting worried. How long before she did

something like call the Ranger service? The worse thing about being hauled out by chopper would be the embarrassment.

Now the path was climbing the side of yet another hill. Further down it'd described a snakelike route through thick undergrowth and trees. Tough going: Rain had eroded it in places. Elsewhere I had to climb over exposed roots and rocks and fallen branches, push through bushes that scratched my arms and ripped my t-shirt. I could've worn my jacket, it was quite thornproof, but in that heat it just wasn't worth unrolling it. Anyway, toward the ridge the going got easier as the undergrowth thinned out, making way for the scrubs' larger coniferous cousins. The trail crested the hill at a place where a granite outcropping of huge, weather worn boulders denied the trees a place to grow. A lookout across the broad valley below. And when I clambered up and stood there and saw what lay on the other side of the mountain my spirits soared.

Farmland. There were farms down there. At last some sign of civilisation, however pastoral it might be. My fatigue evaporated into the bright sunlight and I gladly shrugged out of the pack then dropped down beside it and took my canteen from its clip, raising it in salute to the world before drinking. For a while I rested, just sitting there enjoying the scenery.

It was a broad shallow valley; very picturesque, cupped between ranges of low forested hills on either side. What was either a small river or large stream sparkled and wound its way along the valley floor. Patchwork sections of farmland were dotted along its banks, sandwiched between the river and forest the butted right up against their flanks. And along with the fields there were buildings down there. Further up the valley lay a small town or village: a cluster of a few dozen buildings visible through the trees. I couldn't see any cars anywhere, or paved roads come to that, or phone lines, power lines. It was calm and peaceful. A number of the structures in the village flanked a packed-dirt Main Street while others were scattered along the peripheries. I could see some of the larger buildings along the street done in that Tudor style: whitewashed walls with black beams visible across the plaster. Other places were smaller and

looked like they were made of unpainted wooden clapboard. Roofs... quite a few thatched roofs. I scratched my head. That's illegal; firetraps like that are against building regulations in most states. Elsewhere across the valley were other isolated pockets of buildings tucked away in copses and in among sheltered hedgerows. Farms, by the rings of fields and pastures that surrounded them. It was an odd way of arranging a community, but I guessed they valued their privacy.

Nevertheless, the more I looked the more discrepancies I noticed. But there were people down there. Smoke was rising from chimneys and I could see a few distant stick-figures: walking, working in the fields... driving a team of animals pulling a wagon?

I shook my head in bewilderment, stood and stretched, then gathered up my pack. I'd find out what was going on when I got down there. Perhaps it was an Amish settlement, or one of those self-sufficient cadres I'd heard about; something like a kibbutz or ejido, or one of those back-to-nature societies who decide that 'nature' still necessitates building houses and farming and felling trees for polluting wood-burning fires. I'd heard there were some Quaker settlements in this region of Vermont, maybe I'd stumbled onto one of those. Perhaps it was a medieval role-playing festival: society for creative anachronisms, something of a similar ilk. Whatever, they could at least set me on the path back to civilisation.

With a bit more purpose in life I set off down the path. That damned mystery object in my pack was digging into my back again.

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The 'trail' curved down to emerge from the treeline, dropping down an eroded

bank at the edge of an outlying field. The field was furrowed, ploughed, but nothing was growing, not at this time of year. Carefully I climbed over the rickety fence, just wooden poles slung between uprights. No nails that I could see; cheap and simple. The wood looked like someone had gone to a lot of trouble cutting and treating it by hand, axe marks were quite visible where branches had been trimmed. A gaggle of farm buildings nestled among a dense grove of low trees of some kind not too far off, so I headed toward it.

A brilliant day. A few clouds in the vault of the sky, the air uncharacteristically hot for the time of year. The deciduous trees were already a riot of color, turning the hills rusty-gold in patches while the evergreens formed their own enclaves. Winter was lurking just over the horizon. Further along there was another fence, this one with an unsecured gate opening onto a rutted track leading to the farm buildings. I turned up it.

Quiet though; unusally so. No sounds of animals, no engines. Even when I approached the buildings. Several different structures were arranged around a small dusty courtyard littered with animal droppings, the farmhouse itself: thick thatched roof, wooden weatherboard walls, tiny windows, small door, heavy wooden shutters and a stone chimney with a trickle of smoke showing there was someone home. There were no lights, no phone or power lines, no vehicles or old trucks or the usual debris you find around farms, not even a cigarette butt or recognisable piece of trash. A small rickey-looking building might have been a toolshed and another was probably a barn: larger than the house with big doors hanging ajar. No chickens or dogs. Why wasn't there at least a dog barking?

"Hello?" I called, nervously. Something wasn't quite right... Hell, something was way out of wack. "Hello? Anyone here?"

There was a pause before the barn doors pushed open. What stepped out wasn't a person.

It took a second to register. I just blinked moronically at what was standing in the door, at first thinking costume, then for the first time in my life I knew what it feels like to have your heart miss a beat: realising it couldn't be a costume, realising it was too goddamn REAL and then not believing what my own eyes were showing me: a monstrous jigsaw that refused to resolve. Catlike, but standing on two legs... a mishappen and distorted human with a cat head, clothing. No, not human. The way the muscles moved... it wasn't human. An organic patchwork, Frankenstein's creature. I remember... parts of it. Like a David Hockney work, a jumble of needle-sharp detail joined to make a whole: A feline head with wide copper eyes locked on me, a distorted furry hand with a chunky green stone bracelet dangling at the wrist holding the door, a stocky fawn-furred torso, baggy grey pants with flashes of gold, a twitching tail and inhuman, twisted legs and wide-splayed shaggy feet.

Then it opened its mouth and snarled... something. The way the noises flowed together, they didn't sound like the noises an animal would make. Loudly. And several others appeared in the doorway behind it: multicoloured fur, green and amber eyes, one holding something long and wooden that terminated in several sharp spikes. It snarled, then shifted its hold on the implement, pointing the tines toward me, others raised blunter instruments that were more familiar, stubby fingers cocking hammers.

I took several steps back, then turned and ran. Even with a twenty-odd kilo pack on my back I ran. Howls sounded behind me. Another creature appeared in the farmhouse door wearing something I had the insane impression was an apron. It squalled and dived back inside, slamming the door. I picked up speed, making for the trees, vaulting a fence, catching my foot and falling flat on my face with a jolt that knocked the wind out of me. I scrambled to my feet and risked a look behind me. One of the things was raising something to its shoulder. A dense puff of white smoke rose, followed by a dull flat-sounding crack and something whirred past. I automatically ducked, then ran again. Another bang and what could only be a bullet whipped past with a peculiar thhrppping sound.

I hit the treeline and kept going, ducking and pushing my way through the undergrowth, clawing myself back up the hill I'd only just descended and down the other side. I kept going, running blindly through forest and scrub until a stitch cramped me up and I couldn't take another step. I doubled over, then collapsed between the roots of a tree, sucking in lungfuls of air.

It wasn't possible, the voice in my head kept repeating. It's not possible. It can't be possible... No.

But I'd seen it; I'd heard it; The buildings were there, the creatures were there. They shot at me. I looked back the way I'd come. There was no sign of them, but if they wanted to follow I'd left a trail like an epileptic rhino. I didn't want to be here, not while they were still so close. Still shaking, I gathered up my gear and made my way further back into the hills, away from the town, this time taking care to cover my tracks.

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That night I sat outside my two-person igloo, listened to the creek gurgling, swatted at bugs, and stared at the crescent of moon riding low over a distant hilltop. The moon. It was still there; it'd always been there. Eternal and unchanging. But now I stared at it and the longer I stared the more differences emerged. The shapes of the seas were wrong. Where were Tycho and Copernicus? Tranquillity? It was a moon, but it wasn't the one I'd grown up with. The hollow feeling inside grew and the more I searched for answers, the more befuddled I became.

What had happened to me? Was I cracking up? Loosing my grip? Was it

something else?

I preferred to think it was something else.

What?

A government project or experiment? I've seen internet files on some of the cutting edge in genetic engineering, and what I'd seen... we were nowhere near that.

The Rip Van Winkle syndrome: I'd fallen asleep under a tree for a hundred years and things had changed?

Alien invasion? Then why the crude architecture, why the lack of vehicles or any sign of industry? and that weapon had sounded like a musket. Surely they'd have something more advanced. Energy weapons, or at least automatic weapons.

I picked up my small butane lamp and took out my zippo. Ready to light the wick before I realised what might see it. I snapped the lighter shut and set it aside, suffered the evening darkness while I munched morosely on a sack of Trail Mix. Somewhere else. That accident at those high tension power lines when that isolator came down, that flash of light. It would explain why when I woke up the lines had vanished. I'd thought I'd been knocked on the head and wandered away from the site. I hadn't wandered, but I'd gone further than I'd ever suspected. Or maybe I'd died and this was a weirder purgatory than Dante had ever dreamed of.

Now I was here, wherever here was, and whatever those things down in the town were, they weren't human. I shuddered. How was I going to get away from here, how was I going to get home. Could I get home?

I looked back in the direction of the town, two insulating hills away. What if they came after me? What could I do? Run, I guess. Fight? I had some plastic cutlery and my leatherman, nothing of much use against guns or even farm tools. Would they come after me?

Perhaps I should find out just what those things were, what they were doing there. It might help me find out where I was and just how I was supposed to find my way back home.

And just how should I go about that?

As carefully as I possibly could. If I ever got my hands on you, Elliott. You and your fucking holidays.

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The town rose with the sun. I was there early, while the sun was just a suggestion on the eastern horizon and a morning mist hugged the valley floor. Already there were figures bustling in the streets. I settled down on the rocky outcropping I'd chosen as my position and set up my monocular, a decent 15x Leica. If I'd used it the other day it might have saved me a lot of trouble.

Cats, that what they looked like, walking and running on two legs with a peculiar fluid gait. They were wearing clothes: things like short kilts, baggy trousers, long shirt-like affairs that hung down past the waist, even things that looked like the baggy shorts surfies favour. Different colors, some bright, almost garishly so, others subdued and earthy.

And they went to work. I saw farmers labouring in their fields, some hoeing and weeding and gathering crops, others working with livestock: goats and deer and bison and turkeys. In the town there were buildings that could have been stores, with barrels and baled goods outside and signs written in some indecipherable script that looked like spastic chicken scratchings. Periodically a harsh, rhythmic sound reach up to me from down in the valley: a clash of metal on metal from somewhere in the town. Shorter versions of the creatures that could have been children scurried around the streets and fields, rolling in the dust. A small group wandered down to a spot on the river that looked like the local swimming hole where they romped around, diving and splashing and fishing.

It looked so much like small-town America, a mis-framed Norman Rockwell painting, but for those things... Norman Rockwell on acid.

I stayed there for hours, watching them. Was this an isolated community, perhaps the only one? No, there was a road leading off down the valley. Around about midday a wagon plodded into town, pulled by things that looked like mutated llamas: oversized and overmuscled. Obviously it was expected and welcomed because creatures from all around dropped what they were doing and came running when it arrived. Barrels and crates and sacks were unloaded. Mail, I realised. Freight and goods. It had to have come from somewhere.

The wagon was loaded again with stuff carried out from several stores. Trade. It left a few hours later, rattling off in a pale cloud of dust with cubs trailing it to the outskirts of town. So, there were other settlements. Within a few hours travel

too; unless that cart had travelled all night.

The next day was pretty much the same and I realised that I wasn't going to learn much sitting up on a hill watching them, but what else was I supposed to do? Last time they'd seen me they'd shot first and not even bothered to ask questions. So I kept watching from a distance.

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Days passed and I watched them. Once I ventured down.

As darkness fell I crept down to another farm on the edge of town. The late evening: a time when they all disappeared inside their homes and there was nothing moving on the streets.

There were lights burning in the small windows, a warm glow. I crept closer, keeping outside the pool of light illuminating the dust outside. It was a small room with a low ceiling, a fire burned in what looked like a cast-iron stove. The felids were eating. The locals gathered around a table engaged in a raucous evening meal complete with bowls and utensils. Two adults, if one was male and the other female I couldn't see any difference. Two young ones bouncing around, obviously being berated by their elders. At the time I thought of them as a family, but now - more familiar with their social structure - I know better. I could hear the noises of their language from outside and hesitantly tried mimicking a few... words. Difficult; they made my throat itch.

Food. I was going to have to worry about that. I had enough stuff with me to last maybe another two weeks if I rationed it, then I'd be on my own. I'd have to

set a few snares to catch something. My laptop's encyclopedia probably had something on that. Perhaps I could 'borrow' some food: There were things I thought were smoke houses around that weren't guarded.

Meal over and the room bustled as they cleared the table, bodies moving too and fro in front of the window throwing changing shadows outside. I moved back a bit, just as one looked my way and froze and stared, then pointed and howled.

Shit, and I'd thought they wouldn't be able to see me in the dark. Cat's eyes.

Halfway out across a field there was a yowling noise from the house. I paused and looked back; the door was open, a felid silhouetted in the opening with something in its hands, raised it to shoulder height and I immediately ducked. There was no gunshot, but something hit the dirt nearby. I ran again, only daring to turn on my flashlight when I was well within the cover of the trees.

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A week went by and I started to worry about food. I started setting snares and catching smaller animals: rabbits, birds and the such. I've always hated the cleaning and gutting that follows, but it was something I had to learn to put up with. Properly prepared, one rabbit was enough to feed me for a couple of days, provided I mixed it with a few plants and other wildlife. I found it was possible to starve to death on an exclusive rabbit diet; missing trace elements or something. I even set up a small smoking process: it helped preserve the meat and hid the scents of a fresh kill from any larger animals that might have been sniffing around.

And I wasn't any closer to finding what had happened. I'd trekked back the way I thought I'd come and there was nothing there. There was that dirt road leading out of town and that was the way the other things had come in. There wasn't anything else. I spent nights lying awake wondering what was going on back home. Were they looking for me? Christ, where would they start? And what hope would they have of finding me?

They were long nights.

And it was about that time I started noticing something new down in the town. There was a house down in the valley below my lookout point that had appeared to be deserted since I'd first seen it: run down with birds nesting in the patchy thatching, shutters and door closed, never any sign of life. Now I'd been seeing a felid around the place: throwing open the doors and windows, cleaning the place up. It had got several others in to help fix the roof and cart some furniture in.

"Someone else new in town," I surmised, giggled a little to myself. It was too easy to believe none of this was real.

It spent several days working on the farm, but not actually farming. A lot of time was spent in the barn, sweeping it out, hauling stuff from inside and dumping it around the back, cleaning it out. I watched the proceedings with interest and curiosity. Late one night, after the inhabitants were indoors and the last of the lights had gone out, I had a poke around. Inside, the barn was a single large space with double doors at each end. The place had been cleaned out, the packed dirt floor covered with a layer of straw. A small stove was set over by the wall, a makeshift flue poking out through the boards. Oddest of all were the benches and tables, four of each arranged in rows facing a desk at the far end. Behind that desk several large flat pieces of black slate were hung from the doors. I walked around in the moonlit interior, sitting on a bench and looking around. What was this? A bingo hall? church?

A few days later I was watching the town waking up as sunlight flowed into the valley, the farmers off to work, but this time the cubs began flocking toward this end of the town, a rollicking crowd of furry little bodies rolling and squabbling in the dust around the barn. Different sizes and ages mixed together, running around, throwing balls and chasing after them. About twenty of them I guessed. The felid who lived in the house came out with a satchel slung over its shoulder and began gathering the cubs together. It was so... Walton-ish that when I realised what they were doing I had to laugh. "School's in."

Twenty rowdy cubs were herded into the barn. I shook my head. If it thinks it can keep order in there, good luck. Then I stared at the barn, thinking.

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Night time again. The moonlight coming in through the barn door not quite bright enough to see by. I flicked on my flashlight, the halogen beam throwing a white disc around the walls, up toward the roof. Yep, like I remembered: right above the door there was a loft or some kind of storage area. It had been boarded off, making a tiny attic space less than a quarter the length of the barn. There was a door up there: small, with a huge rusting bolt, set in a corner of the loft close up against the outside wall. I circled around underneath, shining the light around while I tried to figure out a way up there. No ladder, but if I jumped I could grab hold of one of the diagonal supports under the loft, directly below the door, and haul myself up, perching in the narrow triangle. I pushed my flashlight into a shirt pocket, pointing up, now I could reach up and grab the bolt.

Jammed or rusted solid.

Shit. I yanked hard on it and one of the nails holding the latches to the door pulled loose with a loud squeal. “Shit!” I yelped as I fell backwards. The other nail held and I was hanging precariously from my perch by a bit of rusty metal, my heart pounding. If something had heard me...

I caught my handhold again and pulled myself back, pushed the door open, scrambling into the loft: a tiny triangle of a space hard up against the roof. I clicked the flashlight off and pressed against the wall and listened.

Wind. Insects. Otherwise silence.

I was too far away from the house for anyone to have heard me, hopefully. After a while I turned the light on again, shining it around. Junk mainly. There were a couple of scraggly piles of hay and fragments of straw scattered around the place, some remains of sacking. A split axe handle was propped in a corner along with a few rusting bits of metal that might have been nails. Not much else. I guess this wasn't a throw-away society. I'd been hoping there might be a knothole on the inside wall that would give me a view down over the classroom. No such luck. I opened my leatherman and used the awl to bore a small hole. Then I made sure the door was shut, settled down against a bale, munched a bit of smoked rabbit washed down with a swig from my canteen, switched my light off and settled down to sleep.

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I dreamed. I dreamt I was lost in a maze, running through countless corridors. A final turn and there was a door, guarded by a knight in armour. I hesitated and the knight stepped forward, a sword leaving its sheath. I backed away and the knight raised his visor and a cat's face grinned at me. Snarling something.

Noises woke me with a jolt, blinking at roof joists a couple of arms-lengths from me and wondering where I was. I rolled over, seeing sunlight filtering through cracks in the walls. I pressed my eye against one; the cubs were outside, engaged in their usual chaotic games. A louder voice broke over theirs: the teacher. I heard the door below open and the cubs spilled inside. I moved over to the small hole I'd carved, laying out my notepad and pen while they scrambled for benches. Huh, seemed the back of the class was the most popular place here too. The teacher moved up to the desk at the front.

The first time I'd been able to examine one up close and undisturbed. Not as stocky as the others I'd seen, with tawny fur and cinnamon stripes around the ribs. It walked with a stalking grace that reminded me of a big cat, perhaps a Lynx, especially with those tufted ears and cheeks, the furry ruff around the neck. The legs were odd... the broad toes touched the ground, splaying out with every graceful step, while the ankle was raised high, giving the illusion the leg had another joint: similar to a dog on its hind legs, but this looked more... I don't know... natural. It was wearing a pair of faded red shorts with a pouch slung at the hips. A slender, furry tail protruding from the shorts twitched like a metronome. Perhaps it was the way those hips moved, or perhaps it was the twin rows of black teats visible in the fur down its front that had me peg it as a 'she'. It was as good a label as any, so until I could find out for sure I stuck with it.

She laid her satchel on the desk and pulled out several books: big things of leather and yellowy paper, also a small case that she opened and pulled out some small glass things. Spectacles. I almost laughed as she perched them on her broad muzzle and set the twisted earpieces in place. A schoolmarm. Of course they'd have to wear glasses. I stifled another fit of the giggles.

With the glasses in place and a book open to a certain page she turned to her charges and snarled something. They shut up and she began.

That talking... it was like a steam boiler leaking, a tesla coil snapping, sandpaper on sharkskin, a catfight and other noises. Words were growled, sibilants extended. I listened, trying to make some sense of it. Very few palatal consonants, sounds like 'el', 'double ew', 'dee'...try to speak with your tongue pressed against the bottom of your mouth and you get a vague idea of what I mean. All the sounds were from the throat and vocal chords or sharp plosives from the lips.

She started scratching on the pieces of slate with a piece of chalk. Scratching up those cuneiform figures, then she pointed at one and made a noise, the class echoed and I tried saying it with them, under my breath, jotting the figure down in my notebook with a phonetic key alongside.

Gho

Ghe

Ghi...

—v—

I guess the education system here ain't quite what it was at home, not that that's much to crow about these days. School was let out about midday. The teacher shut her books and there was a general scramble for the door as a tide of furry bodies spilled outside. As eager as kids anywhere to get back to the outside world. The teacher packed away her books and glasses, then spent a while cleaning the slates she'd used for chalkboards. I closed my notebook and watched her.

I'd learned a lot that day. The cubs called her 'Chihirae'. I couldn't determine whether that was her name or if just meant 'teacher'. There were a few phrases I'd picked up: something that meant something like 'I need help' and 'I do not understand'. Also 'I have to go to the bathroom' and 'sit down and shut up'. She'd also covered something like basic arithmetic: addition and subtraction using some rocks and numerals scratched up on the board. I was surprised at how like Roman numerals they were, also glad they were using base ten decimal and not some variant like base-eight, hex or binary.

So I waited until she'd left before climbing out of my hidy-hole. It was a simple matter of letting myself out the back doors and skulking across a field to the trees, keeping the barn between me and the farmhouse all the way.

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I went back to the class as often as I could, for weeks. As the weather grew colder and the trees put on their autumn coats, gradually turning the hills to a landscape of gold-kissed red, I split my time between trying to learn more about the felids and squirreling away food for the coming winter. As September passed by I smoked meat and used 'borrowed' sacks and rope to string it safely out of the way up in trees. Strange, but back home I'd spend eight hours a day slaving away in front of a workstation to make a living. Here, I'd spend a couple of hours a day catching and preparing food that would last me several days, the rest of the time was my own. I was almost beginning to enjoy myself, until I was a little lax about purifying my drinking water.

I was sick for the best part of a week with screaming case of the shits. I spent days and nights huddling in the ArcTek igloo. Stomach cramps and hot flushes weren't the worst of it: sometimes I'd only just make it out of the campsite before having to relieve myself. I gave up on wasting my toilet tissue, just went

and plonked myself butt-naked down in the stream. Cold, but more effective.

Eventually the morning came when I woke to find the gastric turmoils had subsided. It was a glorious feeling to be able to stretch without having to make an impromptu sprint for the nearest latrine. I unzipped the tent flap, poked my head out and got something freezing cold pouring down the back of my neck. When I'd finished my little war dance I was standing in front of my tent ankle deep in snow while flakes continued to drift down.

White. Everything was white and still as the grave. The hills around were lost behind a stippled mist. The nearby creek bubbled along its way, although ice crystals were congregating along its banks and everything else was still, shrouded in a white like cold cotton.

Winter had rolled around.

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I huddled in the warmth of my Trailblazer jacket and several layers of clothing, watching the town below.

Quiet. Farmers still tended their stock, forking out wagonloads of hay to feed the deer and farm animals, and cubs played in the snowdrifts, but there wasn't the activity in the streets that there'd been during the autumn months. That three-times a week wagon had stopped coming also. Periodically there might be a single rider come into town with panniers on his llama, but that was about the extent of the traffic.

School continued. Longer classes now there was little else for the cubs to do. Chihirae kept the little fire stocked and roaring, taking some of the chill of the building, but it couldn't heat the whole place. With their fur I guess it didn't bother them so much, but I'd taken to writing while wearing a spare pair of socks wrapped around my hands. Awkward, but it stopped my finger going numb. I'd considered using my laptop, but the clicking of keys would've been a sure giveaway. Anyway, I was using some characters I'd made up to accents parts of speech: characters that didn't exist in any fonts I had and wouldn't until I cobbled together a few new ones.

It wasn't easy trying to pick everything up from scratch, at a distance and without help. I could observe, but I couldn't ask questions, have things explained, ask her to slow down. Their numerical system was easy enough: a blessing that it was base ten and I could follow that all right, but their language had evolved for different shaped mouths and brains. Their equivalent of an alphabet was similar to a Japanese syllabary, where each symbol stood for a syllable in their tongue. As in English the characters were combined to make words, but there were a lot more of them than in the English alphabet. I had fifty-seven listed in my notebook. There were also a range of modifiers, adding expression or amount or tense. It didn't seem too complicated, but I couldn't pronounce some of the words and it was so damn frustrating just eavesdropping. I wished I could ask questions, maybe get my hands on one of her books: perhaps that might provide some answers. I could at least set my own pace.

Still, I was learning. When she spoke slowly and clearly I could follow her. When she told a student to write a phrase on the board I'd do the same in my notebook and sometimes I got it right. I could understand the chatter of some of the cubs: one called Feher was making a new sled, Schi - I think that was a nickname that translated as baby-fur - had to leave early to help gather firewood. I could recognise individuals now, there were telltale differences in height and stance and especially in the fur colouring. I listened to them telling tales of fishing on the frozen river, hunting, working on the farms. Sometimes Chihirae read to them from the books, other stories. I tried to follow but the gaps in my

language were too great. I was lost on even the simplest. Despite that, I found it peaceful; listening to the susurus of her voice as she read to her charges, the class gathered in a semicircle around the fire like a scene from Dant❖.

—v—

Winter brought it's problems: the cold, difficulty finding food, the wind and snow. It also made it tricker to get to the barn. I had to make sure I kept my tracks across the fields hidden. Even if it was snowing enough to cover my prints, the next time the sun came out there would be a staggered line of depressions across an otherwise smooth expanse of snow and anyone with half a wit would be able to tell someone had been there. Still, nobody seemed to go out that way, and the Heath-Robinson broom I made cleared the prints well enough so none of the inhabitants discovered the tracks.

It was well into winter and there was really little else for me to do but go to the classes. Get up before the sun and make my way through the white landscape, among black skeletons of trees and bushes waiting away the winter, sneak in through the back doors of the barn and get myself settled into my cubbyhole. Class always started at 7:45, almost bang on the dot every day. There were a couple of days when no one turned up. Perhaps it was a holiday, perhaps Chihirae was ill, I never found out, but after that it was back to usual.

It was on a normal day, after the cubs had spilled out into a steady snowfall. Chihirae was in a hurry. She didn't clean the boards off as was usual, she just picked up her satchel and hurried out. Late for a date? I watched her bounding through the snow towards her house, then a few minutes later head off toward town. I climbed down from the loft, then saw the leather-bound volume sitting on one of the benches where she'd forgotten it. A book! She'd left a book.

I didn't think. I just grabbed it and ran before she came back.

It was a grammatical text, a godsend. Heavy due to the bulky binding and the thick pages. For two days I skipped classes and devoured that book, scribbling down notes, realising mistakes I'd been making. There were primer notes in it, basic sentences. I spent hours referring to my previous notes, matching words up and trying to make the scratchings SAY something. I found a section with a chart listing all the characters in the alphabet and I found I'd missed a few. I copied everything I could, filling up my notebook and moving on to my sketch pad. Of course a lot of it was gibberish to me, but the bits I could understand I devoured and that let me understand a little more, which provided the key to open a few more doors.

But I didn't dare keep it more than two days.

I left the book lying on her desk and waited in my hiding place. She saw it as soon as she came in. Bright sunlight from the opening doors falling across her desk and she was across the room, grabbing it like it was a long lost child and immediately leafing through the pages. I winced: of course she'd have missed it, books were probably worth their weight in gold here. There was a silence down there, the cubs watching her, then she carefully set it down and turned her amber eyes on the class. I could see her pupils were dilated, her ears down and tail thrashing. "Who [did] this[deed]?"

The cubs looked at each other, waiting to see who owned up. Of course no one did.

"I am [going to] talk to your [parent[s]?] see who [left, departed] [something]."

I couldn't follow it then. Was she going to punish them? I shifted away from the opening. Well, if I was feeling particularly suicidal I could own up and say it was me. All the others had shot at me, what would she do? Especially with all the cubs to protect. I moved back to the peephole.

She'd stoped shouting at them and was staring into the sunlight streaming in through the open doors below me. What was out there? I moved to peek out through the cracks between the boards in the wall: nothing I could see. Back in the classroom she'd settled down, seeming very subdued as she carried the students through their recitations of the two's times tables. I forgot about whatever it was that had distracted her and returned to following the day's lessons.

—v—

In retrospect I suppose I should've guessed what happened. Well I'm not psychic, so I didn't. The next day the lessons were more grammer and I was able to lose myself in these, trying to make my mouth say words it was never built to say. But whispering isn't quite the same as speaking out loud and I never dared raise my voice. I wasn't sure how good their hearing was, but with ears like those it had to be better than mine.

Tenses today. He ran, he runs, he will run. That's a transliteration: their language has a couple of ways of adding tenses, as well as adverbs and adjectives: with a modified version of the verb run such as Khiscai[ran], Khiscice[run], Kisceiri[running], or by adding a modifier, which is used as a sort of slang: Khisc'ch [will run, run fast, run more] Khisc'e [ran, run slow]. They used the same modifiers in their mathematics: ch [+], e [-].

I worked hard as they went through their lessons, trying to add to my vocabulary. The day passed quickly for me, but the cubs were obviously anxious to get out of the schoolroom and into the bright day. Still, with a bottomless blue sky and sun to take some of the chill off.

Two O'clock and the cubs were out of there. Snowballs and tackling and tails held high as they scurried off toward their homes. Chihirae cleared up, packing her stuff away, then followed them.

I waited, then swung down from the cubby, pushing the door shut behind me. I'd done it so often I could probably do it in my sleep. Drop to the floor and head for the back doors...

Another book. She'd dropped a book by the desk.

I should have realised. I should've guessed.

I picked it up, dusting it off. The cover was a supple dark brown leather with an air of age about it. The edges were worn and smooth from untold years of careful handling. I ran my fingers over the binding, feeling the leather and the marks of embossing where faint traces of a gilt foil still adhered: Words, the cross hatching of their language and completely indecipherable to me. The spine creaked softly as I opened it.

Pictures. Hand-drawn, woodcuts, line work. Maps. Felids fighting animals. Pictures of castles other buildings and felids in suits of armour fighting each other. Weird-looking boats and sailors and cities. A history text?

I breathed out in wonder; this could tell me more about them than eavesdropping on a year's classes. Right there and then I sat down at the teacher's desk and pulled my sketchbook from one of my jacket's pockets. And then and there worked through the book, making notes from captions, page after page. The maps were of towns and cities, a lot of them, rivers and... and...

I stopped, turned the book on its side. It was twisted and changed, but that was the Florida peninsular, the Gulf of Mexico, Great lakes... Cape cod was missing. Appalachian range, rockies...I stared. It was America, but not America. Some other version of America and I was...

Light flashed across me as the front door swung open. Startled, I looked up, squinting into the sunlight and for a second Chihirae stared at me in an expression that was purest shock in any species, then the crossbow came up.

"No!" I yelled in English, my hand starting to come up as if to ward her off and her face distorted into a grin of sharp teeth, the string snapping forward, the briefest glimpse of red fletchings and black iron as the quarrel covered the distance between us in a split second and an impact knocked me sprawling off the chair.

Just below the shoulder. I was scrabbling on the dusty floor, trying to regain my feet, sickeningly aware of the stubby arrow now imbedded in my collar. The pain hadn't hit yet. Look up, she was frantically reloading, on my feet with my arm out to ward her off, babbling, "No, please..." in English. Alien words lost in the shock skittered away from my grasp as I tried to recall them and she locked the string back. I bolted for the back door, fighting it open then running for my life, the snow staggering me, pain beginning to burn in my shoulder. I stumbled and fell and when I got to my feet again she was in the door, aiming. A blur crossed the distance between us and hit and spun me to the ground again.

Agony burned through my side, a hole through my shirt above my hip, rapidly turning red. I screamed in half-fear half-pain and clawed onwards, splashing wildly through the stream before reaching the shelter of the trees. I don't know how I made it up the hill, but the next I remember I was sprawled over the rock I'd first used to watch the town. Pain made the world spin. A freezing wind was blowing straight through me, chilling me to the bone and leaving me shuddering hopelessly. I couldn't move my right arm and something wet and sticky was coating me, my clothes and the rock beneath me, dribbling in a clammy, viscous mess from my wounds.

No idea how long I lay there just trying to breath through the pain.

Howls brought me back to cold and numb awareness. Figures moving across the fields and through the black and white of the trees, following the pink spots in the snow and my terror overcame my pain. I choked on agony as I clambered to my feet, the world blurring when I staggered off again, trying to run. There was a yowl, howling and a distant crack of sound: a tree beside me showered splinters of bark as something thrummed past. I staggered, slipped, fell and kept going as the hillside crumbled, skidding and sliding on snow and ice and mud, bushes tearing at my face and hands as I rolled and something caught and there was more pain ripping through my shoulder. Dropping and lurching and spinning...

Just lying at the bottom of the hillside among mud and rocks and debris, cuts stinging, clammy grip of shock sending the pain away again. I tried to move, gagged and vomited uncontroably until I was dry-retching, shaking like a leaf, cold. Shrieking yowls rang through the cold trees behind me, unearthly and terrifying, and that fear was all that dragged me to my feet again. With no other choice I turned to the only door, the only thing familiar to me.

She was in the barn, at her desk, leafing through my sketchbook. She looked up when I staggered over the threshold and my shadow stretched across the floor and her eyes went wide and her hand grabbed for the crossbow on the tabletop beside her.

“Chihirae,” I croaked and she hesitated, eyes widening.

The room was spinning, the howls pursuing me growing louder. I giddily looked back at where lean predatory shapes were bursting from the woods, dragged my feet that bit further to collapse at a desk; blood soaking under the filth covering my clothes, running down my arm and side and dripping on the wood and pooling under me. I looked at the chalkboards at the front, the alien scrawls there that blurred in and out of focus, nothing made sense. The figure behind the desk was standing, holding a crossbow and a book and I choked on the agony as I told her in her own language, as her cubs had done, “Chihirae. I... I do not understand. Please... help me.”

Then the blood loss and pain and shock took me away.

—v—

“Christ, Riley, I’m just asking you to take a few days off. Look... I’ve got this place in the Smokies. A cabin. Great place: heating, utilities, all the mod cons... I can give you loan of that for a week if you want. Fishing, climbing ... you’re into hiking, right?”

I leaned back in my chair in front of the SunSparc workstation and pinched the bridge of my nose then looked up at him. “Now? Christ, Elliot, I wish you’d make up your mind. You break our backs over that deadline, now you’re telling me to take a vacation. There’s something I’m missing here?”

“You’re on schedule, right?”

“Yeah, but I was on a roll and DeFriet’s having trouble with the decompression algorithm. With the sound routine going on a stock pentium with under sixteen megs, it can’t find enough space to...”

Elliot interrupted me, shaking his head and sending his extra chins swinging. “That’s DeFriet’s problem, not yours. Look, I know you’ve been burning the candle, but you’re going to burn right out and that puts us out of a graphics man. You’ve done your work, now go and take a sabbatical somewhere away from these things.” He waved an arm at the 21 inch flatscreens scattered around the cluttered lab. The screen saver had appeared on mine: hippos in tutus parachuting down on tiny umbrellas.

“Bonus pay?” I grinned.

His beady eyes narrowed. “Paid leave. Don’t push it. Go on. Take a week.” Then he turned and moved off with all the grace of a Sherman tank in the Ardennes. Incredible, after two years and I’d never seen him actually bump into anything. It’s a wonder that any heart’s powerful enough to circulate blood through a lump of protoplasm that big. I waited until he’d gone then stood and leant over the partition. “Hey, Rita, what’s with Elliot? Has he found philanthropy?”

She gave me a reproachful look over her glasses. “Are you kidding?”

“Yeah, actually, I am. What gives?”

She rolled her eyes. “A deal on the side. He’s got some other outfit paying him mucho dough for some time on big iron.”

“On Bessie?!”

Rita gave me an exasperated look and tapped a few keys. “It’s a Sun SparcStation. Why do you have to give it such a...a bovine name?”

“Why not?” I grinned, “It’s for a good cows.”

She winced. “Don’t start that again. I don’t think I could take it a second time. Look, he’s given you time off: take it. It’d be good to get away from the office for a while. You’re too paranoid. Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

I nodded, “That’s something I’ve never been a bull to do.”

She grimaced, “Ah, you’re full of sheep.”

“So ewe me.”

So I packed my kit and set off up north in search of the great outdoors. Vermont. The northwestern lakes and hills. The Green mountains. Incredible to think that 50 years ago so much had been deforested, and now native flora and fauna was growing back again. Still, camping yes; wilderness... I don't know. Can you call it a wilderness when there's a souvenir stand around every corner, flush toilets, no camping signs, no fishing, no fires... And people. I'd seen small towns with fewer people on the streets.

But it was outside and it was away from the office and monitors and deadlines and systems going down before you'd saved and backup discs being used for home videos. I had my laptop with me, but I took the chance to get back to the ancient art of graphics, the pad and pencil way. It'd been some time since I'd done any landscapes so I experimented a bit: pencil, inks, washes. Black and white.

It was the third day and I was just walking my merry way along under a majestic grove of native American high-tension power lines when I remember hearing a loud snap sound and looking up into a growing sun to see an isolator shattering and parts of the structure glowing white hot where a line was welding itself to the tower then there was a pressure that popped my ears and a painful tingle like I'd grabbed hold of a live wire.

—v—

Agony ripping through my shoulder. Going on and on. Like molten lead in my bones and hornets in my skin, pushing deeper and deeper and I couldn't stop it and couldn't fight it while monsters loomed over me, grinning viciously and I couldn't move at all, couldn't do anything except scream.

I'd woken face down in pine needles and crushed leaves. Groaned and rolled, squinting into morning sunlight, aching in every joint and disoriented. I was on a wooded hillside, surrounded by mature pines and dew-damped bracken and a deep silence. Through the trees I could see the far side of a narrow wooded valley.

Somewhere a bird sang.

The air was motionless, cool with a reminder of the past night, smelling of earth and plants and water. A red bundle in the bracken nearby turned out to be my pack. I crawled over to it and sat again while I pulled the straps open and rummaged through it. Everything was there, including my wallet, laptop, canteen. I took a long drink.

What'd happened?

I sat down in the middle of that forest and tried to recall. Shit, I had a headache that was a dull pounding behind my forehead. There'd been the line falling and after that...

Nothing. A blank.

Concussion? Shock? Amnesia? I must have wandered. Certainly this was nothing like the place I remembered. Confused, I sat a while, resting and

finishing a bar of trail-mix while the sun climbed and the dew burned off in faint mist. As the temperature rose with the passing day I pulled out my map and pondered over that for a while. Last I knew, I'd been about... here; on the road about ten kilometres south of Montpelier, bound for Burlington. Now... I didn't have any idea; there was nothing I could use as a landmark. Still, if the road had been curving around, then it should be over that way somewhere. I sat a while longer, then gathered my stuff, faced into the sun and started walking.

—v—

I don't know how much time I lost.

I'd nearly died in the barn that day. I'd lost a lot of blood; I was bruised and torn, suffering from hypothermia and shock and trauma. Most of my memories of that time are fragmented to say the least: memories of pain and vomiting and shadowy figures moving and touching me; sometimes water or some other liquid dribbled over my lips; glimpses of wood and cloth; occasionally an inhuman face leaning close as I opened my eyes, jerking away and leaving me in darkness before I slept again.

The first time I woke with any semblance of real awareness. I opened my eyes and saw wood above me: stained planks, dark, grain running though it like veins, indistinct in the dimness. I don't know how long I just stared at that before enough of me was awake to take stock of my surroundings.

I was lying on something soft that rustled gently when I moved: A bed, built into a recessed alcove in a wall. A box bed. Scarcely long enough for me. Clothes gone. The sheets covering me were warm; thick wool or something. Itchy. No pillow, a mattress of what sounded like straw ticking underneath linen bedding. And my arms and legs were tied down with ropes padded with cloth,

another across my chest. There were thick bandages around my shoulder, holding something like a gauze pad. I let my head loll to the side, gritting my teeth. The slightest movement and my shoulder screamed bloody murder. From what I could see the room was dark and austere: shutters on the windows, a closed door, a table with what was maybe a jug on it. I couldn't see anything else. I just lay there in the dimness, unable to move while the fear grew, not knowing where I was, too scared at what might answer to call out.

Some time later there was a noise at the door and a flickering light moved into the room. A candle, the dancing flame illuminating the inhumanly twisted hand of a native. I froze, not even breathing as the underlit shadows of the creature's face shifted to stare at me and hesitated when it saw I was awake and aware: Its eyes glowed with a rainbow shimmer like titanium steel as light changed and a cold shiver skittered over my flesh. For a while it just stood there, watching me, then suddenly moved: an incredibly fluid, springing gait on those peculiar ankle joints as it crossed to the rickety table. Metal clinked on glass as it fiddled with something, using the candle to light a lamp: a wick sputtered, glowed faintly, then brighter. As the creature leaned closer to huff out the candle, I saw who this felid was: Chihirae. Her shadow flickered across the wall behind her, tail lashing in disquiet, inhuman muscles shifting as she moved. And while she watched me I stared back, petrified and helpless.

After a while she spoke and it was just noise: incomprehensible coughs and snarls. I couldn't move, just shivered violently while those amber eyes transfixed me. Muscles in that visage spasmed, her head twitched and she spoke again: slowly, and this time I could make out the words, "Can you understand?"

I licked my lips and tried to think, to pull some words together, and presently rasped my first words: "Yes. Understand."

She reared back, her jaw gaping with a hissing noise. I saw her hand fidgeting around her belt. There was a knife there. Then she leaned forward, teeth bared in

a snarl as she demanded, “What are you. Where [something]. Why are you [something]. You [something] us...”

“I... not understand,” I stumbled through the phrase then licked my parched lips, trying to draw some moisture into my mouth. “Slow.”

It stopped her. She gaped for a few seconds, then raked her fingers through those tufts of fur on her cheeks and turned aside to pull a stool up to the bedside. She sat, a safe couple of meters from the bed, then glanced at the ropes and scooted closer. When she spoke this time it was slowly, enunciating clearly; like I had heard her use in class when trying to explain something to a pupil who was having trouble. “What are you?”

“I have... name. Michael Riley.”

She cocked her head to one side, creases furrowing her muzzle. “Mikah Rry?”

“Michael.”

“Mikah.”

Uh, she couldn't say it. Same problem I had with their words. “Yes,” I told her, then ventured, “Chihirae?”

She flinched, then twitched an ear. “Yes. How [did] you [know]?”

“Say... you.” I winced, trying to pull the words back out of memory, trying to remember the lessons and the meagre handful of inhuman words I’d spent all those hours fighting to comprehend. “See you. What you?”

My question was ignored. “How long?”

How long? I closed my eyes to think and only opened them with an effort. “Ah... You come here.” I tried a smile and winced as scratches on my face made themselves felt, “You... teach good, well. I listen. I understand... small.”

No, it wasn’t that easy. About two minutes just to fumble my way to a point where I was that comprehensible. Then she sat there a while, watching me, as if she didn’t know quite what to think. Though this face-to-face was hard on me, I didn’t know what it’d be like for her. I guess I’d had a bit longer to get used to them, to realise they could think rationally, whereas she was trying to come to grips with the fact I could talk at all. “Water?” I grated, hoping it was the right word. “Please? Water?”

She twitched that ear again and for a while I thought she wasn’t going to respond. Then she slowly stood and stepped across to the table, returning with an earthenware jug. She was careful not to touch me, to keep her distance as she held it to my lips, but the water was a welcome relief. I drank until she drew away and sat there, cradling the jug while she watched me. I lay quietly, staring back at her and shivering involuntarily until she stood and left the room, locking the door behind her. In a few minutes she was back, carrying my sketch pad. She flipped through the pages and showed me my last unfinished notes, the ones I’d been copying from her book, spattered with dark brown droplets. Dried blood I realised. “Yours?”

The blood or the book? “Yes.”

She flipped back to the beginning, my sketches. “Did you [draw]?”

“Yes.”

She gave me another hard look. “They are good.”

An art critic? I almost laughed and tried to raised my arm to rub my face. The ropes were padded, but quite secure. I couldn’t move and she watched my muscles tense and relax again, her eyes flicking from my hands to my face. “I go?” I asked.

She stood then and seemed to smile at me, but that baring of sharp, pointed teeth didn’t seem very friendly. “No.” Then she picked up the pad, extinguished the lamp and left me. I heard a lock click shut behind her. I just lay there, staring up at patterns in the grain in the wood over my head, feeling the knot in my guts ache almost as bad as my physical wounds.

What is she going to do with me?

—v—

Low sibilant noises pulled me out of dreams of cold ocean waves washing on a shale beach. I blinked to muzzy awareness, licked dry lips and tried to rub

bleary eyes, only to be brought up short by the restraints and a lance of pain through my wounds. That brought back remembrance of where I was. The room was lighter, with wedges of sunlight working their way around the edges of the shutters and casting golden streams across the room. My shoulder, my hip... both were throbbing unmercifully and I groaned, wishing to go back to that place where it didn't hurt so much. What kind of chance did I have? Did they know how to prevent infection? If I could get my medical kit... Which was back at the tent. So much for that idea.

The noises were still there, faint but audible. Not waves but voices, inhuman sounds coming through from the other side of the door, muffled by the wall. I couldn't make out any words.

Minutes later the latch rattled and the door opened. Five of the creatures filed in, eyes immediately drawn to the bed. I thought I recognised Chihirae coming in among them, standing to the side and watching me as they gathered in a loose semicircle around the bed to study me intently. Feline voices were guttural and sibilant words, an unearthly sound as they talked and gesticulated animatedly, all tails twitching like hyperactive snakes. Males and females? I wasn't sure. Some had discernably wider hips, like Chihirae. Otherwise they were androgynous shapes, fears made flesh and fur. In the gloom they were... terrifying: nightmarish shapes against the slivers of light seeping through the chinks in the shutters, overbearingly huge from my perspective. The light from behind alternately blinded and left me in darkness as they shifted and snarled, their discussion? argument? heated and fluent so I was only able to pick out a few words here and there. Then I heard words I understood: 'kill it'.

My ribs tried to strangle my heart. Frantically I searched the faces, trying to find the one who'd spoken. One of them, a female? glared back with an intensity and hatred I could feel like a hot wind in my face. Several, including that one, were wearing knives at their belts. I started shaking and Chihirae pushed through and stopped, a half-meter or so away. "Mikah. You can talk?"

“Chihirae,” I leapt on the opportunity, my lifeline. “Yes. I talk. Chihirae, what happen? What?”

There was a moment of silence from the others, then a babble that sounded like a catfight in a blender, some directing questions and demands at me and Chihirae in a torrent I couldn’t follow. I shrank back as far as I could from the glares and snarls, my heart racing, feeling dizzy and confused and scared. Then Chihirae was leaning closer, asking, “What were you doing?”

“What? I do not understand.”

“In the barn. Why were you [something]?”

Watching? Was that what she meant? Were they pissed about that? “Oh... I... I learn. You teach... cubs. I listen. I learn.”

“Why do you [something]?”

“I do not understand.”

“Why did you [hide]?”

“I here... ” I tried to piece the words together, tried to find the right words. There were so many missing. “They try... hurt me. Two.”

“They [tried to] hurt you? Two?”

“Try one. Later, try two.”

“Tried to hurt you [twice]?”

“Twice. Yes.”

There was more arguing, yowling, then the sheets were pulled off and I gasped at the shock of the cold air against my skin. Embarrassing being naked in front of them, vulnerable in that nakedness, terrifying not being able to move. Freezing cold air set me trembling, the tension enhancing the aching in my wounds. Then one of them leaned forward into the cubby and poked the bandage across my shoulder. I screamed, feeling like someone had grabbed handful of nerves and dunked them in acid and Chihirae swung around and backhanded the other away, snarling with bared teeth. The chastised one growled back then turned and stalked out. She faced me again, watching until I caught my breath. “Mikah, did you hurt [anyone]? Understand? Did you hurt?”

What was she talking about? “I not understand,” I breathed and shuddered again. “Please, Cold.”

She said something else, but the room and alien faces were spinning and melting together, my shoulder aching unbearably where he’d jabbed it. “Cold,” I mumbled and blacked out again.

There were low noises, sounds that resolved into growling voices murmuring. Something touched my face. I flinched and opened my eyes to sharp teeth, broad valentine nose and amber, inhuman eyes with intelligence glittering in their depths. Terror forced a small noise from me and the felid pulled away.

”[something] awake?” I heard a voice in the background call.

“Yes,” the felid at my bedside said, then added something I didn’t understand. The creature moved to touch my shoulder and I tried to struggle, ignoring the agony that blazed through my chest and side. The felid was shouting something, then Chihirae was beside him and she caught my arm and was speaking, murmuring, “They are gone. [something] he is [something].” I couldn’t understand, but it wasn’t what she was saying, it was the way she was saying it: calming, stroking my arm with leathery fingertips. “Be still. He [is trying to] help you.”

Why should I trust her? She’d shot me, almost killed me, now I was locked away, tied down. But she’d let me live, she’d tended my wounds and looked after me. I looked up at her face: broad, leathery nose pad, Lynx-like tufts of fur and intense amber eyes.

I was still shivering, I could feel it, but the fear was settling. “Be quiet?” she asked, patting my arm.

“Yes,” I choked through tightened vocal chords. She looked at the male and said, “Be [something],” then moved aside. The male pulled a chair closer to my bedside and hung the lamp from a hook above the bed, the shadows oscillating as it swung gently. When I looked back at the male he was holding a small, scalpel-like knife, the cutting edge a single line of glittering light. I started trembling again, unable to take my eyes off that blade.

“Calm,” Chihirae urged me.

The male pulled the sheets down and cocked his head at me, hesitating before carefully slipping the knife under the bandage to cut them away. I winced as he laid the bandages aside, then started on moving the pads underneath away. Skin and sticky yellow serum adhered to them, hurting as he tugged it away. I could see the purplish-blue flesh below from the corner of my eye. He made a hissing noise through his teeth and gingerly touched the wound with a finger. I flinched and gasped and he stopped immediately. He sat back, then looked at Chihirae, “This will not [work]. I have to [untie] him.”

“Is that [something]?”

The doctor waved a hand at me and said something I didn’t catch.

Her muzzle wrinkled and she looked at me, hand touching the knife at her waist, then she knelt and undid the knots on the ropes. I lay absolutely still as she hesitated, then flipped them aside. The male - a doctor? - carefully took my wrist and said, “[Does] this hurt?”

He raised my arm and I gagged on the pain that caused, feeling torn muscles

in my shoulder shifting. He moved it again, trying the range, but my shoulder was so swollen he could only move it a few degrees before the pain got too much. What the hell had they done to me? It felt like there was a hole right through, in the front and out the back.

Turned out there was. It'd been the only way to get the triangular head out. Push it right through. Thank God I don't remember any of that. He half-rolled me to examine the exit wound, then took a small vial from his kit and spread a foul-smelling yellowish powder over both wounds before replacing the bandages and gauze with fresh ones. The wound on my side wasn't as clean. He had to lance and drain that. Chihirae ducked her head and laid her ears back when I screamed and went rigid, slipping half-under while the doctor tended the puncture and mopped the fluids that seeped out. I was just hanging to consciousness by a thread when he finished.

Light glinted on metal as he wiped his knives off packing them away, glaring like flares in my blurry vision. A figure leaned over me, a shape resolving into Chihirae bending over to hold my wrist and retie the straps. I moved, trying to struggle, and she caught my hands, bared teeth in my face. I stopped fighting and lay panting. "No," I croaked, almost inaudibly.

Her muzzle smoothed. She cocked her head.

"Please... no."

She looked at the doctor; he waved a hand in a gesture that could have been a shrug and muttered something. Once more she looked at my face, meeting my eyes, then just patted my leg and pulled the sheets up. I think I thanked her, just before falling asleep with them watching me.

I woke with a start into darkness, wondering where I was all over again. It was a second before the memory surfaced, and when it did I raised my hands and turned them slowly, not quite believing the freedom. I sagged back, staring up at the shadows of grain patterns on the top of the cubbyhole, remembering, listening. Silence. That muffled stillness of a sleeping house. The light that'd been seeping around the shutters was gone, so it was dark outside. Did that mean I'd slept away a few hours, or an entire day?

My bladder was screaming for relief.

Slowly, I managed to sit myself up, gritting my teeth as my wounds ached and my head spun. There was just enough room in the bed's cubby to sit upright with my hair brushing the overhead as I rested a while, breathing hard. Then I took a deep breath and swung my legs over the side of the cot. By slow, painful steps I clambered to my feet, wobbling uncertainly on the rough wooden floor. The roof was low, the room seemed to sweep in and out, like there was a tide in my skull. How much blood had I scattered across the landscape? Too much.

There was something I took to be a chamberpot beside the bed. Well, I'd never actually seen a chamberpot before, but it was all there was. I leaned against a wall while urinating, getting most of it in the pot. Hard to see in the dimness. Hope it was a chamberpot, not a valued piece of crockery or funeral urn and I was pissing all over some dear-departed's ashes.

Cold. I was shivering. Despite that, I staggered over to the window hoping to at least get an idea of where I was. It was shut, and the shutters couldn't be

opened from inside. I leaned my head against the window, the thick, distorted panes cool against my face. Through cracks in the shutters I could catch glimpses of slivers of moonlight on snow, a starry sky, silhouettes of pinetrees like fractal sets against the skyline. Her house, had to be.

There was a soft noise from behind me as the door opened. I turned, stumbling and collapsing and falling and crying out loud in pain as my wounds shifted and I banged elbows against walls and floorboards on my way to the ground. I scrambled back and huddled on the grimy floor below the window, something bodywarm and wet started seeping from my shoulder wound, a dark stain against my bare skin in the dimness. A shadow moved in the door, light gleaming from eyes and a length of steel. The fear returned.

Chihirae slowly moved into the room, keeping the table between us and the knife ready. As if she thought I was going to jump at her. She was fidgeting and her tail lashing, like she was nervous and unsure.

I sagged back on the cold floor, my voice faltering as I rasped, "I not hurt you."

She cocked her head, made a chittering sound and broke off when I tried to move, tried to stand up again only to collapse again with a groan. Chihirae hesitated, then sheathed the knife and moved closer, making up her mind. Her leathery palms caught my arm and helped me up. I staggered and she hauled my arm over her furry shoulder, half-carrying me back to the bed even though I loomed over her by about a foot. Hard muscles under that soft hide, deceptively strong arms, a furry tail flicking against my bare legs.

I lay back on the mattress, shaking from fatigue and the cold and the fading adrenaline rush. Chihirae wiped the trickle of blood away, then collected the

sheets from where they fallen and laid them across my waist. “That was [something],” she admonished me.

I didn’t know the word, but I could guess. Stupid, dumb, idiotic, moronic. There wasn’t much I could say to that.

She cocked her head, then hissed softly, “You are all right?”

The wounds were aching furiously again, but I nodded. “Yes.”

She stared at me, her pupils dark pools in her eyes, then she stood and left me. I noticed this time she left the door open, but I made no move to go anywhere. I just lay still, letting the pain and cold slowly ebb.

She was back again within half an hour, carrying a tray. She sat beside the bed, the tray on her lap holding a mug and plate with several pieces of something that could have been bread on it. She handed me the mug. “You are hungry[question]. Here.”

It was warm milk. I hadn’t had warm milk since I was... shit, I can’t remember the last time I’d had warm milk. I sipped: It tasted... strange, watery, but it was still milk. The images of home and security and familiarity bubbled up from the depths, battering me to my soul with an impact that was almost palpable: here, away from everything and everyone I’d ever known and loved, huddled in a tiny bunk, clutching an earthenware mug of warm milk, eyes swimming while a furry alien straddled a chair and watched me. I choked back a sob and drank to hide the tears. It didn’t work.

“What is wrong?” I looked at Chihirae. She gestured at my face “Your eyes; they’re [watering].”

My arm ached when I wiped my face. “Nothing. All fine.”

She twitched her ears, then carefully reached out to take back the mug. Her hand brushed mine and I shivered again at the feeling of fur against my skin. “Do you want?” She offered me the plate. I took a piece of bread: warm with something like butter melted over it. It tasted even better than it smelt and my shrunken stomach welcomed it with growls.

All this time Chihirae was sitting, watching me, everything I did. I was on my second piece when she asked, “[something] you [what] are you?”

I blinked at her. “I do not understand.”

She took a breath, “What are you?”

“Human.”

“Hu’an?” She tried the word, trying to work her narrow black lips, long tongue and jaw around it. “Hu’an.” She was silent for a while, then, “I have [never] seen a [thing] like you.”

“I am same. I have [never] seen a [thing] like you,” I forced a smile, echoing her words.

She leant forward, “Where are you from? Why are you here?”

“I am... I am,” I struggled with my vocabulary, trying to remember the alien sounds that were words never meant to be spoken by a human throat. “I am from home. Many... me’s there. I do not understand how I am here. I home,” snapped my fingers and she jumped, “I am here. I do not understand.” I met her inhuman gaze and asked the question that had been burning in me, as it had in her, “What are you? All you. What are you?”

Her mouth opened, then she blinked. “Rris. I am Rris. My name is Chihirae Aesh Hiasamra’thsi. I am a teacher.”

“Rris,” I tried it. The word started with a noise from my throat, fading into a hiss. Her full name... I tried it a couple of times, still not sure I’d be able to remember the full pronunciation. “What is this place?”

“My house. This [town] is called [west]water.”

“You are not from... Westwater.”

“No. I come here to teach. In [winter]. Cold weather. Understand?”

“Yes.” I forced a pained smile. “Good teacher. You should be not so good shot.”

She flinched, then hissed. “You hurt. You [frightened] me.”

“I will not hurt you,” I said softly.

She looked away from me, her ears flattening. “I did not know.” Then she reached to touch my right shoulder, the bandages there. “I [thought] you were [something]. I [worried] for the cubs.”

I flinched at her touch, then sank back onto the coarse mattress. “You thought I was what?”

“You did not hurt anyone?”

“No. They try to hurt me. I run. Why? You ask... before.”

Her muzzle twitched, she rubbed the side of it. Like she was nervous. Then looked right at me: “Someone was [something].”

“I do not understand.”

This time the twitch was more pronounced. “[something]. Stopped. Made no [something]. Not [breathe]. Not live. Stop.”

“Dead” I blurted it in english, “You think I killed someone?!”

She jumped, pulling away like I was coming after her. I was panting hard, trembling again. I tried calming myself. “No. I not. I not! I not hurt!”

She didn’t say anything.

“You... think I ... do it?” I ventured.

Her ears went back. “Not me. Others do. They think you are a [animal]. They think you [kill] him.”

Shit. I felt faint again, heart pounding on top of fear and bloodloss. Bedridden, wounded and lost in a land where I wasn’t only a stranger but an alien and now a murder suspect. “What do they do?”

“They are [something]. They do not [know what to do] with you. I say you did not kill. Some still say you did. They are not [sure].”

I looked at her morosely. I never killed anyone. I knew that and it was so hard to say it. “I not... did not kill.”

“I know.”

That stopped me. Confused, I asked, “How?”

Her ears twitched. “You were in the barn, watching us.”

“You knew.”

“I saw the [something].”

Dust. Sifting down through the floor as I moved. Very visible in the sunlight. She made a small chittering noise when I stared at her. And I’d thought I’d thought of everything.

“Dust,” she hissed. “Also your hands.’

My hands? I didn’t understand, not until she moved - fast - and her hand was in front of my face: Opalescent claws hooked from her fingertips. “The dead one, he was [torn] from these. You not do that.”

I stared at those little crescents. She didn’t need the knife: Those were quite capable of shredding me. Then she patted my arm again and said something I didn’t understand at all, then added, “You rest now. We talk more tomorrow.”

She was looking after me, feeding me and - if her story was true - defending me. She'd shot me, but she'd also saved my life. Maybe if she hadn't caught me the others would have come after me, convinced I was dangerous. They might have been even better shots. No matter what the reasons, I trusted her. It was just a feeling, something she exuded.

“Chihirae?”

She paused at the door.

“I have other things,” I told her, then took a deep breath and tried to explain about my camp, where it was. She listened, then ducked her head and said she would look for it. Then the door closed and this time I didn't hear the bolt slide home.

—v—

Chihirae roused me the next morning, bringing me breakfast: grain cakes and water and some strips of near-raw meat. She was in a hurry, her class was waiting and I wasn't enough to pull her away from that. Snowing out, she said and left me again. I nibbled at the bread, ignored the meat, then slept.

That's all I did all morning, too exhausted to do anything more. Around noon the noise of the front door slamming roused me. Chihirae entered the gloom of my room, brushing snow out of her fur. “Greeting, [something].” She noticed the leftovers. “You do not like meat?”

“I cannot eat. Have to... fire more.”

“Cook more,” she corrected and looked at the meat. “You are not [easy] to look after.” Her nose twitched and she popped a piece in her mouth as she left the room. She returned a few minutes later and I had to do a double take. She was wearing my jacket. I stared, not sure whether to laugh or shout at her. A bipedal cat adjusting the fit of my green ArcTec jacket. “Strange [something]. Nice,” she said, stroking the spidersilk fabric, then asked me, “How do these [work]?” indicating the fasteners.

I showed her how to work the zips and buttons and Velcro tabs. She fiddled with them, chittering to herself, then grinned. I was beginning to realise it wasn’t a friendly grin. “Your place had [better] be [something]. I do not want to be walking around the hills all night.”

“You find,” I assured her and she snorted and turned and left me. I lay there and listened to the door slam and then to a silence that seemed bottomless.

—v—

I had weird dreams. Flashes of memories from home mixed with stranger things. That knight again, chasing me through what was sometimes a maze and sometimes a labyrinth of unfamiliar streets. Hang gliding high over some unfamiliar terrain, never losing any altitude and looking for something. A nurse and her lioness face grinned at me and she growled something I can’t remember and reached for me with stainless steel claws.

The pain ripping through my wounds when I flinched woke me and I found myself looking up at a group of feline faces: tiny faces, just visible over the edge of the bed. Yelps sounded and they scattered with a skittering of claws on the floor. Cubs. I blinked, collecting my wits, then turning my head to see them better. Still daylight, with sunbeams filtering through the shutters. Small heads with puffed fur were peering around the door, watching me like a cat watches a dog on the other side of the street: ready to bolt at the slightest sign. Muttering at each other.

“Told you it [something] here.”

”[something]. What is it?”

”[something] said it [something].”

“Teacher said it was [harmless]. It was just [lost].”

“Right, cub-spots. Does that look harmless?”

And I recognised one of them. “Feher?” I ventured.

There was a silence in which they drew back a half-step, their fur bottling. The one called Feher looking particularly stricken as he realised it was him I was addressing. “How is your... sled?” I managed, proud of myself for that sentence.

He took a step backward, mouth working but nothing coming out. Then he dropped his jaw and hissed, fur going up like a bottlebrush. The others chattered and his ears dropped like wet tissues. He was a few seconds pulling himself together, drawing himself up to his full three foot height. "You can talk?"

"Yes." It was amusing. Their cubs can only be described as 'cute'. Scarcely over my hips with volumous fur and gangling limbs, they seemed to be all heads, puffed-out tails, hands and feet. No clothes; they wouldn't need any with all that fur. Warmth and androgyny; I couldn't tell boy from girl. Melting snow speckled their thick pelts. "Where is Chihirae?"

They all looked at each other but none answered. "Not know you here," I guessed. Ears went down. I chuckled, winced.

"What are you?" one of them asked.

"How did you know my name?" Feher demanded.

"I saw you," I said. "I am Michael."

They shifted around, six of them moving to see me better. Furry bodies eclipsed the fans of light spilling through the shutters, turning the scene surreal. The small room was getting crowded. "Teacher shot you?" one asked.

"Yes."

“I saw the [blood]. They are saying you [something] [something] Sherrith.”

“What? Talk slow. I do not understand lot words.”

“You killed [something] Sherrith?”

My gut lurched. How many thought I’d killed whoever it was? “No.” Six pairs of amber and green eyes watched me. “I not killed.”

They exchanged glances again. That one who’d asked if Chihirae had shot me said, “Teacher said you didn’t do it.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. She trusted me... sort of. She was trying to protect me against the others. “Who is Sherrith?” I asked.

“You don’t know?” another cub asked.

“I do not know much.”

They chattered and one shifted closer for a better look. “He was[something] at the [something],” the talkative one said, “up the valley, near [something].”

“I did not understand. I do not know some words.”

“Why?” another cub piped up.

“I learning talk.”

There was more chittering, a smaller one said, “You are not very good at it.”

“That is why you were in the barn?” The tallest asked.

“Yes.”

“Why were you hiding?”

“I not knew you. Some tried to ... hurt me. They see me, they try to hurt me.”

There was a short silence, then one of the smaller cubs blurted, “You were afraid of us?”

I looked from one intently interested catlike face to another, suddenly embarrassed about how the confession would sound to them. “Yes.”

“That is [stupid].”

I pulled the sheet down, just enough to expose my shoulder and the bandages over purple-black skin. “Stupid?”

Their reactions were mixed and unreadable; grimaces and hisses. I kept trying to read something human into their body language and nothing made sense.

“You are [lucky] she is not a better shot,” Feher observed.

“Why don’t you have any fur?”

Heads swivelled toward the one who’d asked that question. He or she ducked its head and flashed teeth. I gave a small smile, “I am from... not cold place. Need do not... Don’t need fur so much.”

“Are you like that all over?”

“Yes.”

“Cold,” one said. Another muttered something I didn’t catch, but it brought forth a chorus of chittering, which was abruptly stilled when the one who’d asked about my lack of fur ventured, “Can I touch you?”

I think a few of them stopped breathing then, watching me for my response. I

slowly nodded. “Yes.”

The cub was cautious, like he was going to pet a strange dog. I lay still, watching him approach, reach out an arm and touch my right forearm with a single finger. I stayed motionless as he stroked my arm: gingerly at first, then with more confidence.

As if that were a sign the others gathered around the bedside, stroking and poking and touching, keeping well clear of my wounds. They wanted to touch my hair, stroke my growing beard, chittered at my feet: They thought they were funny, like they thought pulling the blankets off was funny. Why were my feet funny? Why didn't I have fur? a tail? I grabbed and caught the sheets, but not before one asked why my [something] was all outside. I flushed red and they chittered again, but only until a growl interrupted them, “What are you doing?”

Chihirae stepped into the room and slowly bared her teeth. The cubs shrank back, their ears going down while she walked forward and looked down at Feher, “You are [something] them here? Why am I not [something]. [something]! I will talk with you [tomorrow]. Go on.” She aimed a swat at his head as the cubs made for the door and I heard their chattering laughter fading away. Chihirae looked out the door after them, then huffed a breath that left a white cloud in the air and turned back to stare at me.

“They not hurt,” I said in a small voice.

She regarded me levelly for a second, then snorted again and came over to gather the sheets back into some kind of order: “They come into my house. It is [rude?]. Cubs, they never do what I say.”

“You are not... ” I stumbled, tried to figure out how to word it properly. “That is new to you?”

She looked at me and twitched her ears, then smoothed the sheets and paused. “I found your camp.” There was a faint clicking sound that took me a second to pinpoint: she was tapping her claws together, a preoccupied little manerism. “How long you there?”

I didn’t really know. “Before leaves fell.”

”[Autumn],” she supplied. Kept staring at me. “You have some strange [something]. It is...I have never seen the like. Where is it made?”

“Where I am from.”

“Where?”

I opened my mouth. Several times, then confessed, “I not know words.”

Her lip twitched over teeeth. Then she made a snorting sound and stood, leaving me. “Chihirae,” I called after her and she stopped at the door, a sunbeam catching her shoulder and turning the fur golden-white. I swallowed, embarrassed, not knowing how to ask an alien this. “I need to...” I didn’t know the words for that either. “I need to...use the small room?”

“What?” Her muzzle wrinkled. Was that confusion?

“Ah...” there was that phrase I’d heard in the barn when a cub asked to be excused. I repeated it as best I could.

She blinked, then made that chittering sound. “You mean you have to [defecate].”

“Yes...defecate?”

“Ah,” she rubbed a claw along the side of her muzzle. “Have to move you again.”

She did, and it hurt again. I gritted my teeth and suffered as she helped me out of bed: sit up, then get her shoulder under my good arm and stand up with the cold teasing goosebumps from my naked hide. She was a solid crutch under my arm as she helped me, step at a time, to the door. There was narrow, dark corridor there that bisected the house, a curtain at one end, a door at the other and in each wall. I hesitated and Chihirae let me rest, then it was couple of steps to the end of the corridor and the curtain there. It was a tiny room behind it, with a seat that was a weird affair that resembled a potty: a seat with a raised cup that jotted up in front of my groin. I didn’t know what that said about their anatomy. Freezing in there. My breath frosting in the air. “Here,” Chihirae panted, her breath as white as mine, “The smallest room, huh?” she chittered again.

Cold, draughty, with the hole leading to a bucket outside. It would reek in the summer. A handful of straw and a half-frozen bucket of water to clean off with after. Chihirae hovered around the curtain, not seemingly bothered by my

activities. They're less squeamish about bodily functions than we are, but that didn't make it any more comfortable for me. When I was done she began to help me up, laid a hand on my arm and stopped. "You are [something] cold."

I was; shivering and embarrassed. My wounds throbbed with an aching I could feel in my bones. When Chihirae half-lifted me to my feet I could feel her warmth, her skin almost hot under her fur. I was shaking hard when she got me back to bed and set me down. Any trace of body warmth had already vanished from the sheets and the mattress was as cold as the room. Chihirae looked down on me as I huddled, then leaned a little closer; I saw her nostrils twitching before she pulled the sheets up again. "I think you need [something]."

"What. I do not... Chihirae? Chirae?" but the door was already closing behind her. I laid my head back and tried to puzzle out what she'd meant by that. I didn't know the word.

But I guessed what it was when she returned about half an hour later, a steaming bowl in one hand, cloth draped over her arm. Bath.

"Here," she laid the implements down on the table, then turned to me and gave a slow, deliberate grin. "You be still, all right?"

"I do not..."

"You need to [wash]. You [smell] like a [something]." She dipped a cloth into the water, wrung it out, then grinned at me again: "You be quiet? I can tie you again."

I opened my mouth to protest, saw the lay of her ears, and realised she wasn't joking. I closed my mouth again, nodding and laying back.

Shit! That cloth was hot! I gasped at the first dab and Chihirae hastily pulled away, then slowly resumed again. It was hot, but it was a heat that gradually ebbed, sinking in as she wiped the cloth down my face: softly. Down my neck, across my chest. I lay back, relaxing, beginning to lose myself in the warmth and clean feeling that followed the cloth.

She moved lower.

"Huh?" I started to wake at the feelings. A hand touched my face: "No. [something] looking. Nothing new there," she murmured and I just lay still, aware of what was washing between my legs, embarrassed, wondering at the ridiculousness of it all, converting binary to decimal in my head; anything to keep the blood out of the wrong places. Despite the cold, despite what was doing it, it just felt... good.

Mercifully she was quick: down my legs, around my feet. She had to help me roll over and then I could only lie with my arms at my side, but she was slow and thorough, the cloth hot and rough as it scraped my back, leaving a cold, fresh trail to chill in the air. My pulse settled, relaxing under the unintended massage, the occasional brushing of warm fur. It seemed too soon before she said, "Finished."

"Huhn?"

A hand patted my shoulder. “Finished. [something]. Turn over?” I gritted my teeth as she helped me, panting slightly when I was finally settled. Chihirae caught the sheets to pull them up and hesitated, then asked, “Why IS your [something] all outside?”

“What?”

She touched me then: a furry hand flicked lightly against my dick. “Your [penis], why is it outside?” she asked as casually as one might inquire about the weather.

I could only croak, “I don’t know.”

She blinked at me, then pulled the sheets up and patted my shoulder, “I will bring food later.”

I stared after her as she left, then slept again.

—v—

Something touched my cheek, nudging me. I made one of those half-hearted, incoherent complaints that’s such a part of waking and opened my eyes to a candlelit feline face, the dancing light doing weird things with shadows. “Chi’ra?” Everything was muzzy with sleep.

She withdrew her hand and said simply, “We talk.”

“Huhnn?” It was dark out, the single stubby candle the only light in the room. “What?”

“This.” She produced a flat black box, a little smaller than a directory. She fumbled with it, hinged the lid open and touched a red button. The screen blinked to life, the desktop popping up. “This. What is it?”

Candlelight one side: the other twisted active array illumination. “Oh,” I said and lay back. She’d brought that back with her. How much other stuff had she brought back? There was a low growl from Chihirae and I looked up at the shadows of her eyes. “It is a... a thing I... Like you are teacher, use book. I use that for what I do. It is like a book.”

“A book,” she echoed. “This is not a book.” She touched the lens over the CCD while her tail lashed against her legs.

“Like a book,” I repeated.

She cocked her head and I saw her tongue flicker around her lips before she said, “I don’t understand.” A claw clicked on plastic as she ran a finger over the keyboard. “What are these marks.”

‘Writing.’

“Writing... ” her head came up and shadowy pools of her eyes were locked on my face, then she looked down and a fingertip touched a key. “It isn’t Rris. You [something] a writing of [something] your own?”

“I don’t understand,” I said and she stared at me again. “What you said. It not Rris. Is mine... my people.”

“You have writing.”

“Yes.”

“What ARE you?” she asked and this time there was emphasis on words, an emotion imparted that was something I couldn’t understand.

“I am... ” I started to say but the words weren’t there. “Human,” I said.

‘What does that mean?’

“Look,” I pointed at the laptop. “Pictures on that.”

She looked confused.

There was a stylus: a cross between a mouse and a tablet pen. I told her how

to hold the stylus, how to open some files. I had about a dozen 28gig PCMCIA flashcards with me, loaded with all kinds of stuff: from my work to art packages to novels and films. Easier than lugging a library around with you. She was slow and clumsy at first, but not too bad for someone who'd never even conceived of a computer. I couldn't say 'open that window' or 'use the file selector', I had to take her through it as a complete newbie.

Only this was a neophyte who'd never imagined anything like one of today's PCs. I gave her a simple walkthrough, demonstrating sound; She'd never heard her voice played back before and stared quizzically at the speaker, conjuring images of some feline perversion of 'his master's voice'. She was uncomprehending when I pointed the laptop at her and ran the video capture for a few second. When I played it back she leaned close to see what was moving on the screen then reared back:

"That's me! [Something] me! How do you do that?"

It was graphical tricks like that that really got her. I'm a digital graphics specialist so the card was packed with clip images and animations of every description: from a tour of Manhattan to models displaying the latest fashions to helicopter gunships in action. She didn't speak as the pictures flicked across the screen, bathing her features in a light so familiar to me, so out of place here.

"What is this?" she asked finally, still not looking at me. A picture of New York from the air, Central Park central in the POV while a travelogue droned on, muted to near-inaudibility. "Where?"

"Home," I said.

“Where?” she insisted and I thought she sounded a little scared.

I sighed, my ribs flexing painfully. “I do not know how I come here. I was walking. I walked. It changed. It all other... it go away and I go here.”

Her head drew back. “You do not make [sense].”

“I home, then I here. I do not understand. I do not know how. It changed.” I tried to make her understand. “It changed. My home, then here. I do not know how. I was walking and something happen. I wake here. I walk some days. I see houses.” Just lying there in that cold little room, it hit me again: that hollow, empty feeling. An entire world gone forever, stolen from me. Not just the world, there were the people, the friends and family. My job. I had a mental picture of myself trying to explain this to Elliot:

“Sorry I’m late back but I got a bit lost. Ended up on another world and there were these cats and one shot me. Don’t suppose I could have my job back?”

Rita; Jackie - my flatemate, my friend, and more than that; my parents in Chicago; friends: Gareth had been about to open an exhibition of his kinetic and laser sculptures. I’d promised I’d be there but somehow I didn’t think I’d be able to keep that appointment. What were they doing now? I’d have been expected back a month ago. Were there people searching? Fat fucking load of good it’d do.

A hand touched my arm, pulling me out of my fugue, back into the moment. Amber eyes were meeting mine. A screen flickered in the dimness and she flinched violently. Pink hippos parachuting with umbrellas. I looked at that

frivolity and the tears came.

“Mikah? Your eyes are leaking again.”

I rubbed my good hand across my eyes.

“You do that when you hurt?” she asked. When I didn’t answer she tilted her head, then snorted, tucked the laptop under her arm and left me lying in the darkness.

—v—

Chihirae did her best, but sometimes that wasn’t the best for me. There were the times she tried feeding me raw meat, a time she tried giving me some concoction she insisted was a medicine that had me vomiting my guts out. I’d no idea what was in it, was damned lucky it didn’t kill me. She was a better teacher; in the evenings she would sit at my bedside and we would talk. She’d made trips back to the campsite, bringing all my stuff back with her. Of course she hadn’t been able to figure out how to pack the tent away, so she just piled everything inside and used the tent as a sack. The Compaq; she played around on that until I had to show her how to connect the solarpack to recharge it. My clothes were a source of great puzzlement to her, I don’t know what she thought of my boots, but she seemed to have taken a fancy to my jacket. My medical kit was a blessing, once I’d managed to tell Chihirae what I needed. She brought it in to me and I could tell as soon as I opened it that she’d been rifling through it. I popped a couple of antibiotic tablets, then Chihirae dusted my wounds with antiseptic dust and replaced the bandages with the sterile gauze pads. Two days later the swelling around the punctures had reduced, the aching had subsided. It still hurt like hell to move but I was healing.

My waking hours were long and boring and cold. Chihirae was gone for long periods during which I either dozed or lay and stared at the ceiling. There was no way I could go anywhere on my own: my injuries and two weeks bedridden left me hopelessly weak. Chihirae spent time with me in the afternoons and evenings, helping me with her language, teaching me new words and correcting my grammar. She said I couldn't say some of the words correctly, but that was more of a physical difficulty and there wasn't a lot I could do about it.

—v—

The front door slamming and the loud snarls of Rris voices shouting woke me. I started awake and lay blinking in the dimness. Evening. Chihirae was a lot later than was usual for her and judging by the sounds she wasn't alone. The voices became a lot louder when the door opened and three Rris pushed in with Chihirae behind them. Two of them were male: one of them I thought I recognised as the doctor who'd treated me, but my recollection of him was kind of fuzzy, the other as the male who'd spoken about killing me. The last was a female and she was arguing vehemently with Chihirae in a stream of fluent Rris impossible to follow. She rounded on me, levelling a clawed finger and snarling. I shrank away and stared at Chihirae helplessly. Her muzzle wrinkled and she made a placating gesture in my direction: "It is all right, Mikah."

"It is a killer," the other male snapped.

"I kill no one," I protested. They stared, momentarily nonplussed. "I did not kill," I said again.

"[something] you! [something] Sherrith said he saw something like you," the

female snapped. “Two days later he is dead. Where were you! What [something] you. Teacher, it is [something]. Kill it [something]... ” I couldn’t follow.

“It said it [something] the [children]. It [something] kill them also?”

“No,” I croaked, shocked and scared at what they were implying.

“He cannot have,” the Doc stepped in, on my side I hoped. “Look:” he came close and pulled the blankets away to show my hand. “No claws. How could he [something the something] killed Sherrith. And there are no [something]. There was blood under his claws. No [something] here.”

The female seized the blankets and threw them across the room, pointing out the red scratches across my hide where branches had torn me when I fell down the hillside. “And what [something] these?”

He snorted. “Not claw [marks].”

“He is right,” Chihirae snarled, actually bristling, her fur bottling out in a furious ruff as she launched into a snarling tirade. The female flinched, then spat something back and stalked out with the male in tow. The others swept out behind them and I heard shouting carrying off down the corridor, leaving me lying naked in a room with the temperature hovering around zero, the sheets scattered around the floor. It still hurt when I tried to move and just sitting up moved muscles that shouldn’t be disturbed. Walking was agony and - as I soon found out - a stupid idea.

Chihirae returned to find me slumped against the table unable to get the blankets, unable to get back to the bed, doing my best just to stay on my feet. “What are you doing?!”

“Cold,” I said in way of explanation and tried to make it back to the bed by myself. She caught me before I did myself some serious damage. “Ai, you are like ice,” she exclaimed as she soon as she touched me.

“Cold,” I said again.

She cocked her head, then her tail flicked against my calf as she slipped a shoulder beneath my arm and took some of my weight. I limped where she led, which was not back to the bed as I’d expected, but rather to the door and then a few paces down the cramped hallway to the other door.

The house’s other room was a little larger than the one I’d been in, but this one wasn’t a barren, cold cell. It looked lived in. The window was unshuttered with blackness outside and frost lacing the glass. Like the other room there was a single unmade bed set in an alcove, but here there were also cupboards and stocked shelves in the surrounding walls; a glowing lantern hanging above a table with old books stacked on it. Scattered around the room were items of my own: the tent clumsily rolled up in a corner along with my pack. On the table my laptop and pens and lamp sat alongside a candle stub. In the far corner a small, cast-iron stove squatted like a black gnome, a workspace with a few kitchen implements such as bowls and skillets beside it. A pyramid of wood was stacked against the wall alongside. On the floor in front of the stove was something that looked like a beanbag chair or large, lopsided cushion.

Chihirae helped me across to settle down on the cushion. The fabric was richly woven, embroidered with hundreds of tiny pictures I didn’t have time to

examine. It was stuffed with something soft that rustled and smelt pleasant: a potpourri aroma. She gave me a grubby blanket and crouched down in front of the fire while I huddled and shivered. The sight of her tail poking through the green fabric of her pants was unsettling and something I found difficult to take my eyes off: just so strange. She talked to me as she coaxed the fire to life:

“They are afraid of you. They think you killed and they do not want to listen. Some of the town think you are [innocent], others think you killed. They want you killed.”

“They kill me?” I asked, not really feeling anything. It had all been too much; the emotions had burned down, like the fire.

Chihirae twisted to look at me: a flash of titanium in the lamplight. Her tailtip twitched, “No. I am [something]. If they [something] I told them I bring [something].” She chittered again, “They are quieter, but they have sent for [something or someone].”

“I do not understand,” I told her in a small voice.

A sigh escaped her. She pushed a larger piece of wood into the stove and closed the thick door. Cast iron I suddenly realised. The most sophisticated thing I’d seen here. Did that mean they had industry? Steam power? Electricity? Chihirae was talking again, explaining.

“I work for... [people] who ...” she made aimless motions as she searched for a simple word I knew, “[something]? Teach us. Tell us. Make land work.”

Government?

“I am a Teacher. A town asks for one, I go. Stay for a while. They try to hurt you I tell them I tell my [superiors]. No more help. Make life hard for them. They send for [something]. He say if you have killed or not. What he says is [final]. I cannot change.”

So, she was a government employee, blackmailing them. They kill me, the officials make things tough for the villagers. They’d gone over her head and sent for a... a cop? Judge?

“You want to show me to your... superiors.”

Her jaw twitched. “You go? You talk?”

What kind of choices did I have? Not many. “If you say, I go.”

She might have heard the resignation, anyway, something made her look around and meet my eye. “I will not hurt you,” she told me.

“Too late,” I smiled slightly.

She returned a hesitant twitch of her ears and popped the stove door to throw

another piece of wood in. God! The warmth that flooded out was bliss. I'd been lying in that icebox with only my own bodywarmth for heat for so long, now this just felt incredible. It seeped into me, easing the aching in my side and shoulder. Chihirae was speaking again, but her words became a background droning that made it all the harder to stay awake. I just let my head sink back into the cushion and gave in.

—v—

In the days that followed Chihirae settled me down with my own sleeping bag and mat in a corner near the fire. It proved to be a judicious move as my health took a turn for the better: I wasn't as tired, and when I did sleep, it was longer and deeper. The swelling around the punctures subsided even more, but I guess that could have been due to the antibiotics I was stoking myself with. At the time I never realised just what a risk Chihirae felt she was taking in having me in the same room; I later learned she didn't sleep nearly as well on those first couple of nights. I guess if I were in her place I wouldn't rest so easy either.

The first four days passed pretty much as usual: she would give me some food in the morning and leave me to go off to her class. Clothes rubbed painfully against bruised and swollen wounds so I had to make do with blankets and the stove. It was stoked in the morning, then damped down so it was just ticking over while Chihirae was out with her classes. Her evenings and other spare time she spent with me, spending hours nursing and patiently tutoring me in that cramped little room, teaching me her language, her customs and her life. Her books were possessions she valued more than anything but she still let me leaf through them. All the while she was watching with attentive eyes, ready to pounce if I made a move that might damage her treasures. Of course so many of the words were just chicken scratchings to me, but I could look at the pictures and try to make what I could out of the ones I did know. While she was out I spent the time reviewing my notes, trying to make my mouth wrap itself around sounds it was never intended for. After a few hours I inevitably ended up with a sore throat; Hell, I still do.

And there was that cop.

“A [something],” Chihirae explained.

“I do not know that word, [something].”

Her muzzle wrinkled and she scratched a clawtip against the desktop as she pondered, “Someone who balances? If there is a problem between people, they will [judge] and make a decision. They hold the [power] of the [government]. Their word is what-must-be. [Law]. Do you understand that?”

“Yes.” A cross between police and judges? The closest I could come to an accurate translation was mediator; although whenever Chihirae mentioned the name it was always Mediator... with a capital ‘M’. “They are...” I didn’t know how to say important, “big? People listen them?”

“To them,” she corrected automatically. “Yes. Yes they do.” She stared at me, then looked away hastily.

She was worried about this Mediator.

That scared me.

A couple of days later. Chihirae hadn't returned home after her classes.

I stood at the tiny window with a blanket wrapped around my shoulders, clutching the sill for support. It was already dark outside and crystals of frost laced the warped glass of the windowpanes, snowflakes drifting like glittering stars into the pool of light just outside. Beyond that: night. Blackness. Not even a moon through the clouds. I turned away and winced as my right arm shifted in its sling. Growing cold again. Awkwardly I stoked the fire - laboriously fetching one piece of wood at a time from the stack - then settled down on that cushion and huddled in front of it while it crackled and hissed and popped and the wind picked up outside. Where was she? A whole day gone and there was no sign of her. I rubbed my hands and tightened the blankets around my shoulder. Was I worried about her? Surprising to find I was. She'd almost killed me. I remembered the pain from that, but I also remembered what she'd done for me, how she helped me after, how she stood up for me and believed in me when nobody else would.

I was beginning to like her, and I found that as amazing as everything else that had happened.

So I waited while snow flickered past the window like silent static. I waited while the fire flickered and the warmth soaked me and let my eyelids droop. I guess I nodded off there because the next I remember a hand was touching my shoulder and I started awake with a jolt, my heart racing. Chihirae flinched back to crouch beside me with ice crystals still dusting her facial fur, "Mikah? You are all right?"

I blinked up at her, then saw the other Rris standing in the background: A

stranger. A bulky male with ice crusting his ears and facial fur, wearing a long, stained, leather overcoat that hung down to his calves and glistened with oils and melting snow. A tail peeked out from the hem of the jacket and a tattered pack hung from his hand while he watched me. His facial fur was dark fawn with lighter streaks running back into his ruff, his eyes a glacial green. I stared back with a horrified fascination. I knew who this was.

“M’kah,” Chihirae touched my shoulder again, “this is Shyia. He is Mediator. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

There was a noise from the Mediator, a kind of surprised snort and I looked again and saw the gun in his other hand; a flintlock pistol. He also looked down, then shifted his grip on the weapon, set his pack down and came closer. “They told me this was going to be different, but I hadn’t expected this.” His voice was deeper than Chihirae’s, like a husky growl that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

“I suppose I have grown used to him,” Chihirae murmured.

“Huh.” He stared at me. “They said you can understand me.”

“Speak slowly. I can understand.”

He hesitated and glanced at Chihirae then turned back to me. “You know what

you have been [accused] of? Do you understand just what it means?”

“I think so,” I said hesitantly, unable to keep from glancing at the gun.

“He is still learning,” Chihirae supplied. “Use small words. Can I take your coat.”

He blinked, as if he’d forgotten he’d been wearing it, then he fiddled with the gun and laid it down on the desk. Water dripped on the floor as he shrugged out of the heavy overcoat and handed it to her and turned back to me while she hung it on a peg near the stove. He was wearing pants of some coarse-woven material and a quilted vest with lace-on sleeves: incongruous on his furry body. His tail was dark fur, twitching with a life of its own. Things I was beginning to learn about them, one of them being that their tails often said what they didn’t. “You have been [accused] of murdering Sherrith Gh’ryis. His [something] said that you were seen near his house. You ran from them. A few days after Sherrith was found dead by [something] else.”

“They say I kill him,” I said.

His muzzle twitched to show teeth. “I am here to decide. Did you?”

“No. I not kill him! I not! I would...”

“Mikah,” Chihirae interjected softly and I shut up, hunching morosely while they stared at me; two surreal shapes in the twilight of the lamp. The Mediator

glanced towards his pistol on the desk, then at her and said something; too fast and fluent for me to follow, as was the brief exchange that followed. I watched them like a spectator at a tennis match as the ball went from one court to the other. It ended with Chihirae ducking her head and backing off. The Mediator looked at me and said, "I want to have a look at your wounds."

I nodded. If cooperation was going to help me, then I was going to be one cooperative monkey. Goosebumps rose when I turned the blankets down to show my scars; his muzzle wrinkled and I couldn't tell if it was distaste or something else. The massive bruising around the punctures had subsided, but the surrounding skin was still greenish-purple and sensitive. The scabs were beginning to crack, showing the puckers of angry-looking scars.

"You do not have [much] fur," he eventually observed.

"Nothing gets past you, does it."

"What was that noise?"

"No. No I don't."

"Huhn," he scratched at his chin in a gesture startling in its familiarity. "These," he reached out a hand to almost - but not quite - touch the red traces of scratches along my arms and up my neck, "where did you get them?"

"I fall... fell down."

“It is true,” Chihirae interjected. “You can ask. They were [chasing] him. They saw.”

“Huhn,” he studied me again, and this time touched the skin around my shoulder wound. A cold, smooth claw traced a hard line across sensitive flesh, making me flinch violently. “Huhn,” he growled again, then the claw jabbed hard. I yelped and jumped wildly as I tried to pull away from the pain. Chihirae shouted something and moved forward and hesitated; uncertain as to just what she could do. The Mediator looked up at her, then down at my arm where a trickle of blood was starting to well up. “Your [hide] is thin.”

“Why did you do that?” Chihirae growled.

“It would be difficult for him to kill anyone. As you said, he has no claws and [anyone] could [something] his [something] with their own hands.” He leaned back and studied me again. “You said there were other things.”

Chihirae stood for a few seconds, her head bobbing slightly, then she crossed the room to her desk and held up the laptop. “A lot. This says the most.”

“That?” I could tell when someone was looking dubious, but he went to stand beside her. I guess any doubts he might have been having flew south when Chihirae switched the laptop on.

Graphics are... were my business: both static and animated. I had a dozen or so 28 gigabyte flashcards filled with everything from clip art to films to music.

The oldstyle CD-ROMs could pack about 640megs; with oldstyle-MPEG motion picture compresion that's about 70 minutes of low-quality animation. 28 gigs and improved compression gives you 56 times as much storage: that's enough room for the entire Star Wars, Godfather, and Jurassic trilogies at broadcast quality on one disk, and DATACRUNCH COMPRESS  gives you even more megs for your money. The few films I had with me were a varied assortment: a few of the newer releases such as New York Nights, Silken, Aliens Vs. Predator, FireSide and Starship Trooper along with some older pieces: Citizen Kane, The Piano, Hot Shots, Window to a Soul, Dances With Wolves, The Lion King, Wild at Heart, The Hitcher, The Monty Python Series, Basic Instinct, Platoon, and Schindler's List among them. Also a bundle of shorter clips I'd used for references scenes, and with the megapixel HDCCD mounted above the screen I could record clips of my own. There were several games (copied, I'll admit to that. After all, who's going to come after me here?). More serious packages: Encyclopaedia Britannica (2003 edition) , Thesarus, References, Classics, Adobe Photoshop and Animator revisions, Director Extreme, Autodesk Applications for 3D and CyberScape, presentation software and Authorware Pro. I'd never counted how many books there were in the Libarary disk, but the blurb claimed there were over five thousand, including necessities such as the Guttenberg Bible, Book of Kells, Pauper's Bible, The Nuremberg Chronicle, The Strife of Love in a Dream by Aldus Manutius, Archtypical Illustrations, ... well, as an illustrator I find them indespensible. The disk of clipart had all kinds of shit, from scanned images to Keylight stock disks: over ten thousand images. I wasn't sure exactly what I had in there, a potpourri more than two years in the making. A couple of decades ago a laptop was something the NeoYuppies carried - primitive things, each pretty helpless on their own. But they've had their time to grow up. My little Compaq is everything I'd ever need in an office away from home: A studio, an office, bookshelf, library, fax and ISDN node, camera, stereo and video in a package I could easily carry in a utility pocket in my pack. Now a couple of over-evolved cats who'd probably never seen a lightbulb in their lives were playing with it.

She showed him some of the things I'd shown her: a few animations, pictures that probably made absolutely no sense to either of them. The Mediator began to ask her questions I couldn't understand, so while they poked through my files I watched and worried my own thoughts: Did he believe me? How could I make him? Shit, I couldn't speak the language well enough to defend myself if one of

them accused me of all the murders of the past ten years.

Again I had to wonder: Why am I here?

It hadn't been a life great epics are made from: a few years of college then a life of fast foods and deadlines and sleepless nights. There were friends and family and loans and an overdraft to pay off. Nothing spectacular, but looking back, it seems all the more important. At the time I'd been living it, I'd never dreamed that life might have been taken away from me. If I'd known, perhaps I'd have appreciated it a little more. What were they thinking back home? Were they searching? What good would it do.

"Mikah?"

I blinked out of my reverie at the mention of my name. The two Ris were watching me dubiously; the Mediator in Chihirae's rickety chair at the desk, she watching over his shoulder. Chihirae asked, "You all right?"

"I fine," I answered hollowly. She twitched an ear: perhaps she could tell when there was something not quite right.

The Mediator didn't catch it. He leaned back and studied me for a second. "Tell me what happened," he said.

"I've already told you," Chihirae interjected. "What he told me, I told you."

“I [something] for myself,” he said. “Leave us alone. Wait [something].”

“But he...”

“Go.”

Chihirae stared at him, then ducked her head and left. At the door she hesitated, looked to me and said, “Tell truth.” Then the door was closing behind her. The Mediator glanced after her, then settled himself and steepled his clawed fingers in front of his chest, watching me. “Tell me,” he said, “everything. Where are you from. Why are you here. Tell me.”

I stared back, trying to weigh him up, trying to find some way to read those inscrutable features. It was like looking at a stone mask; waiting expectantly. I swallowed, then began telling my story. Awkwardly, haltingly, I tried to tell him and he just sat and listened. When I wound up he just sat there for a while longer, watching me with those ice-green eyes, then he shifted and grunted. “Huhn. You [something] a good story.”

“I do not understand.”

His tail twitched around and he took it in his hands, idly grooming the fur at the tip. “This is all true?”

“True. Yes.”

“I [something] do not understand. How can you come here and not know how?”

Again I had to shrug. “I do not know.”

He gave me a dubious look, then turned back to the laptop. “Is there more to this?”

Not really much point in lying. “Yes.”

He hesitated before touching the machine, before picking it up. He turned it over a few times, squinting at the text on the base plates, then brought it over and set it down on the floor, squatting on the other side. “Show me.”

I reached out and touched a key, then looked at him. He just stared back expectantly. All right. I shifted uncomfortably to a half-sitting position and put the computer on my lap, adjusting the screen. He watched as I ran a slideshow. Often he stopped me to ask questions about things on the screen. I answered as best I could, but I didn't have the vocabulary to describe things he had no conception of. He couldn't understand a 767 or the space station. He stared for a while at the pictures of women with an expression I couldn't decipher. Other things I think frightened him: his ears went down when he saw some of the city clips, the shots of New York from over central park. I couldn't answer when he asked how many people there were there.

“Many,” was all I could offer.

He stared at a picture of North America as seen from five hundred kilometres above the earth's surface and a clawed fingertip reached out to trace the coastline through the clouds. I licked my lips, swallowed on a throat made dry and sore by an hour of trying to wrap vocal chords around noises they were never designed for. Exhausted. Those green eyes shifted to me. "Truth?" he asked again.

"Truth," I replied.

His ears laid flat and he scratched at the fur of his chest while he studied me. Then he ducked his head and reached out to take the laptop back. I surrendered it without a fuss and he stood to set it back on the desk, then looked down at me, "Enough for tonight."

I nodded tiredly and just lay back as he gave me a final glance before leaving the room. I heard Rris voices, muffled by the walls and door. For a while I listened, unable to understand a word and I don't remember exactly when I sank under.

—v—

The dreams were bad that night.

There were nightmares of the kind that seem so absurd in retrospect, but in sleep they seem to tickle some of the deepest emotions. I don't remember exactly what they were that night, just that there were things chasing me, waiting for me, hunting me. I ran through trees of sand where hands clutched at me and caught me and woke gasping like a drowning swimmer, drenched in clammy

sweat. I lay in the darkness, still on that cushion, panting at the ceiling and a voice sounded in my ear: “Mikah?”

“Uhn? Who... ?” Shadows shifted beside me, an indistinct blur in the darkness. “Chihirae?” I croaked as I tried to see something.

“Yes.” There was a pause. “What is wrong?”

“Oh...uhn... Nothing.”

“You were shouting, [something]. I thought you were going to hurt yourself. What is it?”

I lay back. “Just bad... what is word for... thinking at night? Pictures in head? You have?”

”[Dreams],” she volunteered.

“You have dreams?” another voice asked. The Mediator? Still here? Didn’t he have a home to go to? “Yes,” I said.

“Not very [pleasant] ones,” Chihirae added. “He does not sleep very well. Many nights like this.”

There was a pause, then the Mediator asked, “What do you dream of?”

I searched for an answer, trying to find words. Finally I just settled for: “You.”

Wind whined outside; then one of them - it had to be Chihirae - touched my arm again. “We get you back to bed? Yes?”

Half the night on that cushion in front of the stove and I was so stiff I fancied I could hear my bones creak as strong, furry arms helped me up and across to my makeshift bed in the corner. With the warmth of the sleeping bag around me I lay back in the darkness, feeling them watching me. There was a brief exchange of muted Rris, then the sound of the door opening and closing.

“Chihirae?”

“Yes?”

“What do you... dream of?”

There was a hesitation, then she murmured, “I don’t think they are the same as yours.”

The Mediator was still there next morning.

Sunlight from outside made the ice frosting the window panes glow. Something sizzled and popped on the stove and Chihirae was breaking eggs into a pair of wooden bowls. “Good sleeping,” she greeted me and flashed me a grin: inch-long incisors, multitudes of needleteeth.

I flinched. What’d I do? What’d I do? “You are angry?” I asked in a small voice.

She put the bowl down and cocked her head at me. “I was trying to smile; as you do.”

“Oh.”

“It was not the same?”

“Not quite.”

She chuckled and I sat up on my pallet, working the stiffness out of my shoulder while she watched me. “How are you feeling?”

“It is getting better.” I raised my arm and moved it in a slow circle, gritting

my teeth all the while. “I can do this without screaming.”

“Ah,” she ducked her head and idly popped an eggshell into her mouth, crunching and swallowing loudly, then she quietly asked, “No more dreams?”

I shook my head, “No. No more.”

She made a small noise and turned her attentions back to the food. I hung my head and ran my hands through my hair, my beard - both growing out past what I was comfortable with. Cold morning air, despite the stove; I hitched the sleeping bag up and watched her, feeling guilty as I did every morning about not being able to do anything. Dammit, just lying there every day; it wasn't just boring, it left me feeling useless, like a spare wheel. My wounds must have had long enough to heal up by now.

Chihirae watched me cautiously when I awkwardly clambered to my feet, still uneasy on my legs. The new skin over my scars felt too-tight: stretched tissue-paper that might tear. I oh-so slowly made my way across to my pack, using pieces of furniture as hand holds along the way.

“What are you doing?” she asked as I began rumaging around in my pack.

“I am... not wanting to lie all time,” I said, trying to find some clothing, then upending the pack and sorting through the pile. The shirts I'd been wearing when she shot me were a write off: they'd had to be cut away. There were still dark stains on one of my two pairs of bluejeans - no washing powder with hungry enzymes here - but they were wearable.

“Mikah!” Chihirae realised what I was doing and dropped what she was doing. I held out a hand to ward her off. “I want to.”

“Last time you [something] you hurt yourself more. Lie down.”

“I do not want to.”

“Mikah... “

“Please,” I forestalled her, “I must walk. I feel... no good. I lie there long I go out of my head. Please.”

She looked at me, then at the clothes. “You need those?”

“I feel no good without clothes.”

“What?”

Maybe for them it wasn't a problem. For me... “I feel like... cold. Like open. Like no hiding.”

Her muzzle wrinkled up. “You need clothes.” Then she looked me up and down, “I [something] I understand. No fur. Cold.”

“Yes. Cold.”

She snorted then, a sound that mixed an ounce of disbelief with resignation. “All right. I help you?”

I almost fell over trying to get my legs into my underwear. I nodded and gave a small smile: “Please.”

She really had almost no idea of what went where. The Rris have clothing, they use it in extreme conditions as well as social occasions, but they just don’t have the number of articles of different kinds of clothing you might find a human wearing. I really couldn’t tell if she was amused or bemused by the amount of stuff I had: she looked at my underwear and she gave a hissing laugh.

“What?” I asked.

“Uncomfortable,” her muzzle pursed and her ears flickered in what I’d come to recognise as a smile and she helped steady me as I pulled them on. “Would rub,” she said, plucking at the Calvin Klein’s fabric over my crotch. I slapped her hand away and she voiced a sound I interpreted as a chuckle. The socks were thermolactyl, something that Chihirae admired and she asked me what animal the stuff came from. Halfway into my trousers, teetering with one arm around her shoulders while she chattered and hissed and I swayed, trying not to laugh as well and the door banged against the wall and a pile of firewood walked across the room to land with a crash beside the stove. The Mediator dusted his hands

and looked around, his ears flattening at the sight of us: me with trousers half on, bent over, Chihirae helping me stay upright, then his muzzle twitched and he hissed something at Chihirae. She twitched her own ears and growled something back. He just grinned, then plonked himself down at the table and helped himself to a bowl, sitting slurping back raw egg while watching Chihirae helping me finish dressing: blue jeans, proper shirt. She stepped back and looked up at me, cocking her head, “You look different.”

“Why so many clothes?” The Mediator asked.

“No fur,” Chihirae provided.

“Looks like a [something],” he growled and ambled over to the stove where he picked something out of the frying pan, waved it in the air to cool, then popped it into his mouth, chewing and swallowing loudly. “You know, in clothes it almost looks [something].”

Chihirae gave him a look and a flash of teeth. He gave a small hiss and pointed at the pan, “The meat is burnt.”

“Huhn. For Mikah. He needs his meat that way.”

He fished out another piece of raw meat and chewed slowly at it, watching me all the while. Uncomfortable, I looked away and patted Chihirae’s furry shoulder, “Thanking you.”

“You are all right?” she asked as she moved back, leaving me standing.

“Yes,” I nodded, managing to stay upright. Already those morning urges were making themselves felt. “I go to the toilet,” I told her and turned to make my way to the door, stumbling but catching myself before Chihirae could get there, “All right,” I protested, holding out a hand to ward her off, “All right.” She looked concerned but kept her distance while I carefully navigated my way out of the room, keeping a hand near the wall just in case. Muted Rris voices sounded from behind, my name being bandied about.

—v—

Chihirae left us shortly to go to her classes. I heard the front door bump shut and I was alone with the Mediator. He sat at the desk, fiddling with the laptop, slowly poking through a slideshow, studying each image as if it held the secrets to life. I sat back on Chihirae’s bed, watching his furry back as he tapped hesitantly at keys. Beyond him, the window framed a snowscape: a treeline with whitewashed evergreens and cobalt-blue sky overhead, achingly blue. After those weeks cooped up in that tiny house, the small room seemed very stuffy. The Mediator looked around as I stood, then stared openly as I limped across to the door, to the hall then the front door.

It’d been cold in the house, but when I opened that door the chill was like a bucket of cold water in my face. Morning sun glaring off snow drifted up to a metre against the walls in places. Odd footprints littered the snow just outside, tracks leading north to the road that continued on to the village. I could see a few straggling cubs bound for the barn, their voices carrying on the chill air along with a few snowballs. Wisps of smoke hung above the village: indistinct gauze columns reaching for a powder-blue sky where clouds built up from the horizon like hills of cotton.

I leaned against the doorjamb, staring at the snowscape. All I felt was a hollow sensation, resignation. I stretched out a foot and touched a toe into the ice around the door. It was cold, the air crisp and dry and left a smell like tin in my sinuses. It was happening, it was something I was living, it was real.

“You are going somewhere?”

A dark shifting in the shadows of the hall behind me became the Mediator, standing pincushioned by the splinters of light sifting past me. I shook my head and looked back at the world; “Where?”

Muted rustling of fur on fur and when I looked around again he was closer, looking up as he studied my face intently. I swallowed and shifted back a fraction; his nostrils pulsed. A clawed hand reached up toward my shoulder and I flinched violently, knocking back against the wall behind me. He hesitated, withdrew his hand. “Why are you always afraid?”

“I am not,” I blurted.

He cocked his head to one side, his expression completely inscrutable; then turned and looked out the door at his world outside. “Your [something] changes. You do not sleep well. You are always [something], nervous. Do you have a reason?”

I jerked my head back, the muscles in my neck twitching, “I am looking at it.”

“I? You are afraid of me for a reason?”

“You are here to say I killed? Some of they,” I waved a hand at the village, “say I killed. Not like me. You not like me say same. Say I just animal.” I choked on the Rris language and switched to bitter English, “Kill the freak, problems solved.”

He exhaled, moisture condensing in the crisp air. “I hunt answers. Questions are the [trail? road?] one has to follow. I have never seen anything such as you, but that won’t [something] a fair [judgement].”

And I believed him? Oh, sure. Of course he’d say that. I believed it about as much as I belived we had true racial equality in the States. If one species with slightly different amounts of skin pigmentation couldn’t live together, how could two species as different as two poles of a magnet cope? There was no way I believed he could be completely impartial.

He gave me a sideways glance. “You don’t trust me, do you.”

That got me. Confused, I stared back at him. No, I wasn’t sure I did trust him, but how could he tell? I couldn’t read anything in his body language, but then again even Chihirae was opaque enough. The way he’d said that: I couldn’t tell if he was annoyed, pleased, or simply indifferent about the fact. I just licked my lips and confessed, “I do not know.”

“But you trust the teacher?”

I tensely nodded. “Yes.”

“Why? She was the one who hurt you.”

“Yes, but she is... I do not know how to say it... good? She helped me. She stands beside me. She trusts me that I did not kill.” I hesitated before adding, “She is a friend.”

He looked at me again, weighing me. “You don’t have many of those, do you. Any [something] you can [something]?”

“I do not understand,” I protested, confused and nervous.

“No,” he kept staring, “you don’t. [forget it].”

That confused me even more; phrases that made little or no sense to me. I looked back out at the snowbound village in the distance, the rising sun throwing a glare from ice and snow and I tried to sort through his words. Was he trying to make a joke or make fun of me? I wasn’t really qualified to tell. I just sighed and asked, “What you do with me?”

He cocked his head at that. “That is what I am trying to decide. Even if you are [innocent], you will still be a problem. There would be a lot of people [interested] in [something] you.”

I could imagine. I just looked at him then turned and limped my way back to the fire and the warmth. He'd left the compaq turned on; it'd gone into shutdown mode, conserving power. I'd have to remember to charge it up again sometime. On the table beside the laptop lay the Mediator's pistol. I picked it up without thinking, feeling its heft and turning it over as I examined it. A flintlock with a time-and-use worn wooden grip that didn't fit my hand properly, a dark barrel decorated with a few simple inscriptions that could have been lettering or just the craftsman's fancy. The lock mechanism was mounted on a rotating wheel carved like a flower, while the trigger was moulded in a shape I realised after a few seconds was a claw. I carefully put the thing down again.

"You know what that is?" The Mediator was behind me, standing casually but close enough to move fast if he had to. I nodded: "Yes."

"You have [guns]?" His ears twitched. "Like that?"

"Yes." I sat down at the desk, taking the weight off my feet. I was already tired. "Similar." I looked at the pistol again and asked, "You can...hit things with?"

"Not as [something] as a crossbow, but smaller. Easier to carry." He picked the pistol up, moving it out of my reach. "Your guns are different? How?"

I shrugged. "Ah... different."

He perched himself on the edge of the desk and I noticed his tail snaking across the desktop. It didn't look very comfortable. What would it be like having an extra appendage like that. What the hell did they use it for? Balance?

“Different, a?” he rumbled.

I looked up, realising he’d caught me staring and I didn’t know if he meant the guns we’d been talking about or his tail. He flashed teeth then flicked his furry tail around, catching the tip in his fingers and pointedly, slowly grooming it. I swallowed and he ducked his head, chittered briefly, and raised his eyes to mine again. “Some of your devices are more [complex] than anything else I have seen before. Are your weapons the same?”

“Yes.”

“And your kind fight each other?”

“Sometimes,” I admitted, then reached to tap at a random key on the compaq and gave a wry smile. “A lot of the time.”

He turned his pistol over in his furry hands, just stroking the lines, then laid it aside on the dark varnish of the desktop, silver highlights glinting in light: heavy metal and worn wood, something of death sculpted into something of art. A far cry from the functional killers of human manufacture. “What do you think of us?”

I blinked. “I do not understand.”

“What do you think of us? Of Rris?” The Mediator’s bottle-green stare studied

me. “After what’s happened to you, what do you think of when you see us?”

That was a question that vaguely disturbed me. “Why are you asking me this?”

A clawed hand moved in an obscure gesture. “I do not know what you are, how you [something]. I have to learn before I can [something]. Do you understand?”

He was trying to get a handle on the way I thought? “I think so.”

“Good.” He cocked his head, expectantly? “What do you think of us?”

“I do not think I know. I only know Chihirae and yourself. Not many talk to me.” I paused, then smiled, “Your cubs are fun. They are...” “I didn’t know their word for it, so I filled the gap with an English, “cute.”

“You talked with cubs? I am surprised they didn’t run from you.”

That hurt a bit. I nodded, “They were...curious. They hear a lot, they wanted to see what I look like.”

“You did not frighten them?”

Frighten them? I gave him a numb look, did he think I went out of my way to scare them? “Do you think I want to frighten? I do not want it! I cannot stop it. Every Rris who see me think same...”

“Always will,” he said softly.

Those words hammered an icicle through my soul. I shuddered; yeah, they would. The rest of my life I would be getting those looks: shock, disgust, intrigue, curiosity and outright fear. I’ve never got used to it, not completely. At that time, when the Mediator spoke those words, it wasn’t something I’d thought about - not something I’d even wanted to think about. The rest of my life... Forever’s a long time.

I shuddered and looked down at my hands, then at the keyboard of the Compaq. A whole world, a life I knew and understand, one that fitted me like an old pair of slippers... behind me, gone.

“Mikah?” Green eyes studied me.

“It is...it is not a good thought,” I choked on their language, bringing a momentary flicker from his ears. No, it wasn’t a pleasant thought, even less so when there was a possibility I could be spending my time as a murder suspect. The Mediator was just watching me with that look I was beginning to find intensely annoying. I swallowed and asked, “What do you do if you think I do it?”

He scratched at the side of his muzzle. “They will want you dead. It is usual, but you are not.”

“You not kill me?”

“Something else. I don’t know,” his tail twitched and he shifted, then stood up and crossed to the window where midmorning sun was pouring in. Muscles flexed under the dark fur across his back, none in quite the right place. “Later, I have to go out. I will leave you here. You stay here.” He turned and grinned at me, one of those grins that’s the last thing a lion’s lunch sees, “It would make [something] much easier for everyone. I do not want to have to hunt you.”

And I knew when he said that he meant it; literally. “It’s not like I’ve got much of a choice,” I muttered in English.

“What was that noise?”

“I stay.”

“Better for everyone.”

—v—

Either Chiherae or the Mediator was back. I heard the front door and looked up from the papers spread out on the desk, my cramped handwriting covering just about every square inch. The laptop screen shone steadily, the word processor dotted with lines of notes and cross-references, phoenetic representations of their language, and the Rris character sets I’d created and

loaded in, copied from some of Chihirae's texts. It was Chihirae who came in along with a blast of icy air, pausing and leaning against the doorframe while she shook the remaining clumps of ice and snow that clung to her ankles and feet like it would to a pair of mukluks. "I am really starting to hate winter," she growled.

"You said fur is good for warm," I pointed out with a smile. She hissed at me, then corrected, "Good for warmth... for warmth, understand?"

"Yes. For warmth. Understand," I nodded and then spied the other faces in the hall behind her, peering around her hip. Chihirae noticed where my attention had suddenly drifted. "Ah...I think you have met these."

"Feher?" I ventured the name of one of the cubs in the front.

"You remember?" He moved forward and Chihirae put hands on his shoulders, stopping him. He twisted to grin up at her, "I told you he would."

"It is not easy to forget you," she grinned back. "All right. Be quiet, he is still not [something] to your [something]. Try not to tear him apart."

He just ignored her, staring at me again, "Why are you wearing so many clothes?"

"Why aren't you?" I retorted. "Aren't you cold?"

“Not cold today,” he snorted. Chihirae made a small gesture that could have been Gimme a break. “You can talk better,” another cub observed, one of the others who been in my room that day, and the rest of the bevy of cubs started adding their questions.

“Why don’t you grow fur.”

“Why do you sound so strange?”

More questions as the cubs gained confidence, a bunch of waist-high furry figures in patched snow-dusted clothing gathering around while Chihirae hovered proprietarily in the background. Why was she doing this? Trying to prove something to someone? Maybe it was a field trip, go and see the local freak. Would she do that to me? I blinked and looked down at the cub who was tugging on my jeans, digging her claws into the fabric, “Hey! Careful.”

“Are you reading these?” another cub was reaching for the books, Chihirae’s books. I hurridly grabbed it before he got his claws on it. Another... oh shit!

“What’s this?” Feher was tapping buttons on the laptop. “Hot! Look! It moves.” I got to the keyboard and saved the document before he did something like cut the power. “What is that?” he demanded.

“A computer.”

Muzzles crested and cubs exchanged confused glances. “What is cm’t’ther?” a

voice piped up.

“This. A tool.”

Small hands fumbled at the keyboard and claws clicked against keypads, printing gibberish across the screen. “Does it write?” a cub asked and pointed at some Rris text I’d done earlier, “Those are words.”

“How does it do that?”

I showed them. They sat and watched, quietly, entranced while I typed a few things on the word processor. “Where did it come from?” a cub asked.

“Where I come from.”

“Where?” a multitude of voices demanded.

“Ahhh,” I cast an uncertain appeal toward my nonhuman mentor and benefactor who’d just finished stoking the fire. She leaned back against the wall, crossed her arms, and looked amused. I was on my own for this one. “All right,” I sighed, “I show you...”

“You did a good job,” Chihirae complimented me as I helped her clear away the soiled dishes from that evening’s meal. “The cubs seem to like you.”

“I am a likable person,” I smiled. It didn’t translate well: their word for ‘person’ is Rris, which I aint. Chihirae gave me dubious glance but elected not to push it any further. “They are fun,” I said.

“They can be a thorn in the feet,” she snorted. “But I don’t think think there is anything else I would rather do.” She took the bowl I passed her and shook most of the water off. Easier to let me do the washing otherwise she spent the rest of the evening drying her sodden fur. “They enjoyed your machine.”

“Most cubs do.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Cubs of my kind, they enjoy using them, especially the games.”

“A,” she considered that, then said, “You did not show me those games before.”

I shrugged and rinsed another bowl out in the hot water. Couldn’t just turn on a tap here: melted snow. “They are just games.”

She scraped at a leftover bit of gunk on the bowl with a clawtip. “That one

that copied a flying machine. Do things like you really have those?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve known people who’ve chased the tail of flight all their lives. They dream it. I wonder how they’d feel if someone told them what they were [something] for had been done before, was a thing for games.” She wiped her hands against her hips and glanced at the laptop. “Those games... there is a lot of fighting in them.”

True. Starstrike, AT-57 flight simulator, Trinity Unveiled, Hammerhead, Unreal 2, SPAWN. I hadn’t shown them Wing Commader IX: the Kilrathi bore a striking resemblance to the Rris and the fate of some of them might not be taken in the spirit of the game. But the violence; who was it who said, “There cannot be drama without conflict”? I don’t know. Somethimes I did think there was a bit too much violence in computer games; games like beat-em-ups didn’t appeal to me at all, but then humans - however we like to contradict it - are an inherently quarrellous and violent species. I like to look on games as a variation on stress-management toys. A sort of digital punching-bag. Personally I find it eminently satisfying to shoot down a few NKAF MIGS or Imperial TIE fighters, nail a screaming Reaper with a KKD cannon, and the Kilrathi do go up in a juicy ball of flame. I shrugged slightly. “Lot of humans say same,” I said. “Most say better there than real.”

Chihirae cocked her head and gave me one of those looks I was becoming so familiar with: “True. Many of your kind have... things like that?” she waved hand at the laptop.

“Yes. Common,” I told her as I scrubbed one of her wok-like cooking bowls in the greasy water. No washing-up liquid here. When I offered the bowl to her

to dry off she was staring at me, her eyes widened and ears tipped back. I could see her tail lashing. “What?” I asked nervously.

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed and twitched ears back. “I just... nothing.” She took the bowl and shook water onto the floor. After a minute or so of silence she said, “Your kind... you think that tool is common. There are a lot of them? They are [something]?”

“Rler ? I do not know that word.”

“I have told you about money? Yes? You understand that? It means thing does not cost much monies. Understand?”

Inexpensive. Cheap. “Yes. I understand. Yes they do not cost much monies.” She glanced at the laptop again, looking so out of place on that rough old desk of hers. “I do not think we could build something like that. Not in hundreds of years I think. To be able make them cheap, so just common people can use them...” She looked at me and I couldn’t read that expression on her face. “Mikah, you be very [something]. You are running into darkness.”

“I do not understand.”

“Sorry; a [metaphor]. I am always forgetting you do not grasp completely.” She glanced down at the bowl, turning it in her hands with their stubby, furry fingers; then she sighed and set the bowl aside on its shelf. “Mikah, you are going to scare some people. Huhnn, you already have. They will feel [something] by you, also by the [something] that there are... others in the world who make us like cubs. Do you understand?”

“I... I am only one. I do not... “

“Mikah, it does not matter. There will always be those who fear what you know, what you are: something that is not Rris.”

“You mean it shows?”

“Mikah,” she looked pained.

“Sorry.”

“What you know will [something] many. The [something] will not want to change. Some of the things you have told me, some of the things you have show me, there are many who will do anything to get them, others will not welcome change. The [something] of the [something] will look on you as prey or a [something] to [something].”

“Please, Chihirae, I do not understand. Too fast.”

She ducked her head. “I am sorry. Mikah, just... be careful. Think. Do not frighten people.”

“Like here,” I said.

She blinked at me. "Here?"

"I frighten you, you try kill me."

"Ah," she flinched at that, then studied me for a few second - looking nervous? I felt a twinge shoot through my shoulder and she gave a slight grin, a tic of her muzzle, before she turned to retreat to her desk, sinking into the chair and watching me over steepled fingertips. I sighed and touched the dishwater: cold. She'd have to throw the tub out, I still couldn't lift anything.

"Like them," I said after a while, nodding my head in the direction of the town beyond the cabin's walls. "They do not really think I did it, do they? I am from outside, so I am... I am easy one to say did it. They do not believe it, they just want to believe it."

She stared at me, as if she couldn't believe I'd said that. "You keep surprising me. Did Shyia say that?"

"Who?"

Chihirae blinked, "Shyia, the Mediator," she said as if I'd missed something incredibly obvious. I couldn't help it if some of their names just sounded like static to me. I just said, "Oh," then shook my head. "No. He didn't."

"Ah. I suppose you might be right," she said, then scratched at an ear and gave

me a sidelong glance. “It does show,” she smiled.

I looked down at myself. “Do I really frighten people that much?”

“I nearly pissed myself when I first saw you.”

“Thanks. I needed to know that.”

So the first thing the Mediator heard when he walked in was Chihirae’s laughter. He stopped in the doorway behind her, his heavy coat slung over his arm. Chihirae saw me looking over her shoulder and quickly turned, just as quickly sobered. “I missed something?” Shyia asked.

“Ah,” Chihirae sat back and raked claws through the thick white tufts of her sideboards. “Just Mikah showing he had [something].”

“Him?” The Mediator gave me another once-over then wrinkled his muzzle - what did that mean? - and went to hang up his coat. Still snowing out there, judging by the melting ice dripping from the travel-worn leather. “I met with the [something].”

“Ah,” Chihirae glanced at me, just briefly.

“They want [something] tomorrow night. They want him,” he gestured at me, “to be there, so they can [something] when I [something]...” “

“Hold it,” I interrupted. “Please, I do not understand? What is happening?”

They both looked at me, then the Mediator said, “The [something] is tomorrow.”

“I do not know that word: Fichi’thi,” I protested, starting to feel scared.

“Mikah,” Chihirae got up, crossed the room and knelt in front of me, lowering herself to my eye level. “Listen: tomorrow they want to see you, to [something] you, to choose if you killed or not. To decide what to do with you.”

—v—

It was a long, long day after a restless night of bad dreams. I had plenty of time to sit and worry.

They hadn’t told me anything. Not a fucking thing! I didn’t know what was going to happen, what to prepare for. Did I get a lawyer? Shit, I didn’t even understand everything that was happening. Looking back on this account I think that it might not convey just how confusing some of my conversations with the Rris were. For brevity’s sake I’ve had to lop out the endless questions and explanations, the times she spent hours trying to hammer just one concept home. I’ve done the best I can to chronicle what happened and record as best I could my encounters with the various Rris I’ve met over the years, but there’s just so much I’ve written only what I feel is relevant. It was damned difficult to talk to any of them, let alone understand everything that was going on.

Chihirae couldn't tell me what was going to happen to me and the Mediator refused to say what he thought the verdict was going to be. He'd been asking questions around the village, so Chihirae told me, learning more about what happened. I hadn't been much of a help: there was so little I could say, even less I could actually tell him. What I did manage to convey I'm not sure he believed.

So I was stuck in that tiny room, still in no condition to make it any distance on foot. Besides, my boots had disappeared. I just huddled on Chihirae's bunk, moodily watching the patches of sunlight streaming in through the window crawling across the floor as the hours wore on. I could only feel fear for so long, after that I settled into a sort of apathy, from there into sleep.

Chihirae woke me when she came in. Dark outside and the fire had gone out, leaving the room chill. She didn't speak, just looked at me while brushing snow off, then ducked her head and went to stoke the fire. Still groggy I sat on the edge of the bed, pinching sleep from my eyes, watching her. After a while she asked, "Are you all right?"

I nodded.

"Worried."

"That obvious?" I muttered.

Chihirae fidgeted, rubbing a hand across the pelt of her chest, then came closer and sat at the far end of the bunk. A few seconds and she scooted closer,

close enough to reach over and touched me on my arm, my skin. I flinched and she withdrew. "Please, try and calm down."

"Chi... " I choked on her name and tried again, "Chihirae, what happens. Tonight, what happens?"

She looked uncomfortable, perhaps trying to decide whether or not to tell me. Why? That I didn't understand. Didn't I have a right to know? Finally she said, "It is a meeting of those [something]. Everyone this hurts, understand?"

Everyone involved, she meant. "I think so."

"They meet. The [something] of Sherrith; the town mayor; Shyia; the ones who are... saying you killed Sherrith. They will decide."

"Do I get to speak?"

"Of course."

"Will they listen?"

And for that she didn't have an answer. Again she touched me, reaching up to stroke my jaw and the beginning of a beard there. Recently I hadn't bothered much with shaving, largely due to Chihirae prompting me to leave the 'fur on'. "Perhaps if you had more fur you would be easier to look at."

I gave her a tired look.

“It was a joke,” she explained, then touched my hair again. “I think...you could use a bath, perhaps grooming.”

“Now?”

“You must make a good [impression]. It could be your life.”

I ran a hand through my hair. Yeah, I guess I was getting somewhat ripe. “All right.”

The water took a while to heat up on the stove, then Chihirae poured it into a copper basin. I had to strip off and stand shivering in my birthday suit in calf-high water while Chihirae helped me wash. Nakedness wasn't such a problem, after all she'd been nursemaiding me for several weeks already. No running water or container big enough for a real bath so it was another sponge bath. She ran the cloth over my back, gentle around the exit wound on my shoulder. Fuck, my arm was still stiff and it always would be, especially on those cold mornings. Having a stick shoved through solid muscle doesn't do anything for flexibility, and it was going to get worse. The discoloration from the massive bleeding was fading slowly, but my shoulder was still tinged bruise-colored. Chihirae carefully worked over my back, around my neck, where I couldn't reach, then helped me with my hair. I dunked my head and used some shampoo from my kit, getting it cleaner than it'd been for some time. Chihirae didn't let me use any of my soap, said it smelt... foul. The hot water cooled too fast, leaving me with goosebumps. Chihirae rubbed her fingers across my pebbled skin; “Why are you doing that?”

“I can’t help it,” I shrugged, feeling her leathery finger pads scraping weirdly against the skin of my arm where the hairs were standing upright. “Cold.”

“Ah. Feels [something]. How can you do anything with this thin skin?” She laughed then and patted my arm. “Not long.”

It wasn’t too bad, the cold. Character building. With the stove door open the fire kept half of me warm enough, it was the other half that started to get uncomfortable. She was thorough, perhaps too thorough: I gasped when she washed between my legs. “Stay still,” she hissed and I winced when she lightly swiped sensitive skin with claws only partially retracted. A relief when I was able to get back into warm clothes. Chihirae looked through the meagre collection I owned and told me, “You need proper clothes.” Still, she sorted out a selection: bluejeans, a clean black T-shirt and swan-dri checked shirt over it. “Better,” Chihirae pronounced me after a cautious sniff, “Now your fur.”

“What?”

“You look like a badly-kept [something],” she said as she went to rummage through one of her cupboards, returning with a small rolled leather pouch. Unrolled, the parcel revealed gleaming ivory-handled combs and brushes and a pair of tiny silver scissors nestled in loops. Beautiful craftsmanship, miniscule engraving and scrimshaw. “Lie. There,” she pointed at the hearth.

Uncertainly I did as she told me. Putting my sleeping pad down, laying on that, feeling vulnerable with my neck bared, watching the cobwebs up in the vault of the ceiling. Needed dusting up there. Chihirae lifted my head to place one of my towels beneath it then knelt, knees straddling my head so the fur of

her thighs ticked my ears and I looked up at her inhuman face, the glint of metal in her hands and my muscles tensed, my heart started pounding.

A hand gently touched my throat, my pulse, “Calm.” Then she stroked my beard, fluffing it out, also touching the skin beneath, exploring the bone structure: my cheekbones, jaw. The scissors looked peculiar in her furry fingers: dainty, delicate. I almost laughed, gradually relaxing as she started working, snipping at errant strands of hair. She had her head cocked to one side, intently watching her work, my face. Occasionally she’d shift, examining me from another angle. Eventually, my beard was trimmed back to her satisfaction. She had me sit up, fur against my back; the scissors were laid aside, a comb taken into hand.

It hurt at first as she used the comb and - I realised with some disquiet - her claws to rake tangles out of my damp hair. A good hurt, yanking my head back as she struggled with the knots in locks that were beginning to reach my shoulders. It took a while before she could draw a comb smoothly through it.

“Do all your kind have fur like this?” she asked.

“Usually cleaner.” I winced as the comb found a recalcitrant knot.

“This color,” she amended and I felt her fingers run through the blonde hair of my nape. “It looks better clean. [something]. Nice. Like light.”

I didn’t know what to say. The first pleasant thing any of them had ever said of me. “Thank you,” It was sincere. There was the sound of a Rris chuckle and I relaxed under the feel of the comb running through my hair, the warmth from

the fire. Drowsy after a while, like I was slightly buzzed. A primate's hardwired reaction to grooming: natural endorphines and a mild high. Pleasurable. Enough to let me forget about what was going to happen in a few hours. A hand laid on my shoulder and squeezed slightly, "You like this?" Chihirae murmured.

"Uhhh," I answered with an affirmative noise. I suppose she guessed it meant yes; anyway, she chuckled again and kept brushing. It was too soon when another Rris voice asked: "I am not interrupting something?"

The Mediator was standing at the door. His ears were back.

"Cleaning him up," Chihirae replied with a final stroke of the brush. "He looks better doesn't he?"

"Almost [something]," the Mediator said and I couldn't tell if he was agreeing or not. I got to my feet and gave Chihirae an awkward look: I'd never meant to get so engrossed. She returned the look, then smiled and began packing her kit away. The Mediator eyed us both uncertainly - what did he think we'd been up to? - then snorted and shrugged out of his coat. "Kent said they are joining this evening, just after eveningmeal."

"Good," Chihirae smiled at him. "Calmer on full [stomachs]. Won't want to eat Mikah. That is a joke, Mikah."

"Thank you for saying," it could be difficult to tell sometimes.

“Huhn,” the Mediator snorted, gave a joint-popping stretch and sauntered across to the fire where he stood, hands held out to the warmth. Almost amusing. He looked around at Chihirae and added, “and we should get Mikah’s things packed. Especially that machine. They are going to want to see those.”

—v—

My first excursion outside.

Sunset was turning high streaks of windblown clouds into wisps of pink and russet gold, the horizon lost behind the hills cupping the valley. Snow squeaked under my boots - materialised from somewhere by the Mediator - as I hunched down into my jacket against the evening chill and followed the track as it wound through snowbound farmland toward the town. The Ris flanked me: Chihirae wrapped in a tattered old coat of her own had a loose grip on my left arm, helping me whenever I stumbled. On my right the Mediator stalked along with his long coat flapping around his calves, wearing his breeches and quilted vest, my bulky tramping pack slung over his shoulders: incongruous for such a scene, might have been amusing if it weren’t for glimpses of the knife and gun at his waist.

I shuddered. Chihirae glanced up at me and squeezed my arm; reassuring me? I faltered and she caught me, reaching up to pat my shoulder. “Mikah? Please, do not be so afraid.”

‘How do you know?’ I asked, staring at the cluster of buildings ahead. There were Ris moving around on the street.

“You smell [something],” she said. “Calm down. They will smell it also, it will make things harder for you. You did nothing, there is nothing to be afraid of.

“They do not know I didn’t do it,” I nodded toward the town buildings, feeling my heart constricting in my chest. I balked, drawing the Rris up short, Chihirae looking worried and the Mediator wary. “Chihirae... it is so strange, all different. I do not know what has happened, I do not know what will happen. I do not understand all you say, what you do.” Then I reached down and grasped her hand, feeling her flinch like she’d touched a live wire. Strange muscles flexed there, making the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Her nostrils flared anew and I touched the hard curves of claws in her fingertips, “You have these, your teeth...” I trailed off, shaking slightly.

“You,” comprehension dawned in her eyes, a shocked look. “You are afraid of us?”

I looked from her to the Mediator, neither of them taller than my shoulder, both of them staring back and thinking God-only-knows-what. When I released Chihirae’s hand she drew away so slightly. I wiped my own clammy palms and started walking again. After a couple of seconds I heard snow crunching under their pads and this time the Mediator was beside me, watching me. He worked a thumb under a strap to hitch the pack up and said, “It explains a lot. Are you going to be all right?”

I nodded.

“That is yes?”

“Yes. I think so.”

He sighed, his breath crystallising in the evening air. “Just, be calm tonight. Don’t let them get your claws out.”

Disquieting image. A hand touched my other arm, drawing my attention. Chihirae smiled at me, “You will be all right.”

Rris gathered around as we entered the town. Not much to it: just a dirt street that snow and feet had turned to ice and mud in places, a dozen or so small buildings spaced along its length. Different types of buildings: clapboard sheathing on some; others timber frame, the exposed beams stained black or reddish. Only one building with two floors, the roofs covered with slate or thatch or wood-tile. There was glass in the windows of a couple of places, goods visible behind the panes. Shops? Groups of Rris gathered on the porches fronting the building, staring openly. Some cubs ran close, a couple of them cubs I knew; then adults shouted and the cubs stopped, reluctantly looking back at their parents who beckoned angrily. The chastened cubs retreated again and waved to me from a distance. I smiled at that, gave a small wave in return and they laughed and sat down on a stoop across the street to watch.

Our destination was about halfway along the short street: a single-floor, wood-clad building with a fanlight above double doors. Rris waiting on the verandah outside stood aside as we approached and I hesitated again. Chihirae touched my arm, gently urging me on.

“Mediator,” one of the Rris, a female, called, “is it safe to have that thing walking around?”

“He won’t hurt anyone,” Shyia reassured the uneasy cats watching me. Chihirae tugged my arm again, up the steps. I had to duck my head getting through the door and inside it was dim, orangish light from a few lanterns and candles. I blinked, my eyes adjusting.

I didn’t know what the building was usually used for. There were a few boxes and barrels stacked against a far wall, the rest of the wooden floorspace was cleared. Plain wooden chairs were arranged in a semicircle, another in the center facing them: like a meeting of alcoholics anonymous. Rris were waiting, standing as I came in, their eyes glowing with oil-on-water shimmers from the slight evening light seeping in from behind me. A closed, dark room with Rris, a lot of them, more than I’d ever seen in one place before. I started shaking again and Chihirae’s grip tightened perceptibly. “Sit,” she told me. “There. Sit and wait.”

That seat in the middle of course. I sat and the chair groaned alarmingly, but it held. Chihirae stayed by my side while a susuruss of Rris voices rose and ebbed around us and floorboards creaked as furry bodies shifted. A lamp was eclipsed and I turned to find myself eyeballs-to-upper-row-of-nipples with a Rris, looked up to see a muzzle drawn back over glistening teeth.

“Leave him alone,” Chihirae growled.

The muzzle shifted, like the barrel of a gun, levelling on Chihirae. “It’s walking now. You let it go where it wants?”

“He hasn’t run, has he?”

The face turned back to me, looking me up and down. “I don’t think it could if it wanted. How’s your shoulder? Hah? Still sore?” she moved to jab my shoulder and without thinking my left hand was up and locked around her wrist.

Noise in the room hit a brick wall: stopped.

Inhuman bones and muscle flexed under my hand, a pressure as she tried to pull away. A pulse rocketed and I froze with my hand locked in a deathgrip around her wrist, staring at a grin that slowly spread into a snarl. I felt the blood drain from my face but couldn’t move. Her other hand came up with her fingers splayed to extrude the claws, ready to slash at me.

“Mikah.” Chihirae’s voice was very low, very steady in my ear. “Let go. Now. Let her go.”

Slowly, I loosened my grip and she jumped back. “It is dangerous!”

“He was trying to protect himself.”

“Hai!” another voice snapped and the Mediator was pushing through the crowd around us. “Now what [something]?”

“That thing [something] me,” the other female snarled waving her hand at me.

The Mediator gave me a look. “Did you?”

“I stopped her. She try to hit me, here,” I gestured at my damaged shoulder.

He turned back to the female, “Why were you doing that? Why were you so close that he could [grab] you?”

She snarled at me. “It is dangerous!” Then she stalked back into the ring of Rris surrounding us, a cluster of her cronies grouping around her.

As things settled down again Chihirae crouched before me, “Mikah, please, just stay there. Do not move. Do not let them [provoke] you. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I... I am sorry.”

She patted my leg, then stood and walked off into the gloom. “Chihirae... ?” I asked after her as she left me alone, not knowing what to do, but my words fell on empty air.

The doors closed, then, shutting me in a room with over a dozen Rris. A voice called out, telling them to settle down, and Rris seated themselves on a mismatch of assorted chairs, a couple perching themselves on barrels and bales over against the wall. I looked around trying to catch a familiar face, finding them totally anonymous, androgynous, male and female blurring in the shadows. Their chattering dropped to a few hissing whispers and I looked around the semicircle, seeing inhuman eyes staring back. Chihirae? Where was...

“Mikah?”

The Mediator stepped forward, an unfamiliar Rris at his side. “Have you met Kenth?”

I looked at the Rris: shorter than the Mediator, matted-looking fur. Male, I guessed. The tufts on his cheeks were trimmed to be squarish in shape. “I... I do not think so.”

“We have,” the other - Kenth - said. “At the teacher’s. He was off [something]. [something] when Ki touched his wound.”

THAT I remembered. Not their faces, that still eludes me sometimes, but I remembered the pain. “Oh, yes.”

“You don’t remember?” Shyia asked me.

“Not really.”

“He’s the [something],” the Mediator explained.

“I do not know that word, Itchis ?”

“He looks after Westwater, a voice to talk to [government] in Lying Scales. Do you understand that?”

A councilman? mayor? I wasn't sure so I decided to stick with mayor, trying to hang a familiar label on something that maybe didn't have a translatable equivalent. “Uh, yes,” I said.

The mayor gave me an uncomfortable look, then made a remarkably human-sounding throat-clearing noise before saying, “You know why you are here?”

“You say I killed. You bring me here.”

“Uh... yes. The Mediator will hear what you have to say and what [something] has to say. He will decide if you are guilty.”

There was a snarl from the audience and a female - the same one as earlier? - stood, jabbing a claw in my direction and snarling something in impassioned Rris.

“What she say? I did not understand,” I appealed to Shyia.

“It cannot even speak properly!” the female spat, clearly intending me to understand that.

“Too fast,” I said but there was more snarling, more arguing that went over my head. I licked my lips, feeling beads of sweat start to tickle my armpits. How could I defend myself I didn’t know what the fuck they were talking about? Finally Shyia snapped something at her and I caught the ending words, “... sit down!”

She did. Glowering at us, me. The Mediator shook his head like a dog drying itself, then looked around and spoke slowly, clearly:

“To begin with, you should all understand that this creature is not a [something] animal. His name is Mikah and he calls himself a Hu’an. I do not know [something] where he comes from or how he came here, he [something] that was an accident. If what he has shown me is the truth, then his [something] are a lot like ourselves: they have language, they have cities and towns. He is not a [something] animal.”

“Looks like one,” a voice growled.

“Why the strange clothes?” another asked.

“No fur,” the Mediator said. “Not his fault.”

There was some laughter. Didn’t help me much: I still felt like the entr~~ee~~es at a lions’ picnic.

“It still looks like an animal.” It was that female again. I was beginning to

really dislike her. “How could something like that have towns or cities. If you don’t even know where it come from, how do you know that? Perhaps it told you? And you believed it?”

The Mediator flicked his ears, then went over to where my pack leaned against the wall and produced the flat black slab of my laptop and handed it to me. “Show them what you showed me.”

I did.

I sat the laptop on my lap, turned the screen so my audience could see it. The flatscreen monitor glowed under the lanterns. There were muttered comments when I started a video from the encyclopedia, the guided tour of New York again. I saw Ris tipping and tilting their heads, trying to make sense of what they saw on the screen, then when it clicked they almost went over backwards. Some left their seats to get a closer look.

”[something],” a stocky male hissed, “What is it?”

“City where I come from,” I said.

A panorama from the top of the World trade centre showing the suburbs sprawling into the reddish haze of a sunset; stone and concrete as far as the eye could see. When that presentation was played out I ran through a couple of short clips: a potter working at her wheel, some shots of the Isle of Man motorbike race, kayaking on the Yukon, an evening Delta Clipper launch, nut-cases skiing a black pearl slope. Then I stuck my clipart card in and just let it go through a slideshow, a new image every ten seconds. I didn’t watch but I knew what it’d

be showing: people, animals, vehicles... everything from a world I'd never see again.

The Mayor chose that time to ask, "What is that thing?"

"A tool," the Mediator explained. "Mikah says they are quite [something] among his kind."

"Tricks and toys," the female growled, then exploded, "[Something] my [something]! That thing is a murderer. It killed Serrith! It could [something] any of us next, and you show us toys!"

"He never killed anyone!" another voice spat. Chihirae.

"Shut them!" Kenth snapped and there was a silence in the room, a faint shout drifting in from outside.

"Mikah," the Mediator looked at me again, "tell them everything that happened. From the beginning, what you told Chihirae and I." Then he turned to my audience: "Please, listen. He is just learning to speak so he does not know many words, he has trouble saying others. Just listen to him. Mikah," he gestured to me to begin.

I swallowed, licked my lips and began my story. It was the third time I'd told it. My Rris had improved, I'd had practice, but I was still far from fluent. Still, they listened. Perhaps it was the novelty of seeing something like myself

struggling with their language, an animal performing tricks for their amusement, whatever it was they listened. The ones who believed me, the ones who loathed me, they all listened. And when I was finished...

“That is [something]!” the female snorted.

“I do not understand,” I told her.

She glared at me, a muscle-rigid jaw-locked flash of hatred. “That is not true!”

“It is.”

“No!” Then she spoke clearly, spitting the words at me, “We didn’t have anyone else on the farm! Sherrith and I were alone! He shot at it and it ran off. It came back later to kill him.”

“No,” I croaked. “There were others. Two, I think. Maybe more. I thought they helpers...”

“We could [something] help?” She chittered laughter: a high, forced-sounding noise.

“Could you be mistaken?” the Mayor asked me.

I shook my head and his lips twitched. “No! I saw them.”

“How can you see what isn’t there!” the female snarled.

“Raeya,” the Mediator addressed the female, “Tell us what you saw.”

“You already know. The truth!”

“Humor me.”

She sighed and used both hands to brush the tufts of her furry mane, then began her story and I couldn’t understand. She was talking too fast, gesticulating, ignoring me as she addressed her peers.

“Too fast,” I ventured.

She ignored me and kept talking.

“Please,” I repeated, “I cannot understand. Too fast.”

“Slow down,” the Mediator spoke up. “Raeya, I want him to hear this too.”

Her ears went down and she hesitated. When she started speaking again it was slower, almost mockingly so, but it was slow enough for me to keep up with. And I thought I wasn't hearing her properly.

They'd first seen it in the months before winter, when they were storing feed for the animals. She'd been in the house when she heard a shout from outside. When she went to investigate she was attacked by a vicious creature. Sherrith had shot at it and missed, but that was enough to frighten it off. It ran into the hills and nobody believed when they tried to speak about it.

Then it came back. Several times meat had gone missing from their storehouse, some of the remaining stuff half-eaten. A bison was taken. Just over two months after the first sighting, Sherrith went out to the barn in the morning, while that part of the valley was still in shadow. She hadn't thought anything amiss until he didn't answer her calls. When she went outside she saw the creature running across the outlying fields again, running away from the farm. She found Sherrith in the barn, his throat ripped out.

Her mate, I thought.

Oh. That explained that anger.

"[something] Rahtei," the Mediator addressed a Rris sitting in the shadows at the back, perched on one of the barrels up against the wall, "you said you also saw him."

The male shifted awkwardly, standing up. He was big, hefty. "Huhnn, yes. Like it... he said, we were finishing eveningmeal. Saw it through the window.

Didn't know what it was and it was gone before I could shoot it. Never saw it again after that... 'till now. Never took anything, hurt us." He looked uncomfortable then, ducking his head and laying his ears back when he said, "the cubs aren't afraid of him. They like him."

Chihirae was the next one the Mediator called on. She stepped up behind me and I felt a hand brush across my shoulder before she began.

She'd heard the stories about a strange creature poking around the town but hadn't paid too much attention. Every town had its stories. She'd been working with her pupils for a month without any troubles save the usual ones found in any classroom. Then one of her books went missing.

"That upset me. I thought one of the cubs was playing games, but no-one [owned up]. I went around the town, thinking perhaps someone had seen it, but nobody knew anything. It worried me. I couldn't [something] a [replacement].

"A few days later when I arrived for class it was waiting for me on my desk. None of cubs admitted to putting it there or seeing anyone leave it there. I was going to go around their families and find who'd left home early that morning, then saw dust falling from the loft. I realised someone was up there, moving around." She sighed, looked at me. "I had the cubs to think of. I couldn't let them get hurt, so I tried to be [something], not let [something] in the loft [something].

"I finished the lessons without [something]. It was only later I heard of the murder." Chihirae paused then, scratching at the fur of her chest. "They said it was an animal. I'd thought it was a person in the loft, but that started me thinking. There had been a strange scent on the book, stronger in the loft. I borrowed a crossbow from Kenth, said I was worried about animals.

“Next day was quiet. I didn’t see any dust, didn’t hear anything unusual. I thought maybe I’d [something] it. When class finished I left a book... like I’d forgotten it.

“Later, I came back... with the crossbow. He was there. All I saw was his face when he looked up at me. It was... terrifying. I shot him.” She didn’t look at me. “He fell and I was reloading. He had an [arrow] sticking out of him and he ran, out the back. I followed and fired from the door and hit him again. He kept running and I wasn’t going to follow a wounded animal so I went back to town for help. There were enough interested in chasing him; [something] after the murder. I was still trying to get the taste out of my mouth so I returned to the barn to clean up. I found a book that wasn’t mine, filled with drawings and writing, both in normal writing and other stuff that was like nothing I’ve ever seen. I was trying to make some sense of that when he returned. Almost shot him again, but he spoke. Hard to understand, but they were words. He asked me to help him, then collapsed.”

She hissed, a sound like the final dregs of air escaping a deflating tyre. “I guess... he was helpless, covered in blood, looking most-way dead, and I [something] he wasn’t an animal. I didn’t let them kill him.” She looked at me then and smiled slightly, “It was the right choice.”

“You say that about a murdering [something]!” the dead Rris’s mate - Raeya - spat.

“You are very [something] it was him,” Shyia said and she grinned at him. He studied her for a short time, then picked out another Rris. Familiar. His face rang a bell, but it was only when he began speaking that I realised it was the doctor, the one who’d helped patch me up.

“You [treated] his wounds, didn’t you,” The Mediator asked.

“A,” the doctor acknowledged. “Bad. Almost killed him getting that quarrel out. I’m surprised he’s still alive. Bleeding bad, inside and out.”

“What sort of wounds did he have?”

The doc scratched his jaw thoughtfully, “A few. Ahh, worst one was the [something] in his shoulder. Also a tear in his side where a quarrel went through. There were a lot of other bruises and scratches on his head, arms.”

“Scratches from claws?”

“No, no. From when he fell. Thin skin. Mostly branches and bushes.”

The Mediator plucked thoughtfully at his vest with his claws and asked, “You saw Serrith’s body?”

“Yes.”

“What kinds of wounds did he have?”

“Cuts and scratches. From claws. His throat was torn out, quite deeply. There were more cuts on his arms and back. Whoever did it was strong and had claws.” He glanced at me, “He doesn’t

“I saw it,” the female snarled and there were murmurs from the other Rris in the room. “[something] you! I saw it!”

“How?” the Mediator asked. “At the time Sherrith was murdered, Mikah was in the loft in the barn. He was there all morning. He had to have been if he returned the book before the class began.”

Raeya opened her mouth, then grinned at me. “He could have left it there the previous night! [something]! You [something] properly!” She yowled something at the Mediator then: so furious I couldn’t understand it. His tail twitched and he glanced at me, then at Chihirae. Raeya said something else and there was some more arguing, too fast for me to follow.

Chihirae touched my shoulder and knelt beside me, “Be calm, all right?”

“What is happening?” I was shaking again.

She stroked my arm. “All right. It is usual, but we’d hoped... Shyia wants to use [something]. It is usual, just a medicine. It makes you want to talk, more likely to tell the truth.”

Rris murmured and the Mediator came close. He had a small ceramic pot in

one hand, not much bigger than a 35mm film canister. Chihirae pulled my sleeve up a few centimetres and said, “He just has to scratch you.”

“Hey!” I was confused, suddenly terrified by the sliver of a knife the Mediator was lowering toward my arm. Chihirae tightened her grip on my arm and behind her Raeya was grinning viciously. “Chihirae! No... “

There was a brief sting, a bit of blood welling from a centimetre long scratch. “All right,” Chihirae soothed me. “Didn’t hurt much.”

I was hyperventilating, my head spinning. Something was nagging away in the back of my skull, but I was too distracted to worry it out, fixated by the sight of Shyia dipping the tip of the knife into the jar and withdrawing a small dollop of a dark syrupy liquid. Chihirae was still holding my right arm, tight enough to stop me flinching away when he spread the goop over the scratch. Then I had a flash of what happened the last time Chihirae gave me Rris medicine: “Chihirae... “

“Finished,” she told me with a final pat on my arm then the Mediator was asking me something. I blinked at him. “Tell us what happened again. Exactly what happened.”

I licked my lips and did just that. I started talking, breaking out in a nervous sweat while I spoke. That other medicine, it’d really hit hard. The stuff they’d just given me... I couldn’t help thinking about it, what it was doing to me, and that fear grew as I felt a growing heat prickling all over my body. I choked off, then continued, trying to keep going. My heart lurched, of its own accord, the pounding in my breast increasing steadily until it hurt like I was running for my life, a hand grabbed my guts and bowels and started squeezing. Rris stared as I broke off again, wincing, then tried to continue. Everything was spinning: a dark

room with shadows writhing with lives of their own, glowing eyes and inhuman shapes everywhere, shapes that stirred my deepest fears, the fear that my distant forefathers must have felt when confronted with a bear and their hindbrains screamed at them as mine did at me then 'get the fuck out of here!'. A twisted limb caught my arm, another thing snarled and I was trembling uncontrollably, muscles spasming while hot prickling flushes swept over me. Dizziness sent the room spinning, my guts clenched and I doubled over, gagging. A hand grabbed my hair and yanked my head up to a snarling face. Howling in my ears.

I shoved the face away, another, a blow across the head sent me stumbling before I felt the pain, competing with the other pain and I swung a fist and felt it connect. A snarling face lunged for me with gleaming metal raised high then an explosion stunned me, stinking smoke filled the room and I bolted in pure terror, fumbling at the doors before they opened and I was out of the reeking atmosphere into cold night air that hit like a slap across the face and I stumbled and fell into ice and mud and there were more of them circling, closing on me, more weapons being raised and I cried out, scrambled to my feet and just ran, ducked away between buildings and ran while howls rose behind me...

The howls were growing louder again as they chased me, working their way more cautiously down the bank I'd slipped and fallen down. Sheer terror moved me. I staggered, clothes soaking and sticking in a mixture that was half-mud and half-blood. Out of the trees and there were houses in front of me. I sobbed and choked, frustrated, terrified, unable to think while the world around me rushed onward. Nowhere to go, there was no one to help me. They would kill me as soon as they saw me.

Scenes from elsewhen flashed in my head, reality gone. I ran.

Snowbound fields turned monochrome by moonlight, cold and clear as silicon, cutting cold. Trembling, dazed and confused, drugged out of my skull I ran until the fields were gone and the woods were around me and the moonlight

was gone and I was blind, blundering. There in the darkness I collapsed, vomited repeatedly until I was dry heaving, shuddering and shivering while my skin burned and prickled and my muscles tightened like cables ached and my heart raced and I've no idea how long I lay there in the freezing snow and darkness while the Rris drug ran rampant through my system.

“Mikah?”

The voice came from nowhere and I wasn't sure if it wasn't something from in my head. I couldn't see anything.

“Mikah?” This time something touched my leg; a fleeting touch and it was gone. I flinched, trying to curl into a foetal ball. “Are you... can you hear me?”

I raised my head slightly. “Who?” I croaked.

“It's me.” A bit of darkness against the blackness shifted, an inhuman silhouette moving slightly. “Chihirae.”

“Chihirae.” I coughed, the taste of puke lingering in my mouth and nose. Freezing pinches of snow found their way into my sleeves, down my shirt. Wrung out a million miles: totally wasted. Exhaustion sweeping in on the tail of madness and hallucinations. “Chihirae,” I started shaking, crying. “Fuck, Oh, shit, Sheera, what... What happened? What happened to me?”

“You're all right,” she said and I felt her arm around me, helping me sit up. I

just leaned into her warmth and clung there with my fingers entwined in the fur under her coat, shaking.

An age later a furry hand brushed gently along the back of my neck. “It’s all right. You didn’t hurt anyone. It’s over now. Come on, you’re like ice. Come on.”

She had to help me to my feet, then hooked my arm over her shoulder as she guided me through the blackness of the trees and onto the moonlit whiteness of the fields. I was shivering violently now, from exhaustion and cold, my face stung and the new scratches there ached deeply. Somewhere, a wolf howled and I flinched at the noise but Chihirae kept going. Town lights flickered accross the fields before us, then other shapes moved. There were Rris there, a crowd of them waiting. Several of them carried burning torches and I had a flash of old horror films, the mob of villagers going after the mad scientist and his monster. I faltered and Chihirae reassured me, urging me on through nervously shifting Rris.

The Mediator met us on the stoop of the makeshift courthouse. “[something]! How is he? What happened?”

“I don’t think he remembers much. What about her?”

“She’ll live.”

I felt Chihirae give a quick shudder. “It was the [something]. Help me. He is heavy.” The Mediator took my other arm and between them they half-carried me inside. I collapsed to sit in a huddle on the floor and Chihirae was there a second

later to wrap a blanket around me.

Shouting. Rris shouting, a catfight.

That female, Raeya, with the doc trying to work over her, patching her blood-matted nostrils and muzzle while she yowled at the Mediator and pointed at me. I felt sick, giddy, strung out between exhaustion and fear and the lingering traces of that drug. I just closed my eyes and let the noise turn into a dull roaring in my ears.

“Mikah?” Someone was gently shaking me. “Come on. Stand up. Go home now.”

“Home,” I mumbled and let the Rris maneuver me.

“It’s a murderer!” another voice screamed. “It attacked me! You let it live? [something] your [something]! I want it [something]! It is dangerous!”

Chihirae held me steady and led me out of the building while Raeya raged behind us. “I not hurt her,” I tried to tell Chihirae. “I not.”

“I know,” she assured me but I really couldn’t tell if she meant it or was just trying to comfort me. There was a sled waiting outside, the bison in the harness steaming in the chill. It was snowing again, a few flakes appearing from the black sky and settling on the beast’s shaggy haunches. Chihirae helped me onto a bench in the back and made sure I was settled. I just pulled the blanket a little

more closely around my shoulders and sat and shivered while small groups of Ris clustered on the frozen street and watched me. Chihirae returned with a Ris who stared at me then climbed onto the driver's bench while Chihirae settled next to me. A brief lurch and we moved: bumping over mud, then smoothly over deeper snow.

"All right?" she asked me, then reached up to touch my face. "You are hot."

I shrugged away from her touch and raised my own hand to my forehead; Feeling flushed, nauseous, dizzy, not too good. Under the moonlight I could see the scratch the Mediator had given me, a dark black line across my wrist in that light. It stung, I still felt ill.

"Mikah?" Chihirae was leaning forward, trying to see my face.

"What was that?" I asked, showed her my wrist. "Here?"

"Ah." she gently took my wrist in her own hand: her leathery fingerpads felt cold against my skin, but her own skin was warm. "[something] of [something]. Called Isti Firth It is not supposed to do that."

I looked at her hands, then at her face. I hadn't done that. Not very often. I don't know why exactly; like I heard her voice and tried to visualise a person... a human saying it. I looked at her hands, her shoulders, neck... now her eyes were dark pools in the moonlight, shimmering as she tipped her head quizzically in one of those contemplative looks that cats are such masters of. Amber rings glittered around the blackness while the cold moonlight outlined her tan fur in icy-white highlights. It stunned me, that night, just the sheer impossibility of it

all. “I didn’t want to hurt,” I whispered. “I am sorry.”

“All right,” she said, “you just [something] her a bit.” I think she smiled then: “No claws and you [something] her. I think if you were [something] you would eat her easily.”

I didn’t know what that meant, I didn’t know how to respond. What might have been an inuendo in English didn’t mean the same thing here. All I could think of to say was, “I don’t eat raw meat.”

She chittered: laughter. “No you don’t.” Then she abruptly sobered and looked out at the nightbound hills that vanished then reappeared as a cloud scudded across the face of the moon. “No, you don’t, do you.”

—v—

How long had that night been? I’m not sure, but I remember the moon was high: near midnight, maybe past it. Over six hours of hell for me. Back in the house I just collapsed, hardly even noticed as Chihirae tried to pull my freshly bloodstained clothes off, didn’t really care.

I knew they were dreams, but it still didn’t help. It never does.

Huge, silent corridors. Bright. White stone, but an air of decay everywhere. There was something following me and no matter where I turned there were shadows on the walls, muted footfalls behind me. My heart pounded harder as I

tried to see what hunted me. Trying to run and there were always shadows and shapes ahead of me no matter which way I went. Another corner and it caught me and light flashed in my face and claws ripped deep into my cheek and an animal face snarled and glistening teeth went for my throat and I...

...screamed as I woke and the snarling features still hung over me, fighting me and yowling in my face. I fought as it howled and pinned me, and I became aware of where I was, who this was holding me down and telling me, "Calm! You're all right. I've got you. Mikah, it's all right. You hear me? Only a dream."

And I quit fighting her and just collapsed back into my sleeping bag, damp from sweat, shaking violently and I could feel her heart beating as violently as mine through her ribs. Still night outside, some ungodly small hour. A lantern burned orange, casting dancing orange light and black shadows across the walls. I looked at her hands pinning mine, back to her wide amber eyes fixed on me, then I couldn't stop the tears that seemed to be squeezed out by the spasms that rocked me.

Everything gone. My life, my friends and family. Everything and everyone I'd ever known and loved was gone, lost over a distance beyond measuring. Now what did I have? a few mementos of home, a few trinkets, and a future alone in a land where I wasn't even considered a person, where animals that walked like people held my life in their clawed hands. I cried with the fear of the new, the unknown, the lost.

"Your eyes," Chihirae murmured after a while. "Watering... It is pain, isn't it. From inside. You are [crying]." Her hand moved up and stroked my face, my skin, just above my beard, touching the dampness of my tears "Why?"

"I shouldn't be here," I choked. "Why am I here?"

For a while she was quiet, then replied, “I don’t know.” Her voice was a low growl I guess was intended to be gentle.

“I never wanted this. I... I never wanted to be here, I not want hurt anyone...” I couldn’t speak anymore and Chihirae gave a small yelp when I grabbed her and clenched my hands into her fur, sobbing and babbling; confused and lost and alone and I didn’t understand what was happening to me and she relaxed and held me close while I just let it all out,

I remember that dark night I fell asleep again with her arms around me, legs entwined, her fur warm against the freezing air and her voice, softly:

“It is all right, Mikah. You will be fine...” “

—v—

Cold outside, freezing on my face, warm in the sleeping bag, almost hot. Stiff, drowsy, and erect. I stretched out and felt muscles twinge and fur rubbed against me. There was a muffled noise and a furry arm slid over my side. I opened my eyes to razor teeth and an inhuman face mere inches from my own. Her eyes were closed, mouth hanging open just slightly with her harsh breath rasping steadily. She’d stayed with me all night? Confused, I shifted, tried to move away a bit and she murmured something then twitched and lazily opened her eyes, blinked a couple of times. “Huhhnn? Good sleep, Mikah?”

I tried to scoot away, but there’s not that much room in a sleeping bag. She

chuckled, then stretched and gave a sharp little intake of breath when some part of her came in contact with that part of me over which I had little control. “What is...” she looked puzzled and her hand moved down my stomach, then lower still to touch sensitive flesh. I gasped and she froze, then yanked her hand away and turned a wide-eyed stare on me. Her ears laid back.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted, trying to turn away. “I can’t stop it... in the mornings it...I cannot stop it.”

She gave me a hard look and a brief flash of teeth, then threw the unzipped side of the bag open and swung her legs out. Naked excepting her sleep-matted fur; sitting with her tail twitching. “I am sorry,” I repeated miserably.

“Huhn,” she looked back at me, my face and then my groin. I couldn’t tell what she was thinking, but her ears were still flat against her skull. “Mornings huh? That happens many mornings?”

Embarrassed, I yanked the sleeping bag back up again, the subject in question just starting to realise it wasn’t wanted. “Yes,” I said in a small voice.

She snorted, then shook her head violently and climbed to her feet. “I don’t know which is stanger, your mind or your body.” She stretched, a tendon-crackling reach for the sky, totally oblivious to both the chill in the room and the fact she was only wearing her fur. She was a good one to talk about strange bodies, especially that damn tail. I stared, wondering what it felt like to have a backbone as long as you’re tall, then tore my eyes away and awkwardly sat myself up on the mat, hitching the sleeping bag up around my shoulders while she busied herself in her search for clothes.

“Chihirae?”

“Huhn?” she grunted as she tested a pair of pants for flexibility.

“Last night... I slept better. Thank you for staying.”

She cocked her head, then smiled at me. “It was cold. Warmer with two. Yes?”

“Yes.” I smiled also.

“I thought you needed it. You were quite [something] last night.”

I hesitated, looked at my feet and swallowed hard before asking. “I don’t remember... I did not hurt her?”

“Raeya?” Chihirae tightened the waistband of her trousers, scratched at her stomach and chuckled, “I think you might have [something] her nose. No one is [something] you; they saw you were defending yourself. Oh, I think [something] had better look at those,” she gestured at my face. I raised a hand and winced when I touched the clotted scratches across my cheek.

“Shit.”

It was a half-hour later before the Mediator turned up. I heard the front door slam and he sauntered in, his fur disheveled, like he hadn't had much sleep. He sat down at the desk and lowered his head into his hands.

Chihirae looked up from where she was working a log into the stove. "News?"

"They are not happy about what Mikah did." His voice sounded muffled, speaking through his fingers. He raised his head, leaned back, and sighed. "They still think he could be dangerous. [something], they believe me."

Chihirae almost dropped the poker. I put down the egg I was about to crack into the bowl and the Mediator nodded toward me, "Mikah, you are [something]. You understand? You are not under [something]."

"Free?" I ventured.

He looked taken aback, then gave an ear twitch - their version of a nod - and something I'd never be able to emulate. "Yes. Free."

Chihirae vented a startled squawk when I embraced her, then hurriedly released her. "Sorry," I said as she smoothed her fur again, but I couldn't stop grinning. Okay, so I was still stuck here, but if they'd decided they weren't going to string me up, that was one less thing to worry about.

Why'd they decided I wasn't the one they were after? I guess it was several reasons, not the least being the Mediator could be very convincing. Basically,

Raeya's story didn't hold water: The townsfolk believed Chihirae's account, that I was in the barn when Raeya claimed the murder occurred; I couldn't have caused those wounds, I just wasn't equipped for it, and none of my own wounds were from claws. Then again there was Raeya's account of her looted storehouse, the food that had been stolen and eaten on the spot.

"Like he said," Chihirae remembered, "he doesn't eat raw meat."

The Mediator snorted. "That isn't normal." To emphasize his opinion he reached over and speared chunk of diced meat from the tray waiting to go in with the scrambled eggs and swallowed it whole.

"One thing," Chihirae said after a while. "If Mikah didn't do it, who did?"

Yeah, that had been nagging at me.

"That I don't know." Shyia speared another piece on a claw and studied it. "I am interested in finding out," he said before polishing the morsel off.

—v—

Snow continued to fall outside, flurries ebbing and waning in the vagaries of the winds. Deep now. Banking up around the walls of the house, almost to the eaves on the windward sides. Christ only knew why the Mediator had wanted to go out in that.

In the afternoon after struggling back through the drifts from her class, Chihirae was at her desk; head propped on fist, spectacles perched on her nose, tail slotted through the gap in the rear of the chair flicking while she poured over some detail in one of her books: the history atlas. As she'd been doing most of the day. A peculiar sight, a scene that even more strangely struck me as peaceful, as ... fitting.

I added another stroke with the pencil, darkening in a reverse detail, highlighting her ear. The first time I'd ever tried to draw a Rris and I still wasn't sure I was able to pinpoint just what differentiated them.

With humans it's not just the shape of the face or the color of the hair, it's a multitude of tiny details that blend to give someone character. It's easy to follow the set rules: corners of the mouth in line with pupils, seven and a half heads to the body, ears line up with nose... but it doesn't create a character, someone's cheekbones, the set of the eyes, the jaw, particular mannerisms...all the little quirks and nuances and imperfections that make the individual.

But she wasn't human. It wasn't the kind of symmetry I'd grown up seeing every day, being immersed in whether I watched television or walked down the street. Aside from her fur, I didn't know if it was the set of her amber eyes, tufted ears or nose. Maybe it was the ears I sighed to myself as I erased yet another retouched attempt. Chihirae paused in her reading and turned in her chair to look at me over her glasses, "What are you doing there?"

"Trying to see you," I said.

"I thought you were studying." She stood and laid her glasses on the desk, stretched, then wandered over and crouched beside me. I heard her breath close to my ear, then she asked, "Is that how you see me?"

“I don’t know. It is not... right.”

“A,” she said and I didn’t know if she was agreeing or not. “You are good.”

“Thank you.” I smiled a bit, “It was my life.”

“Oh.” She sat down beside me on my sleeping mat and stretched her peculiar toes toward the warmth of the fire. “How long have you been doing that?”

“Long as I know,” I tried to think back to the first time I’d picked up a crayon, the time I’d decided I wanted to spend my life doing this. “Since I was small.”

She blinked at me, perhaps trying to imagine what I looked like as a child. “Does you kind place a lot of importance on [something].”

“What was that word?”

“What you do, making things that are pleasant to look at or touch. Beautiful noises and tastes. [Art], [artisans]. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand.” I shrugged then and tried to put her previous question into context. “I suppose we do,” I finally answered and it’s true. I mean, in the modern Norde Americano culture it’s difficult to escape it. Some might say that

commercial artwork is a bastardization of true art. To be reciprocal, I for one feel 'true art' is a bit of a crock, going downhill since Picasso and Braque and a few other cubists got themselves totally zeroed on some exotic weed, tried to reduce the world to its component geometries and decided it looked better that way. Modern 'art'. Ughh. Give me an Andrew Wyath, a Claude Monet any day.

"Were you an [artist]? Someone who makes art."

"Yes. In a way. Would you like to see?"

"It would be interesting."

It didn't take more than thirty seconds to boot up the laptop and run the macro to show my portfolio. Chihirae huddled up to my shoulder and watched with me, asking me questions as the screens passed. I tried to answer her as best I could, but some things just didn't make any sense to her, things she just didn't have any reference for. "What is that?" she asked as an add for window cleaner spiraled across the screen in a smooth Khaos routine.

"It tries to make people want to... buy? Yes, buy a thing to clean glass."

"Why?"

Why indeed. I tried to explain about advertising and competition and wide exposure and market saturation and found out my Rris just wasn't up to it. I didn't know many words related to economics. Try explaining politics or

theology with a seven year old's vocabulary. When I was about to start tearing my hair out, Chihirae touched my arm. "Don't worry. Try later. We can just watch, alright?"

"All right," I agreed, somewhat disheartened. Having my face rubbed in my limitations still happens - some physical activities, words I can't pronounce - and it's still a letdown.

And Chihirae chittered at my disappointment. "Don't worry. You tried. You will learn. A, that is a good one. How long does it take you to make one of these?"

She asked more questions, trying to keep them simple and the afternoon turned into a relaxed lesson in language and cultures. Time passed and the light outside remained the same flat grey as snow kept falling, icing the windows over. Around the stove it was warm, but move just a few metres away and it got cold. Fast. So Chihirae and I sat beside each other on the mat, sorting through pictures and trying to name them. She asked about other art forms: music, plays, literature, architecture...

"I have some of all here," I patted the laptop.

"Plays?"

"Sort of." How else to describe films? "Yes. A few."

“With things like you?” Her eyes sparkled with interest, her ears perked high.
“Could we see one?”

“Sure. Ah, which?” I put the disk in and called up the main menu. Alongside each entry a minature animated icon depicting the film it represented danced smoothly. “A few. True and not true.”

She leaned closer to squint at the icons: rows of moving figures in miniature, colours vibrant, except for - “Why is that [colourless]?” Chihirae asked, pointing to the icon for Schindler’s List . Shit, I didn’t think showing her that would be such a good idea. Maybe deleting the entire thing would be more...

Censorship is an ugly thing. No matter how I disliked it, that film showed a side of humankind that existed.

“Uh, that was what the...person who made it wanted. It does look different.”

“A, that it does,” she flicked her ears then asked, “What did you mean ‘true and not true’?”

‘The stories, some happened, others are... ah... “

”[Fiction]?” she supplied.

“Yes, fiction,” I had some trouble with the Rris word, stuttering it.

“That colorless one?”

“It is true.” I hesitated, “It is not a... nice film. I do not know that I would be able to explain...” I trailed off uncomfortably.

Chihirae was looking at me. Eventually she just said, “Some other time then. What about that one?”

Silken. Uh-huh. The film that’d won Emile Disrile her Oscars. A detective story set in Louisiana with a convoluted and subtle plot, characters, depths, cinematography to rival *Dances With Wolves* on the big screen, atmospheric music, steamy sex scenes, adventure and action. Everything that - IMHO - makes a film worth watching.

Chihirae breathed out softly as the titles ran, the views of the bayou, wildlife, Baton Rouge, Orleans, the Mississippi river and delta, then she was silent as the film ran, just drinking in the images even though she couldn’t understand a word that was being said. I offered to try and translate, but she just wanted to watch. She was close to me, casually leaning against my arm. I could feel her reactions to scenes: tense in the shadowy backwaters, nervous during the chases, gunplay, laughing at some things, confused during others. Then the sex scenes.

She stared. Like she didn’t know what to make of the semi-lit couple gyrating on the bed with its silk sheets and wrought-iron frame. Then she chattered loudly, “That is a female, isn’t it? They are [something]?”

If that meant what I thought it meant... “Uh, Yes.”

Slow music. Indistinct lighting. Low moans, gasps, wet noises.

“Is [mating] always like that for your kind?” she asked after another while.

“Ah... sometimes.”

“It looks [something]. Is it fun?”

“You have never... ah... what is the word?”

“Mated,” she provided absently. “Ah, yes, but never like that.” She gestured as the actress threw her head back, moaning, her partner nuzzling down between her legs. “What are they doing?”

I didn’t quite know how to explain that. She listened, then her jaw dropped slightly and she looked from me to the monitor and back again. Then her mouth shut with a hollow clop. “You are joking.”

“No.”

“Huhnn,” she made a noise as if she wasn’t sure whether to laugh or say

something else and an awkward tension seemed to set the air on edge. She made a coughing sound, then looked back as the scene faded to morning, the couple entwined in each others limbs in the warm light sifting through black wrought iron curlicures over the window.

I looked at the alien sitting beside me, leaning against my arm with the flickering light of the Active FlatLine screen strobing across her face. “Do you have a... a mate?” I eventually asked her.

“Ah?” she looked up at me, wrinkles on her muzzle. “A mate? What do you mean? You know that word ‘mate’ is a verb; it does not make sense.”

Taken aback, I groped for words, “Is there someone... you stay with, you live with. A male you are...” Shit, I didn’t know the word for married. “A male you live with?”

“Like you you mean?” she chittered softly.

Not what I meant. I frowned, rubbed my chin, then asked, “Chihirae, how long do Rris mate for?”

“Ah?” she looked back to the screen and scratched at her chin with a clawtip. “I suppose [something] goes on a few days, maybe weeks. They might stay together for a while, until someone leaves. It depends on the situation. Sometimes they will decide to live together. Why?”

“You mean Rris just meet and ... and mate?”

She laughed, chittering. “There’s a little more to it than that. It does help if they like each other.”

“Oh.”

They didn’t mate for life. Well, neither do humans, not naturally. It’s just various social and religious doctrine over the centuries that forced us into monogamous patterns. Perhaps the marriage rate back home was falling, but it seemed that Rris had never even heard of the concept. Love ‘em and leave ‘em was the way they lived. Probably because of the lack of dimorphism between males and females: from what I’d seen both sexes seemed capable of standing on their own and looking after themselves, but what about pregnancies? raising their offspring? That loopy female who’d accused me of murder, surely she’d been Sherrith’s mate? And what about the other couples I’d seen around the village? Like that Ki, the ‘family’ I’d peeped in on when I was still skulking around the wilderness.

“A,” Chihirae absently answered my question, more of her attention on what was going on on the screen. “Ki and Risa live together. The cubs were not sired by him. What is that thing... she - It is a she? - is talking at?” she pointed at the screen where the semi-naked actress was phoning her dealer. I took the hint and saved my questions for later. God knew I had more than enough time.

So we sat and watched the movie. All that was missing was the popcorn. Chihirae was a warm presence at my side, occasionally chuckling at something she found amusing, more often than not watching in silence and self-contained confusion. It was disturbing: sitting in the darkness watching a film was something I’d done so often with Jackie. Now, I glanced at the... the person

beside me and felt that hollow emptiness: A part of me was gone and any hope that it might be regained was fading. Chihirae snickered, oblivious, and I turned my attentions back to the screen and tried to push thoughts that could drive me over the edge to the back of my mind.

When the end credits scrolled I had to tell her it was finished. She rubbed her eyes and lay back on my sleeping mat, looking up at the roof. “That was... quite a [something]. I have never dreamed there could be such...” she raised her arms, waving her hands as though she was trying to grab suitable words out of the air, “The places, things... people, the sounds...that was supposed to be music? It is like the [something] after [dreaming?]: one is never sure what is real and what isn’t.” She let her arms drop to her sides, lolled her head to look at me. “Is that considered a good play among your kind. Hu’an?”

“Many people said it was one of the best,” I told her.

“Do you like it?”

“Yes.” I hesitated. “But...”

“But?”

“It’s just this time... it is like... like being in a dark room, looking at the real world through the crack in the wall.” I shrugged. “It just... wasn’t the same.”

She shifted, rolling to her side and resting her tufted chin on laced fingers. “A

dark room... is that how you see us? [something]. A dark room. No light? No color? Mikah, we do not have your toys, but we have plays, we have books, music, art. We are Ris/ people.”

“Yes, I know.” I nodded slightly. “I didn’t mean to... I am sorry.”

Chihirae licked at her black lips - a flash of a pink tongue - then she said, “You are lonely, aren’t you.”

I forced a smile and I don’t think it fooled her for a second. “It isn’t easy.”

She seemed to hunt for something to say, just the tip of her tail flicking like a questing snake. “I... don’t think there is much anyone can do,” she finally said. “You are going to have to try and manage. Somehow.”

I nodded.

The wind outside seemed very loud in the awkward silence, rattling the windows in their frames and sending droughts skittering across the floor like cold, invisible mice.

“What are you going to do now?” Chihirae finally asked.

“I don’t know,” I sighed and leaned my head back against the wall. “Try and go home?”

“And if you can’t?”

I looked down at my hands, as if I might already be holding the answer to that one. “Try and just... live? I do not know... Chihirae, can I have a home here? Can I have friends? can I get work?”

She waved a hand in one of her shrugs. “I don’t know. But there are going to be a lot of people interested in you and your kind.”

I swallowed. “I don’t want to live as a... a ... something to stare at.”

“I understand,” she said softly, then added, “It might be difficult. You will always be different.”

I mulled that over, remembering what the Mediator had told me. It didn’t do a great deal for my self esteem. “What can I do then? Just be a thing for Rris to look at? To be an animal that does tricks?” Picturing that, imagining it going on for the rest of my life... “I do not think I can live like that. Goddamit! I am not an animal.”

She turned to me again, a peculiar expression I didn’t recognise flitting across her face. “What is that look?” I had to ask.

Involuntarily her hand went up to her face, hesitated. “I did not mean...” she began, then made a throat-clearing sound: a small cough. “Sorry for you,” she

explained. Pity for me. “Mikah, look at yourself. You are... not Rris. You look like nothing anyone has ever seen before. You cannot even speak properly. I just want to warn you, do not expect too much.”

I nodded slightly.

Her hand touched my arm, moving as if she were trying to stroke nonexistent fur. “I didn’t mean to worry you like that. [Something], in some ways you are just like a cub... there is a lot you have to learn.”

“Can you teach me?”

She sat up, then, crossing her legs to sit tailor-fashion. “Mikah, I do not know that I can give you enough time.”

“You teach cubs every day,” I pointed out.

A thoughtful look crossed her face. “You would like to come to the class?”

I nodded, then realised it was asking a lot of her. I’d still be a burden, and I didn’t have anything I could offer in exchange. “I cannot pay money. I can help maybe?”

“How?” One ear tipped backwards.

“I do work around here. Cut wood. Fix things. Maybe I help in teaching?”

‘A?’ she looked interested and again asked, “How?”

“I answer questions? I can teach some new things maybe.”

She hesitated for quite a while and I had to wonder if I’d gone too far, threatening to poach her territory. “If you don’t want... ” I started to say and she cut me off. “No, no. It is not that. I suppose... it is something to think over.” Her head - a noble feline profile - dipped, then she glared at the stove. “[Something]! That [something] thing! Always going out.”

I watched as she occupied herself shoving wood into the soot-smudged stove door, fiddling with vents. Avoiding something. “Chihirae? You do not want me there.”

She paused with a piece of wood in her hand, then sighed and settled back onto her knees. “Not me. Mikah, you will frighten some of the cubs, and their elders... I know some of them would not be happy.”

Oh. deflated, I stared at the floor; I hadn’t thought of that.

“Mikah, I didn’t... I mean, I’m not sure what they would say. I suppose we can only find out, a? I will try, all right?”

I gave her a half-hearted smile. “Thank you.” Oh, Jesus and Joseph, was I ever going to be able to live anything like a normal life? Be able to do anything without being thought of as a ravening monster by creatures that looked like fugitives from Dr. Moreau’s island?

No.

I’ve had time to grow accustomed to it, to settle down and learn to live and deal with my problems. I’ve lived through the highs and lows but If I’d known then what was to come in the next few months... well, I’m sure I would have tried to do something desperate. Looking back, I can see there were easier roads to travel, but they still wouldn’t have been the right one.

So I sighed, shook my head slightly, then reached for the laptop and called up some music, something mellow, Indigo, Sanctuary. Relaxing, the music and lyrics were human, soothing, something to help me calm down and try to take stock.

“Mikah,” Chihirae gestured at the laptop. “Stop that? It is... annoying.”

I opened my mouth to protest, then something inside me sagged. What was the use. I turned the machine off and stared at the dark metallic face of the screen. Outside, snow flurried through light seeping through the window: silent static beyond the glass.

The room was in shadows, nothing but darkness and vague shapes and the blue-white light glaring under the door. I crossed the room. I opened the door. The light was at the end of the hall, the front door. Outside it was night but the light was brighter, burning across the snowscape with a cold brilliance and I saw... something, blazing brighter than the moon: a slit, a hole in reality... into reality. And there were shapes on the other side, becoming distinct as I got closer and light swept around me: buildings, roads, people, vehicles on the roads and glowing signs. Aother world, one I'd almost given up hope of ever seeing again. It was a feeling of joy I just can't describe, an elation welling up from inside as I stepped forward and the world lurched, a feeling like taking a step too far down a dark staircase.

I jolted into awakeness, sitting bolt upright in a familiar dark room.

“Oh, God. Nooo.”

The balloon burst and it hurt, with an almost physical pain. I curled up, burying my head in my hands. The small noise I was hearing... I was making it.

“Mikah? What is it? Mikah?” Something touched my shoulder, warm in contrast to the frigid air.

“What's wrong?” another voice registered; not English, not even human voices.

“Another dream I think.”

A hesitation. “Fear?”

“No,” the hand stroked my shoulder lightly, touched my cheeks to feel the dampness there. “No.”

“Huhn. I think he’s not much of a [terror?]. Look at him. It is [something].”

“Why don’t you try thinking about what it must be like for him! He knows what he’s lost and he knows what’s going to happen. [something]! How would you [something]? In his place?”

“I would manage.”

“You think so?”

I heard a low grunt, a noncommittal noise followed by the groan of the door closing. “I don’t think he is as [something] as he tries to be,” Chihirae murmured in my ear and waited, perhaps expecting me to answer. The hand on my shoulder shifted and claws lightly scratched at my back, up and down my spine a few times. “Mikah? Come on, it was just a dream. It can’t be so bad.”

I shuddered violently and felt her hand start rubbing my back, up to my nape to stroke the short hairs there; the sensation of her inhuman fingertips raised goosebumps. Her hand hesitated. “You’re cold?”

She was trying to be kind, but she just didn't understand. How could she? She was a different species, for Christ's sake. But she was trying to. A teacher; she was trying to learn about me. She'd helped me, perhaps from an academic standpoint at first - realising I was more than an animal - but recently she'd done more: standing up for me, comforting me, helping me keep a fingertip hold on my sanity. A friend. And that startled me, realising that was how I was coming to think of her.

Friend.

I tipped my head back, leaning against the wall behind me while I drew a shuddering breath, trying to calm down. Chihirae shifted her hand to my right arm, just touching lightly and I felt a leathery pad stroke the fine hairs of my forearm. I shivered, then reached across to hold her curious hand, and she didn't even flinch. "I do not mean to be a... a burden," I said and she laughed then. "What?" I asked, stung.

"You do not mean to be what?" she said.

"A burden," I repeated the Ris word and she chuckled again. "Mikah, that is an adjective to describe weight. You are saying you weigh a lot. You are heavy."

"Oh," I said and tried to think of the right words but she started chittering spasmodically, closed her eyes and leaned her head against my shoulder. "Oh, Mikah, you are [heavy]?" She clamped her jaws shut and emitted periodic sound like small hiccoughs, her skin almost hot through her fur. I didn't know how to react, somewhat nonplussed by her amusement which gradually ebbed and she coughed and said, "I think the word you were scratching for is [burden]. I don't

think you are. I think you are an [something]. A leaf in the wind.” She hesitated there, but still leaned against me and I was glad of the warmth against the chill of the air, “Your dream,” she asked after a while, “bad?”

I couldn’t see her, but I could feel her: a warm, moving shape at my right shoulder, fur prickling against my skin, a warm, dusty, somewhat sharp scent from unwashed Rris. I sighed, “Different. It... surprised me. I thought... “

“Huhn?”

A deep breath: “I thought I was home. It looked...it... it seemed so real.”

“Then you woke up.”

I nodded. All right, so it didn’t sound like much upon reflection, but when you’ve lived it, just coming out of the haze of sleep, it can hit pretty hard. “I’d offer something to help you sleep,” she said, “but medicine might hurt you.”

“I will manage,” I forced a smile and worked my fingers into her fur to ruffle it.

“All you can do,” she murmured. “Maybe you should try and sleep now, a? You will be all right?”

“I hope so.”

She patted my arm and I felt her warm presence leave me. I sighed, settled down into my bag. I could feel her watching me until I slept again. No dreams I can remember that night, good or otherwise.

—v—

“Is it someone from the town?” I asked while settling another piece of wood on the block.

Standing like some Dali-esqu scarecrow in his long black coat amidst the white snow, the Mediator made a small gesture I interpreted as a shrug and watched my hands as I shifted my grip on the axe. “I am not sure,” he said. “There is nobody who would WANT to kill him. Just about everyone had solid [alibies]. I think his [partner] is mixed up in this more than she [admits] to, but I am not sure how.”

I set the axe down and blew on my hands to warm them a little. Cold. I’d never intended to be up here in the winter: my clothes weren’t intended for a Vermont winter. “Did she kill him?”

“I don’t think so.” Shyia waited while I raised the axe and brought it down with a grunt on the wood. There was a sharp twinge in my damaged shoulder muscle. The axe stuck in a knot. Goddamn thing was made out of soft iron: you could blunt it by looking at it wrong. I swore at it, rubbed my shoulder, looked at Shyia, “There were two other Rris I saw.”

“Are you sure?”

How many times had he asked me that? “Yes”

“And you can’t describe them.”

I exhaled in exasperation, a white cloud hanging and disappearing. “No.” As I’d said before: all I could tell them was that the Rris I saw had fur and pointy ears. They all looked the same back then. “Maybe if I saw them again I could say.”

“That might not be possible,” he growled.

I swung the axe again and this time a splinter chipped off the side of the wood. “You are improving,” Shyia said. Was that supposed to be sarcastic?

“Thanks,” I said dubiously, tried again. This time I split it clean down the middle. “Better,” he said and watched me rubbing my shoulder, “How is it?”

“Stiff.”

“The scar. It’ll be deep.”

“It will get better?”

“Probably not.”

“Shit.”

He cocked his head. “What was that noise?”

“Not important,” I told him and began gathering up pieces of wood to stack with the rest under the eaves. The Mediator watched me thoughtfully. “Your machine, that is all in your words, isn’t it.”

“Yes.”

“Can you change it to proper writing?”

I looked at him and realised that by ‘proper’ writing he meant Rris text. Then I realised he was serious. “No.”

“Ah.” He looked thoughtful, eyes half-lidded as he watched me. “Then can you teach a person to read your kind of writing?”

“Maybe.” I dumped a load of chopped wood on the pile and returned to the chopping block. At least they had saws and someone had taken the time to cut this lot into handy lengths before bringing it to Chihirae. Her payment I guess:

she teaches their children, the townsfolk help with her keep: food and firewood and a meagre allowance. I picked up the axe, leaned on it and shrugged slightly. “It is... made around the way we speak. You cannot speak like us. Chihirae tried it. There are words you have no... other word for. Maybe I could.” I looked down at the axe and added, “It would be long time. I am not a teacher.”

He blinked at me - a brief eclipse of green eyes - and shifted in his coat. Shorter than I was, but he had an air of... efficiency about him. Like a sword. Even if you'd never seen one before, one glance would tell you it's not for buttering your toast. I could guess what he was thinking. It's what a lot of Ris have thought since him. Somewhat annoyed I put another piece on the block, swung the axe and split it first time.

“You're worried about what we are going to ask you.”

I felt my jaw clench, swung the axe again. Pieces of wood tumbled to the trampled snow and wood chips around the block. Panting slightly I held the axe in both hands and looked at the Mediator, “Of course I am.”

“Is there so much to be afraid of?”

I shrugged. It depended. “What are you going to ask me? Tools?” I hefted the axe, “or weapons?”

He tipped a hand in a casual gesture. “Probably both. That worries you so much?”

“What will happen if I say no?”

He hesitated. “I don’t know. You are likely to?”

I nodded.

“That means yes, doesn’t it. Ah.” Wrinkles creased his furry muzzle, as though he was smelling something foul. “If someone wanted it enough, it could be bad for you.”

“I could break the Laptop,” I said and swung the axe again. The wood split cleanly and when I looked up the Mediator was gaping at me in what had to be shock, the first time I’d seen such an outright look of startlement. “You would do that?”

“If I had to.”

A side of his muzzle twitched, a quick flash of inch-long canines. “Mikah, I’ll tell you now: Be careful who you say that to.” He studied me while his tail twitched, only slowly calming, then said, “If Chihirae heard you wanted to destroy all that [something], I think she would want to hurt you herself.” He snorted slightly at that, his breath crystalising in short puffs in front of his nostrils and stood and watched me while I finished chopping the rest of the firewood. I got the feeling he was watching me like I might watch some piece of exotic machinery in action, just seeing how all the different parts moved.

Chihirae returned while we were carting the split wood inside. I had my arms full when I saw her in the distance, trudging back from town along the snow and mud-covered track that led to the cabin, her old coat looking far too threadbare for that kind of weather. She wasn't wealthy, that Rris, also seemed to have a bit more trouble in the snow than I did. Odd that: her feet weren't as broad as mine. Rris walk on their four broad, clawed toes only - digitigrade. It's what gives them that fluid, stalking gait and while lethally fast and agile on solid ground, they did tend to sink into the snow. I guess it was a price they paid when their forebearers started walking on two legs. She saw me and waved, a familiar gesture shared by Humans and Rris alike. "Hi," I called back, my voice carrying over the fields. The Mediator appeared at the door, squinting as he looked to see what I was shouting about.

I was stacking the wood by the stove when she came in and lingered to bat snow and ice from her legs. "Ah, Mikah. Do you want to sit down. I've got some news that I think you should hear."

I put the wood aside and looked at her. "Good or bad news?"

"Good, I think," she smiled and took her seat at the desk.

"You're sending me home?"

"Ah, not quite that good." Her ears went down, then came up again and she managed to look smug, but I got the feeling I might have let the air out of her balloon. "You can [something] the classes. I managed to persuade them. Not easy."

I brightened. “They said yes?”

“There are a few who aren’t happy about it, but they said yes. I think their cubs talked them into it. They like you.”

I really didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know how she did it, but it meant a hell of a lot to me. I just caught her and hugged her. She tensed for a second, then relaxed and chittered, “You are pleased?”

“I am pleased,” I breathed into her fur, then released her, stepped back to pet her ruffled shoulder fur smooth again. “Thank you.”

“How did you do it?” another voice asked; the Mediator leaning against the doorframe. “I was [something] they would rather have their eyes fall out than have their cubs in the same room as him.”

“I had to make a few promises,” Chihirae admitted. “They also want to ask you if you think it is [something].”

He hissed slightly and his leather coat creaked as he shifted. “If you are putting him in a building with those cubs, I think it is HE who should be worried. No, I don’t think there will be any problems.”

Chihirae kept me close at her side on that first day. Snow creaked under my black boots and our breath frosted in the morning air as we walked the route to the barn. There were already cubs there waiting for her.

Nervous? Of course I was nervous. Chihirae had warned me about it, but it wasn't something I could do much about. The same kind of feeling I'd had on the first day of high school or my first job interview. I glanced at Chihirae stalking along beside me, swallowed, and settled the laptop where it was slung at my hip.

The cubs saw us coming and small furry figures scurried out over the snow to meet us. The cubs who knew me were effusive in their greetings, their claws catching at my clothing as they closed around me, a gabble of voices:

“My [something] said not to touch it.”

“Hai! Mikah, they have let you out!”

“You still haven't grown fur”

“Can I see that game again?”

“Alright, enough for now. Inside, go on. Move, ” Chihirae pinched at ears as she got them moving out. “Mikah, try not to be too much of a distraction. You can do that?”

“Yes, teacher.”

She hissed and took a swipe at my own ears. Fortunately, they aren't as big a target as Rris ones.

Inside, although in my memory it was larger, the barn hadn't changed. The rough desks and benches, the small stove. As Chihirae led me through to the front I saw the dark stains across a bench and desk. Someone had tried to clean them up, but the stain had soaked into the grain of the wood, turning patches and spots almost black. I stared and shivered, feeling hairs standing on end.

“I didn't know.”

I looked down at Chihirae. Her ears were down and her eyes studying my face. I swallowed, nodded, “I understand.”

A bench near the fire that creaked under my weight. I had my notepad, pen, and my laptop on the desk before me, stark contrast to the cubs who only had the few slates Chihirae could distribute. She continued her lessons in much the same way she'd done it when I'd been watching from the loft. I'd missed a lot, but her lessons in the evenings helped, also the fact that now I could ask her for help when I needed it; mostly in the language and grammatical areas.

And I tried not to be too distracting to the cubs, but whenever I touched the keyboard to check something in the database heads would turn and voices would pipe up in curiosity until Chihirae restored order. She didn't play favourites: she treated me just as she would any of her other students, calling on me to answer questions, say words. Cubs snickered.

“Something funny?” Chihirae asked one of them after an outburst of giggling.

“Ah, he can’t say ‘riding’.”

“It sound funny,” another hissed.

“He can’t help that,” Chihirae growled. “His mouth is different. He has trouble with words we find easy. Be [something].”

“What was that word?” I asked. Cubs chittered their laughter.

And Chihirae had a couple of other questions for me as well, slightly more curly. Where does snow come from? Why is the sky blue? The snow one, that wasn’t too bad. It would’ve been a great sales pitch for the multimedia encyclopedia, I mean, let’s face it: if a software program can present an explanation of snow in a manner that cubs who’ve never even conceived of evaporation and global weather patterns can comprehend then it must be a useful tool. Chihirae stood near and watched with wide eyes as the children gathered close around to watch the screen, always asking questions I tried to field as best I could.

Children.

Yeah, I guess I was coming to think of them as children. As these Rris were becoming people. I don’t know when it happened; I can’t pinpoint the exact

moment, but somewhere along my twisting, bizzare road, that's what they became. People.

—v—

Those mornings went quickly.

It was fun, and a vast improvement over huddling in that cold little room. I was learning a hell of a lot from the cubs, all the important little things: slang, vernacular, their swearing. They tell you little things about a culture that books don't cover, but they don't always explain themselves. For example, why was it considered rude to call someone 'red tied'? or 'clipped'? 'Shaven' that I could understand, and it did explain why neither Chihirae or the Mediator liked it when I'd wanted to shave off my growing beard. We'd compromised: I kept the beard, but trimmed back to something approaching what I considered a respectable and comfortable length.

Along with my vocabulary, my pronunciation improved. The cubs gleefully corrected me every time I mispronounced a word. Even those words I'd never be able to pronounce properly. Chihirae spent time with me in the evenings, going through her books together. I could read the most basic of childrens' stories: slowly, haltingly, but I could read them. Some days she'd have me read for the class, the equivalent of 'Spot has a ball. See Spot run'. The cubs chittered and hissed, but they enjoyed themselves. There was that afternoon when class was dismissed and I stepped out the door to catch a snowball across my chest. Chine and Feher chittered and launched another volley, missed me and spattered Rikya behind me. She joined me in returning fire and it kind of grew from there into a free-for-all. I could throw further and harder, but they were damn fast on their feet. Like trying to hit the proverbial butterfly with the proverbial hatchet. Seriously, they were only cubs, but they could probably run as fast as I could, even on thick snow. It eventually ended with everyone covered in snow and ice and having had a ripping good time.

I guess their elders weren't as amused. Later that evening a trio of the older Rris came calling, not so happy.

"It is filling his head with ridiculous ideas," one of the females complained. "He wants to go to the place where that," she gestured at me, "comes from."

"Not the only one," I muttered.

The three Rris stared at me and Chihirae said, "Mikah, not now."

"She was covered in snow. She said it threw a snowball at her when they were playing. Plague take it, Teacher, it might hurt them. Look at it!"

"It isn't just that," another added and their tails writhed violently. "Some of the things it is saying, can you believe them? They believe him! Ehanirih wanted me to boil the water! Said there were things living in it!"

"There are," Chihirae said.

"You believe him also? Why are we talking to you?!"

"Not just Mikah. Have you heard of Rethkin? He is well known in [something] areas at Hillvale Between. His book talks about them."

“Probably where your pet heard about it.”

Chihirae chittered. “I can just imagine him walking into the [something] to discuss [something].”

The other Ris set their ears back and Chihirae continued, gathering steam, “Mikah is not hurting anyone. He has never tried to hurt anyone. All he wants is to live his life, something you seemed to be determined to deny him. I was also afraid of him to start with, but he has never done anything to hurt me, he is [something] and [something]. I am afraid I can’t say the same about other people.”

Ris stared at her, as if they couldn’t believe she’d said that. I looked from one to another, worried for Chihirae. She was employed by the town, wasn’t she? insulting the townsfolk could get her into trouble. Finally one of them hissed, “I think the Mediator might be interested in hearing about this.”

“I will be sure to mention it to him,” Chihirae retorted then drew a deep breath. “Kenth agreed to let him have a chance. Mikah hasn’t hurt anyone or broken [something]. He has been friendly and [something]. You can’t just [something] him. If Kenth tells me to remove him, I will do it. But until that day, I stand by him.”

They steamed, but Chihirae stood her ground: If I was to be kicked out of class, the order would have come from Kenth, the mayor himself. They left shortly afterwards and I just sagged down onto my sleeping mat. “They really don’t like me.”

“It is only a couple of pebble-brains” Chihirae snorted and sat down beside me, then batted at my arm with the back of her hand. “Don’t worry about them. I doubt Kenth will [something] them.”

I just nodded.

She cocked her head, then leaned to the side, against me, lowering her head to rest against my arm. A warm, shifting presence against me. “Pebble-brains,” she said again.

“Should be shaved,” I said.

“You are a good one to talk,” and I felt her start laughing at that.

—v—

Not much clear sky that day, heavy grey cloud over much of it. Snow crunched under my feet, a chill wind sent flurries dancing around my feet and tried to steal the sack I was carrying.

“Hurry up,” Feher called back as he scampered ahead with his two friends, “A, you are slow!”

I made a rude noise and they chattered laughter.

“Do that again,” Chine urged me.

So while we walked the cubs tried to see if they could imitate a bronx cheer. It was a bit of a walk across the fields and the stream behind Chihirae’s place before you hit the treeline. The stream was frozen over in places, not thick enough to walk over so we crossed at one of the places it was wider, but only about ankle-deep. My boots are waterproof, but the cub’s feet weren’t; still, they weren’t too heavy to carry.

I guess I shouldn’t have let them come along. With the aid of hindsight, I definitely shouldn’t have let them tag along, but Chihirae had asked me to go and collect some deadfall to use as kindling and the cubs showed up just as I was leaving and they said their elders didn’t mind and ... and I believed them. Anyway, what could happen just picking up some dead sticks?

The cubs were enjoying themselves. Chine and Feher were firm friends and always seemed to be together. The other was Ithi’tsa, a female classmate who was only a little less raucous than the two boys. They scurried through the drifts and up into the trees like two-legged lynxs, hurtling back down the slope in clouds of kicked-up powder, a snowball flew and Chine went chasing off after Ithi’tsa.

“Hy,” a clawed hand caught my jacket and I looked down into the bright eyes of Feher, panting clouds of mist. “Mikah, how long are you going to be here?”

“Here? Where?”

He waved a hand back toward the village, “Here.”

“I don’t know.”

“They said you were going away soon.”

“Who? CHINE! Get off her!”

“The outsider. The Mediator. Him and Kenth, they were saying you were going to Lying Scales. Why?”

I shook my head. That was something I didn’t know about. “I don’t know,” I told him.

He turned away, seeming disapointed, then looked up at me again. “Do you want to go?”

“Feher, this isn’t my home. I cannot stay here... all time.”

“Why?”

Why indeed. Why couldn't I stay here? Live my life here? I sighed and stopped dreaming. "I'm not a Rris. They think I can tell them a lot."

"Like you tell us in class?"

"Like that, yes."

"The Mediator would be angry if you didn't go."

"I think so. And many Rris in the town don't like me. They do not want me to stay. I think it would be better if I go with them. Yes?"

His ears went down. "I don't want you to go."

"I can come back to see you," I smiled. "It won't be too long. Now, do you know a good place to get wood?"

He seemed to deliberate for a second, then brightened, his previous depression cast aside. "Over here," he called and I heard the other cubs shouting as he scurried up the hillside between the denuded trunks, occasionally dropping to all fours. A flash of gold fur between black and white snowscape.

"Hey! Wait up," I called in English.

“You are too slow,” a taunting voice drifted back down the slope. I made a rude noise back.

Well, it wasn't a bad spot: a weather-worn gully just below the crest, a nick in the hillside where a couple of trees had come down in a slip, plenty of deadwood. The cubs made a game of grabbing twigs, occasionally playing pretend swordfights with a couple of sticks. All in all I think they spent more time chasing each other around than actually working, but what the hell: you're only young once and growing up is a one-way street.

I took my own time, finding larger branches and breaking them into manageable pieces to carry in the sack. It'd been maybe three quarters of an hour when I looked up to see three adult Rris at the head of gully. Standing, staring at me. Parents looking for their cubs? No, I didn't think so. I couldn't recognise them, but they didn't look like villagers. “Feher?” I called and pointed at the newcomers. “Who are they?”

Feher and the other two stopped their game and looked. “I don't know,” he said.

Three of them, all wearing long stockman-like coats similar to the Mediator's, save these were a grubby white that blended in with the snow and trees. They looked at each other and started moving down the hillside toward us, spreading out. I got a bad feeling in my gut. It reminded me of a film I'd once seen: wolves fanning out as they stalked a deer.

“Feher, Chine, Ithi,” I called the cubs with unease growing to fear, “come here.”

Thankfully, they did so without argument, watching the newcomers. I herded the cubs behind me, moving back. The three approaching Rris had spread out, a wide arc coming down the gully, a coat swept back and I saw a long sword sheath hanging from the belt, one with a pistol. This wasn't good. I'd almost been mugged once, several punks in a park. They'd used the same kind of moves but couldn't run quite as fast or far as I could.

"Get out of here," I hissed to the cubs. "Go home."

"But... "

"Home! Go! Now!"

They did, slowly, then turning to run and one of the newcomers called out: a name or something, I'm not sure, but there was movement in my peripheral vision and I turned to see a forth Rris downhill from us, moving around behind us in a position to head the cubs off and they saw him also, slowed down as he drew a sword, glittering as cold as the snow.

Too fast, it was all happening too fucking fast. I just screamed at the cubs to run, started down the steep bank as fast as I could, kicking snow, stumbling in the drifts, slipping but staying upright. The Rris howled, the one going after the cubs hesitating and turning and looking up at me and I saw amber eyes widening, narrowing, his stance shifting to bring the sword around in a slash at my legs and I dove headlong.

Impact almost broke my neck. A tangle of limbs and leather and fur and snow, slipping and tumbling down the hillside, claws raking my hands, sliding off my

jacket, flashes of grey sky and trees and whiteness like a roulette wheel that stopped on freezing white.

“Mikah!”

Ice on my face. I lifted my face out of the snow. Feher through the trees, hesitating, watching with wide eyes and ears down. “Run!” I screamed with what breath I had and he pointed. The Rris I’d hit, not a metre downhill from me, was on all fours reaching for his sword. “Heads up bastard!” I snarled, rolled and kicked a heavy boot right into his chin as hard as I could. His head went back with a sharp crack, a spray of spittle and blood and he tumbled away. I struggled to my feet, my left shoulder, my whole left arm burning. Feher cried out again, a tawny blur scurrying down the hillside, another Rris bounding past me as he pursued the cub in clouds of snow with sword in hand. I gritted my teeth, stooping to pick up the fallen sword as I half-slid, half-ran past, running for the cub’s life, for my life as I heard the snarls and grunts of the other two close behind me.

Any other time, any other place, I wouldn’t have had a proverbial snowball’s chance in a race against Rris, but there and then I had an edge: bushes and drifts I bulled through, boots were better protection and traction than their pads. Somehow I managed not to trip and impale myself on the sword or slam into a tree or trip on a buried root as I took a suicidal pace through the trees, unable to stop if I’d wanted to, legs wavering and lungs heaving.

A figure in white in front of me and out of sheer desperation I threw the sword and - Christ only knows how - hit him. He stumbled, recovered and I careened into him, crashing into his back with an impact I felt in every organ and bone, grabbing him, something snapping and both of us skidding headlong, tumbling and he was on me with claws tearing at me and his legs came up to rake down mine, ripping through the denim and skin and I screamed in pain and struck out, grabbing an ear and ripping, hand around throat and rolling. Like wrestling with

a threshing machine, claws flashing and tearing with blurring speed. A gaping mouth of needle teeth and a shockingly-pink curled tongue lunged at my face and fangs caught my cheek, punctured under my chin and scraped against bone, skin and muscle tearing as I yanked away and red washed across my vision and the pain grew like a starburst across my face. I screamed a spray of red and swung an elbow, punched. No thought, just terror and pain and desperation driving me and the Rris yowled through a bloodstained muzzle, squalled fought back and ripped me again and again as we rolled through red-stippled snow and the skeletons of bushes until I was on top and drove my fists down again and again...

An impact across my side, under my arm, my ribs. It threw me sideways and I sprawled into snow. Couldn't move. Tried to get up and couldn't move, couldn't feel the cold, just an agony in my face that was a bright spike through my senses, dimming everything else into obscurity. Something caught me and rolled me and I was looking up at skeletal fingers laced across leaden grey. White flakes. Blinked and red washed across my vision and my arm hurt when I tried to wipe my eyes.

A shape moved above me, raised a glittering sliver of steel and thunder clapped and the sky was empty again. Another peal of thunder, echoing, jarring snow from branches.

It was very quiet.

I don't know what I was trying to do. Somehow I managed to get to my feet, I don't remember how. Everything seemed so remote, like my head was stuffed with cotton. I remember the light was painfully bright, blurred. I tried to wipe my eyes and my hand was red, the snow was pink, two Rris bodies didn't move.

I stared at them for a while, looked at the redness dripping from my left hand, felt it running down my side and face. My clothes were soaked. I touched my face and felt pain and something like raw meat and my fingers came away red. The shaking was starting, a numb feeling stealing over me as I tried to move, putting one leaden foot in front of the other.

Water. Light scintillating from trickling water, from the ice crystals congealing along the banks. Beyond it the fields were glaringly white, shifting light that hurt my eyes, and I saw Rris there: shapes running toward me. Noises sounded faintly, shouting that competed with the roaring in my ears.

It hurt to breath. It hurt to move. Shuddering violently and not just from the cold. Pink streamers swirled from my sodden jeans, tendrils of crimson whipping off into the water burbling around my boots. I stumbled as an underwater rock turned beneath my feet and somehow my legs held until I reached the far side and only then folded facedown into the snow, half-in half-out of the water. Next I remember there was a Rris voice shouting and something grabbed my shoulder. The world rolled and a Rris face came into view. The eyes going shock-wide.

“Hai, rot.”

Another figure crouching over me, propping me up, shouting at me:

“Mikah! Sah, no! Shave you! You [something] drowned-rat! Can you hear me? “

Hard to keep my eyes open and the pain was everywhere, worst in my face

and along my right side - like the worst paper cut you can imagine. Noises throbbed through my head, prickles of heat washed over me, consciousness ebbed in and out. I remember there were more Rris around me, the sound of their voices, then hands were holding me. I tried to speak, coughed a spray of blood. My left cheek and jaw hurt like nothing I can describe: the whole side of my face swollen and ripped open. Rris called out and fussed around me, cloth wrapped around my face. Someone caught my left arm and I screamed as it was sharply yanked and I felt something grate and click through my bones.

The pain brought me back, back to more pain, pain from everywhere. I tried to move but hands held me while I quaked and kicked feebly and slowly sank into the dull haze of shock.

Memory of Rris holding me, half-carrying me across a frozen snowscape. A crowded, dimly lit room with a soft bed and a heat that burned at me. A hellish vision of a Rris, face distorted by reddish light, leaning over me, doing something with a small sliver of metal. Distorted, inhuman hands reaching for my face and I couldn't move away, couldn't flinch in any direction. A small noise like an animal in pain filled the air as I felt metal and thread pulling through my skin and I dimly realised it came from me.

There was a lot more pain. A point came where shock and exhaustion and overload just pulled me away to a remote place inside. Rris moved around my body, doing things with knives and needles and things I couldn't identify.

Enough is enough. There was a point where I just don't remember anything any more.

I'd fallen asleep on the couch again. I could hear Jackie out in the kitchen, clattering pots around while the television murmured background music: The Lion King again.

"You're watching that again?" I murmured and shifted and my waking dream shattered into fragments, my body scored with burning lines and I screamed and there was a twisted figure above me, raking me with razored claws again and again and the mouth gaped to bare inch-long fangs.

Hands pinned me and the visage snarled. "Mikah! Rot take you Mikah. All right, it's all right. Be calm."

Slowly I did, the words finding their way through the pain. The face was Chihirae's, her hands holding my shoulders. Hesitantly she released me; slowly, making sure I stayed put and just the slight rocking from that made me gasp. More pain, like a vast papercut across my ribcage. "No, don't." The voice buzzed through the ringing in my ears. A hand moved into my field of vision and Chihirae touched me again, just a fingertip. "Don't move."

I tried to move my mouth and that hurt. The entire left side of my face swollen so I couldn't open my left eye and felt the raw wound inside my mouth. I felt stiches and scabs tugging at my skin as I tried to say, "It hurts," in Rris.

Even to my ears the words were barely comprehensible, but she understood. "I know," she whispered. "I know."

Her home. Her bed. That small cubby set into the wall. Wrapped in sheets and blankets. My sleeping bag rumpled in the corner, looking slept-in. Sunlight spilled in through the small window, across the desk where the laptop played an old Walt Disney animated movie. Chihirae sat beside me and gently took my hand, wrapping her fingers around bandages covering my raw knuckles. I saw her face and I knew that expression: worry, fear. Her ears laid down. And I felt a pang of fear that momentarily pushed the pain aside:

“The cubs,” I tried to say.

“What?” she looked pained. “Mikah, say again.”

“The cubs,” I croaked again through screaming muscles, squeezing her hand harder. “The cubs.”

Her head flinched back and her pupils widened. “They... they are fine.” She hesitated and licked her lips. “Feher was asking about you. They are worried. They saw you and thought you were dead and you...” She stopped, clamping her jaws together.

I closed my eyes, taking stock. Stiches, I felt those everywhere: minute tuggings like ants biting at my skin. My left arm: felt like it was in splints. Cuts on my arms, my hands, deep pains down my legs. I remembered those: the Ris toe claws raking my legs again and again. My face, the bandages and stiches there: I remembered the teeth, the inside of a Ris’s mouth coming right at me is an image I’ve never managed to forget. My right ribs, the pain there: it was deep, a searing ache every time I took a breath. What was that?

“What happened?” I tried to ask.

“I’m not sure.” She leaned her head back, ran fingers through her facial fur. “We don’t know who they are. I don’t know why they did this to you. Mikah, you didn’t do anything to provoke them?”

“No,” I breathed, barely audible.

“The cubs said you didn’t.” She hesitated and once again reached out to stroke a finger down my skin. “You don’t know who they were? Do you? You haven’t... seen other Rris before us?”

“No,” I echoed, not really comprehending what she was trying to say. “They... just... I didn’t...”

“All right, all right,” she stopped me as I started to get upset. “The cubs told us what happened. You aren’t to blame. Mikah, why did you do that? Why didn’t you run?”

It hurt too much to smile. “From Rris?” I whispered.

“A,” she glanced away. “I forgot.” She patted my arm and asked, “Thirsty?”

Yes. Very. Incredibly.

She dampened a cloth and touched it to my lips, gave it to me a drop at a time. It helped. I lay back on the bed, trying not to feel anything, just closed my eyes and began to remember: just snippets, little flashes of what had happened; The editing room of my brain clipping the footage of my memory together in some sort of order. “Four.”

“What?” Chihirae cocked her head.

“Four of them.”

“Yes,” she said, her eyes flinching down to the water in her hand. “You don’t remember what happened?”

“No.”

“A,” she licked her lips, “You... you killed two of them. Shyia found you just before they killed you. He heard you had gone off with the cubs and went after you. Just as well he did, a?” She made a small noise: a snort, lowered her muzzle and looked small. “Mikah, they nearly tore you apart. I don’t know how you... I was afraid. I didn’t know...” She trailed off into silence.

Killed them? Oh, shit. I closed my eyes and was mildly perturbed to find the news didn’t really kindle any emotion in me. They’d tried to kill me, I’d killed them. I hadn’t been trying to. She was watching me with her ears laid back. “Did not mean to,” I mumbled.

“It’s fine,” she hastened to assure me. “I know, I know.”

It didn’t do much to comfort me. I sank back, feeling searing lines all over my body throbbing in time to my pulse. I tried to raise my right arm - just a bit - and nearly passed out from the effort.

“Mikah!” Chihirae caught my arm, pressed it down again. “Don’t, just lie still!”

I grimaced through the swollen muscles. “How bad?”

“Uhn.” Her ears went down and she rubbed at the fur of her neck. “Mikah, I don’t know...”

“Please.”

Her tongue flicked around her lips. “Not good. Not good. You left a lot of blood on the ground. Your arm - there - is broken. There were over a dozen cuts in your legs that needed sewing up. Also your arms and your face: she almost bit it off. Your ribs there... the sword cut deep, cracked a rib. Your coat saved your life there. What is it made of? I’ve never seen material that can slow a sword so... never mind.”

“Sword.” I closed my eyes. “Don’t ‘member.” I don’t even know if she understood me then. My Rris - not the clearest at the best of times - slurred

through swollen lips.

“What can we do to help you? Mikah? Is there anything we can do? Do you need food? Medicine? I’ve tried to find something in your machine but it’s all in your language. I cannot...”

“She,” I mumbled, my brain drifting back and forth through conversation and memory.

“What?”

“She?”

“The one who did this?” She touched my face, almost imperceptibly. “Yes.”

“I kill she?”

“Uhn, yes. That upsets you? She almost killed you.”

I tried to breath shallowly, tasting a coppery tang on my breath as I digested that. “She’d hurt cubs?”

Wrinkles marched across her broad muzzle and she studied me - just for a

second - as if she'd realised I was seeing something she took as gospel through different eyes. "Yes. She would've. Now, I think you should rest."

Pain and disorientation swept over me, fear and hopelessness and a tsunami of confused emotions. I was shaking violently, tears wetting my face and bandages and taking the world away into an amorphous blur. A warm presence stayed by me: musty fur and harsh breath and the susuruss of a low voice.

—v—

They were endless days of hell. Sleep was impossible. The pain kept waking me, dragging me out of troubled sleep where dreams and pain mingled and intertwined, turning any rest into something far from therapeutic. Day after night after day, only sinking below an alpha state when the exhaustion and fatigue poisons were enough to dull the edge of the pain, the spasming muscles.

There wasn't a lot the local doctor could do. He cut off bandages, applied a poultice of some kind, but he couldn't give me any Rris medicines. They didn't know what would hurt me, what might kill me, and I wasn't in any shape to help them.

Chihirae was there a lot. Some of the scratches became infected and that spread. When I started running a fever she was there with cloths and water to cool me down, to stop me dehydrating. When the deliriums took me... those are times I wish I can't remember. Not nightmares: I was awake, horribly awake, seeing terrors that didn't exist:

Once again Rris tore at me and this time it didn't end.

A warm and familiar place, the rooms of my apartment, and there was something else there. I remember I was looking for something or someone, going from room to room. Claws came out of nowhere, viscious fangs ripping at me while eyes burned amber in the dimness.

Shapes H.R. Giger couldn't have dreamed of, coming out of the walls.

Jackie watching me wake up, changing even as I saw her, claws coming at me.

The sheets catching me, suffocating me.

Light streaming through windows scorched like molten metal, I was burning as it touched me.

I don't know why I remember them. Like dreams; I often remember those, but what I remember from those nightmarish days were so much more vivid. Compare a greyscale image with a 24-bit one; a charcoal with an oil. Vivid, yes, but they aren't memories I cherish. It's disturbing the stuff I'd dredged up from my subconscious: I've been through some pretty bad shit over the past few years, but far and away the worst's the stuff from my own psyche. It's not something I like to think about.

Click

Darkness and confusion. I was hurting unbearably, the support of the desk the only thing keeping me standing. There was a weight in my hand: I looked down, blinking uncomprehendingly down the empty barrel of the Mediator's pistol clutched in my bandaged hand.

I just stared, not understanding what was happening.

A muffled noise and a furry hand flashed past to grab mine, firmly prised the gun away. I looked up into amber eyes: wide and shocked. "Mikah? What are you doing?"

I looked down at the gun again and honestly said, "I don't know." Then the last of my energy was gone and I collapsed across the desk, crying out at the pain in my broken arm. Chihirae cursed and grabbed me. It hurt as she helped me back to bed: stiff and weak and with sutures pulling at my skin. She helped me down onto the edge of the bed and sat herself beside me, still supporting me while I just stared at the gun on the desk, feeling numb and empty inside as I realised what I'd been trying to do.

A small noise came from the Rris beside me and I looked at her as a furry paw came up to touch my good cheek and the dampness there. Her ears were still back in distress while her amber eyes tried to read mine. "Are you all right?" she asked softly.

"Yes," I answered, almost inaudible even to my own ears. I didn't feel it: I was shaking violently now.

“Hnnnn, Mikah,” She held me, laid my head on her shoulder and just held me while I trembled and clutched at her fur. In the background I heard a door open and a voice ask, “What’s going on? Is he...” and Chihirae’s reply vibrating through her body: “Not now. Leave us. Please.”

A hesitation, a sound of assent; the closing of a door.

I don’t know how long we stayed like that, just holding each other in the darkness. Something rough and warm and wet rasped against my forehead, just for a split second, then she patted my head and helped me lay back and pulled the sheets back over me. Cold in there by now, until a furry figure slipped in beside me and got close.

“Mikah?” a voice murmured in my ear. “What were you doing? Do you want to talk about it?”

“What?” I answered unthinkingly.

A claw poked my skin, making me flinch. “Don’t do this, please. You were trying to kill yourself, weren’t you.”

I didn’t say anything. Wasn’t it obvious?

“Mikah?” she ventured, then hissed softly. “That... that isn’t something... I know you’ve gone through a lot, but surely it doesn’t mean you have to do

something like that? Why?”

I closed my eyes, trying to remember, but it was just a blank. “I don’t know.”

She didn’t say anything; didn’t press me. I felt her hand as a comforting weight across my chest, gently stroking my skin. A pleasant sensation beside the pain that was a constant companion. It was just so... impossible. How had my life come to this? A cottage in the snow, a dark room and a small bed with an alien. A world where I stood out from everyone else, where I was hunted. A sharp world, one that tore me inside and out, physically and mentally.

“How often?” I asked the darkness.

“Huhnn?” I felt Chihirae shifting beside me.

“This,” I moved slowly to try and touch bandages and cuts. “How often will this happen?”

There was a hesitation, then: “I don’t know.”

I licked my lips and swallowed, wincing at the stab of pain just that motion caused in my lacerated face. “I can’t live like this.” I whispered and heard her intake of breath. She sat up to look down at me. I could see her eyes in the darkness and she didn’t say anything as I continued. “This isn’t my home. Chihirae, I don’t belong here. I had friends. I had a family. It was my life. All gone. Now, just pain; too much pain.”

“No,” she was gentle when she touched my face. “It won’t be like this all the time. Mikah, I don’t know why they did this to you, but we’re not all like that. You’ve only seen this village, but we have cities like yours, we have arts and music and great works. You haven’t seen a play in the [resound] theatre, you haven’t seen the carving walls in Lying Scales or the carvings in the Living Hall... There is more than violence. Please, Mikah, think. I know you are not that foolish.”

I closed my eyes again, feeling the stinging as tears welled and a choked sob clawed its way out.

“Mikah,” her finger touched the soft skin under my eyes and the moisture there, “don’t, please. It will be all right.” She stroked, just lightly. “Such thin skin. It hurts a lot doesn’t it.” There was a sigh, a wash of harsh breath. “I’m sorry, I just don’t know what [something] would do to you.”

Yeah, it hurt; inside and out. I just lay there, panting.

“Is there anything I can do?”

Send me home?

She waited during that silence, then made a small noise and her hand left me. Another pause, then she swung out of the bed and I saw her silhouette pad across the room to the desk, return and stand by the bed; she was holding the laptop. “Can you... would this help? Can you use it. Perhaps you could find something

to help. Something that might help with the pain. Is there a plant? Something that might be here? There has to be something... ” she trailed off and I could see her head shifting in the dimness, the dark pools of her eyes watching me.

Something.

I took the laptop, fumbling at the latch with bandaged fingers, and she leaned over to pop the catches for me with a clawtip. The bluish light cast up from the screen turned her features into something surreal, something demonic. With my hands bandaged up it was difficult to hold the stylus or type with anything other than finger-pecking. Chihirae watched, absorbed and silent, watching both my fingers and the screen as I accessed the encyclopedia and slowly pecked out text searches on drugs and barbituates and anesthetics. There were things that were totally unsuitable: chemicals and synthetics with names I couldn't translate and weren't likely to be found in the village or anywhere on the whole damned planet for that matter. I narrowed the search down to herb and natural sources and there was more success with those; she recognised some of the poppy flowers, some of the opiates. Too cold to cultivate this far north, she said. Too expensive. Unlikely the local doc would have any on hand.

However, it was a familiar green leaf she recognised. “That?” She leaned closer to the screen and her ears perked up so that the tufts atop them were practically quivering. “How do you use it?”

I tried to remember the words. God, I was tired, my head was throbbing, “Uhn... Dry it, burn the leaves. The smoke... You understand?”

She chittered, “Wait. Please. And don't do anything stupid.”

“Uh?”

“Please,” she said and I felt the pads on her hands press against my hands and then she took the laptop, the mattress bounced and she was out of the room, gone. I heard the front door bang shut behind her.

I opened my mouth, closed it again. She’d recognised the encyclopedia entry: Cannabis Sativa, common-or-garden marijuana. I laid my head back and shut my eyes, but sleep wouldn’t come, not through the pain. Again I lay there and stared at the grain of the wood over my head, feeling my lacerations burning like live wires under my skin while cool moonlight filtered through the frost on the window.

Oh Christ, let this work...

“You are awake?” It was a different voice. A piece of shadow in the doorway shifted, green eyes flashed.

“Shyia?”

“Uhn.” He came into the room and snagged the chair at the desk, straddled it. I saw his tail lashing across the patch of moonlight on the floor as he watched me. “How are you doing?” he finally asked.

“Be worse if you were not there.” I forced a smile; “Thank you.”

“Be dead if I wasn’t there.” I caught a glimpse of light glinting off teeth, and then he said, “Who were they?”

“I don’t know.”

His head shifted, as if he was looking down at his hands, “I think you do. They knew you. They were trying to kill you.”

“But I have never seen them...” Then I trailed off, thinking back to the first Rris I had ever seen. “I might have. The barn.”

“You remember?”

Just the figures in the door. Their faces were nothing, meant nothing. I had no points of reference, all I remember are androgynous, anonymous feline shapes emerging from barn doors. There were details: grey and gold clothes, a greenstone bracelet, but not individuals. No, I didn’t remember. They all looked so alike.

Shyia studied me, like he was trying to decide if I was lying or not. And I didn’t know why he didn’t believe me. Was it simply because I wasn’t Rris? I already had an inkling he wasn’t entirely comfortable around me, so was his mistrust just xenophobia on his part? Maybe he had a better reason.

“Maybe later,” he said, then: “The teacher looked upset. Any reason?”

I licked my lips. “Me,” I confessed.

” Ah,” I saw him turn in the chair to look back at the desk where his pistol still lay. His ears went down. “Do you want to discuss it?”

I couldn’t shake my head; that movement hurt too much. “No,” I murmured.

He didn’t reply to that, just ducked his head and swung off the chair. He took the pistol with him when he left.

—v—

It wasn’t really sleep. Sheer exhaustion dulled everything into a haze, the fatigue poisons dulling the constant throbbing from several dozen deep gouges. Only dulling; never completely easing. The sudden painful spasms in my right leg snapped me back to sweating wakefulness, listening to the darkness for some undeterminable length of time while a moaning wind fumbled around the walls.

Voices from outside were loud in the stillness, abruptly growing louder as the front door was opened. A pair of shadowy Rris entered, lighting the lamp to reveal Chihirae and the town doctor whose fur was ruffled and peaked as if he’d been dragged out of bed. Probably had. “... it doesn’t work. Is there something else we can try?”

“I’m not sure,” Chihirae fiddled with the lamp, then came over to kneel beside the bed. “How are you doing?” she asked, stroking my forehead.

“I have felt better.”

She looked confused, then gave a small chitter. “I can imagine.” She patted my face, then eagerly said, “I found some. It isn’t much, but it should help.”

The doctor had a small leather pouch. There was a pipe, an actual pipe. Also a packet filled with dried weed. He showed it to me and it felt and smelt like the real thing. The pipe was simple: handcarved, with a carefully polished bowl and stem.

“Thank you,” I said.

“A,” he said, stepped back and pulled his coat a bit closer. Whispered an aside to Chihirae and she chittered. “Mikah, it’s [something]. It’s common. Just a [something]. Many people smoke it. It is easy to find.”

“Oh.” I felt the pipe, stroking my fingertips across the slightly uneven surfaces. “It might make me... strange.”

“What?” her expression changed. “What do you mean?”

““Like when you are... ” I fumbled for words. Shit, I didn’t know their words for drunk. “When you drink too much?” No, that didn’t seem to ring any bells. “It makes humans... it makes us feel... good. Maybe be foolish. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” She was quiet for a short time, then asked, “Is it dangerous?”

“No. Not small bit.” I hope not.

She just took the pipe and went over to the stove. When she came back the pipe was smoking gently. It'd been a long time, and then it'd only been a few joints at a friend's place. The first few puffs set me coughing and that hurt a hell of a lot, but then it seemed to go down smoother, easier and the pain suddenly wasn't as important. Shortly, the cubicle was shrouded in sweet-smelling smoke, things were blurring pleasantly. I looked at the two cats there and pictured hippy cats with flowers in their manes sharing a joint and giggled, “What's happnin' cats?”

“Mikah?” The name was distorted and a furred face leaned closer. I reached out my arm, fascinated by how long it seemed to be, and touched the fur. The texture was incredible, her puzzlement amusing. So was the fact she had six nipples, like leather buttons under the fur.

“Hai,” she caught my groping hand and I watched as our joined limbs seemed to whirl like water going down a plughole. “You are [something].”

“And you must have trouble shaving your legs.”

I don't really remember where things went from then; everything kind of runs together in a mellowed-out blur.

It worked. Grass might only be an FDA approved prescription painkiller in a couple of states, but that stuff stewed my system enough that the combination of weed and exhaustion was enough to lay me out for some time. Not a miracle cure of course: there was still the pain when I woke and it was the doc who decided to keep me drugged up as long as possible. He took advantages of one of those drugged stupors to remove the stitches, an experience I'm not going to regret missing.

While the drugs helped me get some real sleep, they didn't stop the dreams, not entirely. There were still the night terrors, the times when I was woken by things I can't quite remember crawling around inside my skull.

Still, I wasn't the only one suffering. The Rris had to look after me. Poor Chihirae had her classes to attend, as well as nursemaiding me and that can't have been a pleasant job: bedridden, I couldn't use the toilet, I couldn't wash myself, couldn't feed myself. I'd been through this before and that only made it all the more frustrating to be relegated back to this status, lying helpless while she tended to intimate needs. Claimed it didn't worry her too much; just like looking after baby cubs she said.

Yeah. Right. Sure. I was just like a baby Rris. It's not like I had a lot of say about what had happened to me, but it didn't feel right that Chihirae had to be the one who shared in my misfortunes; not after all she'd already done for me.

The Mediator was... around. Sometimes he helped Chihirae: cooking meals, cutting firewood, watching me. I remember half-waking once with him washing

me: impartial and thorough. Most of the time, however, he was out. Doing exactly what I didn't know.

I had a few visitors. The cubs, Feher, Chine and Ithi'tsa, dropped by to see me; seeming somewhat withdrawn as if they thought they were somehow responsible for what'd happened. I did my best to dispel that illusion and they came back. I enjoyed those visits, a lot. A flash of color in the plodding days and they made me laugh and forget about everything else for a while. There was one time Chihirae brought several adult Rris in: all unfamiliar, watching me with eyes that flicked across my body.

The cubs' parents... guardians, whatever. They were there to thank me. Awkwardly and uncomfortably, but that I could understand. Anyway, it's the thought that counts. Unless the cubs had talked them into it, which I later realised was a much more likely scenario.

And there was the afternoon the doc took the dressings off my face.

—v—

Chihirae's ears went down as the doctor methodically peeled the bandages away. They adhered to the wounds, reluctantly coming away with uncomfortable tuggings, stained with blood and serum leaked from the healing suture punctures.

"Calm," the doc said as worked. "Don't move your jaw too much." The last of the cloth came away and he moved back to look at me and I saw his expression change: not by much, but it was enough. I reached up and fearfully touched my

left cheek, expecting and dreading what I felt: the naked patches in my beard, raised lumps of scar tissue like starbursts and tracks across my cheek and under my jaw, the numb patches where there was no sensation and never would be again.

“It hurts?” the doc asked.

“No,” I whispered. “No.”

“Pleased to hear it.” He sounded satisfied as he packed his equipment away. “It’s healed better than I expected. They were bad [something] and your skin is like paper. I thought the stitches might begin to [something]. You are lucky to still have a face.”

I gave a small half-smile: The muscles on the left side of my face didn’t want to work properly. Lucky?!

He inspected the other serious wounds: the one across my ribs where the sword had sliced, the deeper ones on my legs and thighs where the Rris had used her foot claws to rake at me. My broken left arm was still immobilised in a splint, still healing and sore. I’d live, he declared, but I’d have to take things very easy for a while. Later, after Chihirae had thanked the doc and seen him to the door she returned to watch me in the silence of the little room. “You are upset,” she said after a while, her voice deeper than any human woman’s; completely inhuman.

“Me?” I gave a small snort and looked up, studying the patterns I’d already memorized. I didn’t hear her move, but abruptly she was there by the bed. “Your

face,” she said and it wasn’t a question.

I tried smiling again, “My good looks gone, huh?”

“That was a joke?” She chittered uncertainly and sat herself beside me.
“Mikah. I don’t know how...” She trailed off, looking flustered and tried again,
“Your face...even before, most Rris would find you...”

“Fugly,” I interrupted.

“What?”

“Not good to look at.”

“I... yes,” I don’t know if I was reading those expressions correctly, but she seemed both relieved and embarrassed at once. “You aren’t Rris. They won’t care if you have a few more [something]. I don’t think anyone will even notice.” I saw her face twitch. “Even without those a first look at you can come as quite a shock.”

“Thank you.”

I don’t know if she caught the sarcasm. “I suppose you feel the same when you look at us.”

Completely inhuman. That face, the body, every muscle and manerism: fur and fangs and eyes like nothing I'd ever seen before. "You are different. Not unpleasant. Sometimes frightening. Sometimes... beautiful."

She was taken aback by that, just stared at me.

"Sorry," I mumbled, and I was. Why'd I say that? Just complicated things. "Do you have a... a... "I didn't know their word for mirror.

Turned out she did: a tiny piece of glass backed with a layer of silver that was peeling in spots. It showed enough, my face, the angry-red worm-tracks through the pale hair of my beard. The scars twisted my face, raising the left corner of my mouth in a permanent small sneer that I could only iron out with an effort. Soon as I relaxed it sprang back like rubber Nixon mask. I stared at the tiny reflection with a hollow sensation in my gut. Maybe it didn't mean anything to the Rris, but it meant something to me! Shit, it was my face!

"It could have been worse," Chihirae volunteered.

I almost snapped something, then bit back the words before they escaped. She was right, in everything: Rris wouldn't care; and it could've been worse. It didn't really make me feel any better, but there wasn't any point taking it out on her. I handed the mirror back with a half-smile I hoped was convincing. "True," I admitted.

She turned the mirror over in her hands, studying it for a few seconds before

looking at me. “Can your kind... fix your face?”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” her ears drooped. “I’m sorry there’s nothing we can do. We just don’t...” she trailed off with small wave of her hand, as though grasping something I couldn’t see. “There is so much you must take [something] that we can’t do for you.”

“I don’t understand that word, schethey.”

“It means what you are accustomed to, things you are used to. Understand?”

“Yes.” I tentatively tagged the word as ‘granted’. Rris words often changed depending on their context. “There are things I miss.”

She smiled then and reached out to touch my face, just gently. Her fingertip felt coarse against my skin as she stroked it down my temple, seemingly fascinated by the sensation. “Do you still hurt?” she asked and brushed the scar across my face, drawing away when I flinched violently. “Sorry. [something] you do. Do you want your drugs?”

I was shaking, not entirely sure if the reaction I’d felt was real physical pain or just a knee-jerk reaction to her touch. Already the flash of pain was ebbing and I licked my lips, “No. I think... I will be all right.”

Amber eyes blinked. “You are sure? Maybe best. You were acting... strange.”

“Strange?” That confused me and I was beginning to realise just how little recollection I had of the days I was stoned into unconsciousness.

“You got a bit silly,” she elaborated. “Talking about things in your words, making noises I didn’t understand. You didn’t make any sense a lot of the time. I think sometimes you were upset about something. You wanted to mate with me sometimes, and some of those jokes you tried to tell... Why would a llama climb a... “

“Hey! ” My heart skipped. “Wait! Rewind! What was that? I wanted to what with you?”

She squinted, as if going over what she’d said. “Oh, you said you wanted to mate with me.” She studied me for a second, perhaps fishing for a reaction of some kind. “Your kind does seem to chase after [sex] a lot. No wonder there are so many of you. You don’t have [something] do you; just whenever you feel like it.”

I didn’t know what the hell to say. She waited for me to speak, then cocked her head. “Mikah? What’s wrong?”

“I am sorry. I... I didn’t mean to say something like that.”

Her ears twitched. “Ah, then you wanted to keep it secret.”

“No! I meant I didn’t want to mate with you.”

“You find me unattractive?”

“No. I didn’t mean that. I... ” I trailed off, realising she was leading me on. “You are angry with me?” I asked, somewhat sheepishly.

“Not angry, no. When you first asked I was...[something]. It was a little [disconcerting]. But... you were not thinking properly.” She gave a small chuckle then and looked down as she scratched at her pelted chest. “After all, I don’t look like one of your females at all, do I?”

I struggled for something to say and came up with, “You have better ears.” She flicked the tufted appendages in a smile. “And you have beautiful fur,” she responded, reaching to lightly touch my hair.

It was an awkward moment. Just a second when there was nothing to do or say and her hand stroked my hair where it was growing in again. I touched her hand in turn, feeling the fur along her arm: coarse and wiry outside with the softer layers further in. Eyes met and there was confusion as I tried to read something in those features and knew she was trying to do the same and no words would come.

Or perhaps I was putting more into that moment than was really there. Anyway, if there had been something there it snapped when the front door banged, heralding the Mediator’s return.

“You’re sure you don’t recognize any of them?”

I shuddered against the cold and the gooseflesh that crawled down the back of my neck and once again looked over the dead Ris laid out among blocks of ice and other chunks of frozen meat in the village icehouse. Frost rimed their fur and their eyes were frozen over. One’s head was twisted back at an unnatural angle, another with two blacked gunshot wounds in the chest and back. The third corpse looked like someone had taken a hammer to it’s - her - face: tongue protruding from broken jaw, a missing canine, frozen blood plastered across the muzzle. She’d suffocated, choked from a crushed windpipe and I looked to my own scabbed knuckles, remembering bone and cartilage crunching under and in them.

But their dead faces didn’t stir any other memories.

“Pity,” the Mediator replied, his breath visible as he exhaled loudly. “There was that one who got away. He’s had plenty of time to talk to friends about you now.”

“You think there are more?”

He huffed and scratched at his chest through the quilted vest he wore. “I think that fine mistress Raeya is [something] in things she should not. “

“She is in cahoots ... She knows these?” I nodded toward the corpses.

He shrugged. “One of you is lying about about something. While I think you haven’t told us everything about yourself, I think you are telling the truth about this. Raeya... she does seem to be trying to hide something.” He nudged a frozen corpse with his foot. “These were after you for a reason, Mikah. Even if you don’t know what it is, you saw or did something you shouldn’t have.” He grunted then, “Huh, maybe they just don’t like you.”

There was nothing more we could do in that frigid little building. Rris were outside on that dreary day, watching us. Groups of furry spectators gathered on porches and stoops along the mainstreet, gossiping and chattering as Shyia assisted me back to the sled he’d commandeered: I think it was the same one they’d used to cart me back to Chihirae’s cottage after that debacle with their truth drugs.

It was a smooth ride back. The snow was deep and the sled was built solidly, with enough weight on its metal runners to iron out the worst of the bumps. What was uncomfortable for me was the freezing air that set my scars and wounds to aching, especially bad on my face. I huddled down further into the fur-lined collar of my torn and bloodstained jacket.

The cottage was quiet, almost buried in the drifts banked up against the walls. I could see a trickle of smoke rising from the chimney of the small stove over in the barn where Chihirae had her class to attend to. Low clouds embraced the hilltops around the valley, tendrils of mist wending down into the frost rimed trees along the slopes. It was a sober, motionless scene; drably serene. I gazed up at the mists, remembering the assailants who’d ambushed us there, wondering if there were more watching us then, at that minute.

“You see something?” Shyia asked.

I flinched, looked around. He was hunched down in his long coat, watching me intently while behind him the draught bison snorted steam and pawed at the snow, clearing tufts of buried grass to tear up. With snow up to his knees the coat concealed most of the Mediator’s body: a feline head perched on what - in that coat - could pass for a human body; snow and mist and dark denuded trees in the background. I was staring. He cocked his head quizzically and I pulled myself out of the weirdness fugue. “No,” I assured him. “Nothing.”

Wisps of steam escaped his keyhole-shaped nostrils as he studied me. So many of them do that to me. If I’d brushed off a human with the ‘nothing, don’t worry about it’ routine, they’d usually accept that. Rris don’t. Maybe it’s because I’m not Rris they aren’t sure whether or not to trust me, they take that extra time to assure themselves I’m not going to go for their juglars.

I’ve only done that a couple of times.

With a final glance up at the hills the Mediator helped me back into the house. I slumped in a chair while he got the stove going again. First time I’d been out for a long time and it’d taken a lot out of me.

A hand touched my head, “How are you doing?”

“Just tired.”

“Your ribs. How’s that cut?”

It was stinging. “It’ll be all right.”

“Do you want to lie down?”

“It’s all right. I should study. Chihirae wanted me to understand maps today.”

He glanced at the books on the desk. “Good. I asked her to make sure you did. I’ll sit with you. There are a few things I want to make sure you understand. I think you might need help.”

“Only all I can get.”

He blinked, then chittered. “I understand.”

It was those maps again. They made me nervous. Now I had the chance to study them and compare them to maps on my Atlases the differences were apparent. Not many, too goddamn few. I’d been trying to avoid thinking about it, but the geography lessons I’d had with Chihirae kept rubbing my face in it. Vermont... it wasn’t Vermont here. Oh, yeah, the Green mountains were still there, the upper end of Appalachian chain, but Lake Champlain was all fucked up; the Connecticut River went way out of its way, and there was a new lake in what should’ve been the north-eastern tip of the state.

Other states hadn't fared much better. Long Island was no longer an island. The Chesapeake Bay was twisted slightly to the west, as though the Potomac was entering in a different place. The Great Lakes had undergone more changes with Lake Erie seeming to have grown somewhat; Lake Huron lost some of its girth, turning into a long banana-shape. A lot of Chihirae's maps were poorly detailed, especially regarding areas like northern Canada and the far west and south. Either California didn't exist here, or it hadn't been properly explored. There were a few examples of places that could only be England and maybe parts of South America and Africa, but they read like medieval human maps, right down to the Rris equivalent of 'here be dragons' emblazoned across unmarked areas.

And Shyia told me about the people who inhabited these maps.

Lying Scales: The closest town to the village of Westwater and the seat of government for the local demesnes, lying about 50km to the northwest. 50km as the crow flies, probably a lot further than that by ground if the Rris roads were in the condition I suspected they were. There were other towns and cities marked on the maps, a lot of them on tributaries, lakes, others along lines delineating roads or trading routes or something.

"Lying Scales," Shyia extruded a claw to point out the town nestled at the southernmost tip of Lake Champlain. "Not one of the largest towns, but many roads lead there, also trade from [something] lake. You understand?"

"I did not understand the name of the lake."

"Ah." He repeated himself and explained the words I didn't know. Thief's

Lament: It sounded like there was a story behind it but it wasn't the time to ask. Names were a minor problem, especially translating them into English. That's something I don't often do now - I find I do a lot of my thinking in Rris - but back then it was something I couldn't help and certain names became somewhat unwieldy. 'You-Mangy-Bastard' is a small coastal town that reeks of fish; It doesn't translate exactly - because of their social structure, 'bastard' is a pretty meaningless phrase - but in Rris it's a sharp bark, useful as a mild insult. Something that doesn't seem to worry the occupants of You-Mangy-Bastard too much. There were other problems: the names I couldn't pronounce, the fact that he'd been immersed in this environment for his entire life and I was coming into it not only as ignorant as a new-born, but not even having the same mindset. Ideals and values I'd taken for granted back home changed here: their attitude to town planning, family values, color, pleasant weather, food, personal habits, recreation... the list goes on.

Still, this lesson with Shyia began to differ from the ones Chihirae had given me. Not so much geographical as political. I knew the Rris had a hierarchical government of some kind; The town mayor answered to a higher power and both Chihirae and Shyia worked for various branches of it, but I didn't actually know WHAT it was. This was what the Mediator was trying to lead me into, one step at a time.

There wasn't one government, there were a dozen. Different countries, subdivided into smaller city-states dividing up the continent I knew of as North America and the Rris called Mainland. Not too surprising, after all; our name for our planet is also our word for 'ground'. Poetic, huh?

Thri'te Ish: Land-of-Water. That was where I was. The territories along the northeast, delineated by a jagged southern border approximately where the New York-Pennsylvania would be back home, the northern border ranging up into the Northern Territories, what I'd known as Canada. To the south, Land-of-Water was bordered by Bluebetter: a long, narrow realm occupying the southern east coast down as far the Florida peninsula. Cover-My-Tail lay to the southwest,

encompassing the Appalachian chain. The majority lay to the west, landlocked countries, clustered around the Great Lakes, spreading across the plains to the Rockies: Overburdened, Nights-in-Wonder, Seas-of-Grass, Hunting-Well... all the others who's names are so familiar to me now I've visited so many of them in one role or another.

Land-of-Water, all of the lands, were monarchies. Land-of-Water's dynasty had ruled for generations, a line by the name of Chihiski. Hirht ah Chihiski was the current liege lord: a decent ruler from everything that Shyia told me, but I had a suspicion his opinion might be biased. The capital was based in the city of Shattered Water, situated about where Buffalo should have been on the north-eastern tip of Lake Erie. From there the town had access to the ports on Erie, Ontario, and through those, the waterways throughout the kingdom. Shyia showed me some maps and illustrations of Shattered Water and judging by those, it was several orders of magnitude larger than Westwater, but still not approaching the size of a place like Richmond.

Relations with neighboring kingdoms were generally amicable: cooperation, open trade flourished, especially around the Lakes where rivers and canals and the lakes themselves provided an excellent natural transportation network. According to Shyia, Land-of-Water had a substantial industrial base and was a land rich in minerals. Their major exports included ore and coal, with lumber and cattle coming a close second, importing grain and things I didn't understand.

That was where the problem started. Chihirae had kept her lessons basic, working with concepts I could understand: physical things, things I could see. My Rris had improved vastly, but it wasn't up to being force-fed a political manifesto. Shyia began outlining the relationships and alliances and what-not between the kingdoms and that was where I lost him. It was too vague, too far removed from anything I'd been able to cover. The political lesson bogged down into language and grammar lessons that frustrated me just as much as they did the Mediator.

We were still at it when Chihirae returned. Shyia's facial fur was ruffled where he'd rubbed at it in frustration. "You spend your life teaching?" he growled at her. "I would go mad."

She laid her books down on the desk beside my laptop. "It is something you learn to [something]," she smiled.

"I don't think I'll live long enough," he sighed. "Rot it all. Just as I think I'm [something], there is something else he doesn't know."

"I am sure you could do better," I growled.

"Mikah," Chihirae warned me and turned to the Mediator. "I don't think he's doing too badly for someone who has only learned to talk a few months ago."

The Mediator huffed, ruffled fingers through his mane. "True, but he's still hard to understand. What happened to his face hasn't helped."

She looked at me and I saw her ears tip back. I turned away and there was a pause before she coughed, then said, "Well, Mikah. Do you think you learned anything today?"

"That there is a lot I don't know."

She chuckled and lightly swiped the tip of the Mediator's tail. "You see: you

have taught him something.”

He snorted. “Don’t think I’m going to change my [something].”

Chihirae laughed at that then sat herself down on the edge of the bed to begin brushing away lumps of melting snow and ice matted into her leg fur. “I don’t think anyone’s going to be asking you to do that. Think about what you’re trying to do though. You’ve spent your life doing what you are trying to teach him, you can’t expect to [something] that into him in a few days.”

His face muscles twitched into some expression I didn’t recognise. “We have to.”

Chihirae stopped what she was doing. “‘Have to’? What do you mean.”

“I want to take Mikah out of here on the next caravan to Lying Scales.”

“That’s... ” Chihirae burst out, then looked at me with her ears down. “Why? Not so soon. He’s not ready for that.”

“I know.” His tail lashed as he perched himself on the edge of the desk, letting the limb thrash back and forth across the wood like an animate duster. “I don’t think it’s safe for him here. Those corpses out there were after him and I think there are more where they came from.” He hissed softly, then continued, “Mikah saw someone he was not supposed to, doing something they were not supposed to. They will try again and this time he probably won’t live. Maybe others will

get hurt also.”

“But he’s not... “Chihirae started, then looked at me with distress in her eyes. “You want to take him to Shattered Water?”

“Eventually, yes.”

“You know what will happen. You know what it will be like for him.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Mikah, but it is better than ending up like those things in the icehouse.”

That wasn’t a pretty picture. “Do I have any other choices?” I asked softly.

“No,” Shyia said.

“If I go away? Like I came here, if I just go away... out there somewhere,” I waved in the general direction of the window.

There was a silence and the Rris glanced at each other. “Mikah,” Chihirae coughed, “they would come after you. They would hunt you.”

I had suspected as much. I met the Mediator’s green eyes, “Would you try to

stop me?”

A moments consideration before he said, “No.”

Fear of me? or was there some feeling there? or was he just saying what I wanted to hear. Whatever it was, his tail was lashing like something with a life of its own. “But you aren’t going to try that, are you?” he said.

“It isn’t something I want to go through again,” I smiled weakly then tried to brush my hair back, feeling scars across my scalp. “Maybe this will be more fun, a?”

“Mikah,” the Mediator looked like he had something he wanted to say, then changed his mind. “Mikah... it won’t be easy.”

“You’re really great at inspiring confidence, you know that,” I sighed in English.

The Rris exchanged confused glances.

—v—

I couldn’t sleep that night. Too much to think about. Long after the Rris had turned in and the fire had died to embers I lay in darkness, staring up at nothing while the events of the day played through my thoughts; the possibilities of the

future as indistinct as the wooden ceiling not two metres above me.

There was a low cough in the darkness, a momentary rustle of fur on cloth from over where Chihirae was bedded down in my sleeping bag. I felt uncomfortable about that; I didn't mean to be such a difficult houseguest, forcing her out of her own bed.

"Can't sleep?"

I flinched at the quiet voice and looked over at Chihirae: pointless, there was only shadow. "No," I sighed, swallowed. My voice caught when I asked, "Chihirae? What will it be like?"

A pause, then again the rustle of cloth and I caught a glimpse of her surreal figure against the dim blueness spilling in through the window, a puff of her breath in the air, then the bed shifting as another weight settled. "Move over. It's cold out here."

I moved, not thinking, and warm fur and cold feet slipped under the covers: incredibly weird against my skin. A hand laid against my ribs and my skin flinched at the cold touch, "Don't worry so much."

"I'm sorry. It is just that... Chihirae?"

"Yes?"

“Have you ever heard of... mouth wash?”

“No. What is it? A drink?”

“Never mind,” I shook my head. “It is... hard not to worry. What you and Shyia tell me, it scares me. Will it be so bad?”

Her hand flexed - so slightly, but claws kissed against my skin. After a time she answered: “I can’t say for [something] what will happen. Understand: you are going to a place where many people will try to use you for their own purposes. Some will try to use you against others, some will try to make you do things you don’t want to.” She sighed then and harsh breath washed over me. “And there will be people who are afraid of what you are, what you represent, of the changes you might bring. There might be... accidents.”

I didn’t say anything, I understood.

“You need more time,” she murmured. “Sending you to the court is like sending a cub to judge a [something].”

“It can’t be so bad,” I forced a smile.

“I hope you’re right.” I couldn’t see her expression, but in the darkness her hand came up to touch my face, to gently touch the scars there. “You’ve already made someone angry. I don’t think that’s a good start.”

“But they won’t come back, will they? Why? I haven’t done anything.”

“They thought you had. It wasn’t an accident Mikah.”

“You are not helping.”

She almost laughed, a choked sound, “Mikah, this is the only way I can help you. You must understand: a lot of people won’t see you as another person. To them you will be an animal: maybe useful, maybe annoying, but to a lot of them you’ll be a [something].”

I shuddered, caught after her hand with my good one and laced my fingers around hers.

“Maybe they’ll learn,” she murmured.

“You did.”

“Ah,” she chuckled. “I did.”

“Am I so horrible?” I asked. “I don’t want to hurt anyone. I am not built for it like you are.” I squeezed her hand and felt claws extrude a little.

“I know.” I felt her shift again, fur rasp against my shoulder as she laid her head there. “But you have killed two Rris, Mikah. It isn’t something that’s going to go unnoticed.” She raised herself up then, to look down at me I suppose: all I could see were indistinct highlights on fur as she spoke. “Mikah, don’t let them upset you. Whatever happens, stay calm. If you hurt someone, accidentally or not, I don’t know what would happen.”

“I will remember.”

“Good,” she settled down again, hooked an arm across my chest and actually hugged me, wary of my broken arm. “I would hate for anything to happen to you.”

“You make my... what is to happen...” I touched the fur of her arm, stroked it sadly. “It does not sound like a life I will enjoy.”

“Don’t say that.” There was another hesitation and when she spoke again it was a low voice, gentle and unsure. “You...what you did with Shyia’s gun; you won’t try that again?”

How do you answer that? I’d never intended to do it; the pain, the fear and shock had just gotten too much. In a way it’d been someone else who’d raised that pistol, pulled the trigger. I didn’t know what the future held for me, I didn’t know if it would happen again.

“Mikah?”

“I... I don’t...” I took a deep breath, to calm down, and made a promise that I had no idea if I’d be able to keep. “No, I won’t.”

A rough tongue touched my cheek, felt like wet steel wool rasping against my beard. “I know you will do your best,” she murmured and licked me again. It tickled and confused me. “What is that? What does it mean?”

“It is a [something] of [something].”

“I don’t understand those words.”

“Sorry.” She laid her head down again and I felt her breath in my ear. “It’s to calm cubs. It shows... I am here, I am close, I care for you.”

I swallowed hard and rolled, trying to see her. “Chihirae, I... “

Oh, shit. Oh, Christ, I wanted to say it, I really did, but I didn’t know the words. Even if I had, even then , it would’ve sounded stupid. A foolish sentiment. I closed my eyes and just held her close.

—v—

It was another two days. Two days of waiting and tension and lesson upon lesson: names, places, customs and protocols, do’s and dont’s... information just piled on top of itself, too much to absorb. I did my best, recorded more on the

laptop to review when I had the chance. Even so, I've made enough faux pas in situations that we'd covered in those cram sessions, lessons I'd forgotten.

Shyia continued my education, sitting with me through the days while Chihirae took up the evening shift until long after the light was gone and the town down the valley asleep. At the end of the day I'd collapse into bed, my head still full of Rris and words and sounds and concepts.

There were dreams those nights, some good, others not so. The one I remember most vividly: lying on a table under shifting red lights while Rris with surgeons' masks gathered around, brandishing knives gleaming bloody, now we'll see how it works. The knives pricked my skin and I woke with Chihirae asleep against me, embracing me, her claws dimpling my skin.

I snuggled closer. A cold night. The last time I'd be sharing a bed for a long while.

—v—

“How are you doing?”

“I am fine.” I waved her help aside and kept on limping along the road, staggering through drifts that came up over my knees. Chihirae laid her ears back and looked dubious, but let me alone. On my other side the Mediator readjusted my fully-loaded and ill-fitting pack again and squinted into the morning sunlight at the surrounding hills. Was he expecting trouble? Had he seen something? He caught my questioning glance and just said, “Nothing. Don't worry.”

That morning was my last morning in Westwater. I'd already been packed when Shyia had arrived to say we'd be leaving. The foul weather we'd been having the past few days had broken up leaving aching clear skies and a stiff breeze that raised goosebumps on exposed skin. I huddled deeper into the collar of my much-abused jacket and kept limping toward the village.

Main Street of Westwater was busy for that time of the morning. There were wagons parked there, two of them, with bison in the traces ruminating and steaming in the crisp air. Even as we made our slow way along the snowbound road I could see Rris, hear their shouting on the wind. They were everywhere: bustling around, shouting and waving arms as they finishing loading and securing cargoes in the back of the wagons, bundles of furs, boxes and barrels being tied in place. Of course when they saw us more and more eyes turned our way. Some stopped what they were doing to stare openly, others just waved or shouted a greeting and returned to work.

My boots sunk into a mulch of mud and ice churned by iron-rimmed wheels as Shyia led us to the lead wagon. Difficult keeping my balance with one arm in a sling. A burly Rris - I couldn't tell if it was male or female - was snarling as it struggled to hook up a final loop of rope securing a canvass covering the cargo. "Hesya?" Shyia asked.

"What?" the other snarled in irritation and gave a triumphant 'Hah!' as the rope slipped over the hitch on the rail and turned to Shyia, dusting hands. "Who... Ah, you're back. I ...what the rot is that?"

Shyia looked at what the Rris was gaping at: me. "Ah, I did say there's another passenger."

“That?!” The Rris looked me up and down. Behind, I could see a small audience of townsfolk watching the display with some amusement. “By my mother’s [something]. What is it?”

“His name is Mikah, or something like.” The Mediator reached up to pat my shoulder. “He won’t hurt you.”

“I do not bite,” I volunteered.

The Rris jerked back and banged into the wagon. “Rot me! It spoke!”

“He does that sometimes,” some wag in the audience called out and there was laughter. The butt of their amusement looked around with ears back, obviously confused. Shyia’s own ears flicked before he turned to wave the watching Rris away. Some returned to work, others just retreated to the stoops along the sides of the street where they settled to watch from a distance. The Mediator ignored them.

“What is this thing?” the other Rris was asking again.

“Just a passenger,” Shyia said. “You’ll be ready to leave on time?”

“I... uh... yes,” the Rris couldn’t keep its eyes off me.

“Good,” the Mediator swung my pack down and looked at the wagons.

“Where can this go?”

“Uh ... there,” the other waved vaguely toward the other wagon, transfixed by the sight of me.

“Come on then,” Shyia snarled. “I have some cargo to be packed away.”

The wagon driver blinked, licked his lips, then hurried off in the Mediator’s footsteps.

“Get used to it,” Chihirae murmured.

“Won’t be easy,” I replied and looked down at her. She was watching me closely, like I might go off on a rampage. “Do I look so dangerous?”

She ducked her head. “Sorry. I wasn’t sure how you would... It was someone who didn’t know you. I didn’t know what you would do.”

“I was all right?”

She smiled then and reached up; her fingertips patted my face, “You were fine. I smiled also, caught her hand and held it, exploring the contours, the muscles and bones with my fingers. “Oh, Christ. Chihirae, I’m going to miss you.”

Wrinkles marched up her muzzle as she fleered her lips back; a human-type smile. “It will be too quiet around here with you gone. I hope we can meet again.”

I looked down at our hands, her tawny, stubby fingers lacing between my longer sparsely-haired ones. “I... I have this for you.” She stared when I produced the papers. “For everything you’ve done for me; It isn’t much... I am sorry.”

She unfolded one: a picture of her at her desk, glasses in one hand, an almost-human smile on her face. One of my Rotring ballpoints rolled out into her hand and she looked startled, “Mikah, I can’t... “

“Sure you can. I’m sorry it’s not much... After all you’ve done,” I trailed off and shrugged apologetically.

A Rris smile spread across her own features, “Mikah, it is nothing to be sorry about. Thank you.”

I shrugged awkwardly. “I... there is something else.”

“Hnn?” Her ears pricked up.

The Mediator was out of sight, out of earshot, nevertheless I lowered my voice. “Back at the house, in a cupboard, I left papers. Writings. They are...

important. Please, look after them.”

She looked confused. “What? What do you mean?”

“If I... if something happens to me they will help you. I... “I shook my head. “They can help you learn my language.”

Her jaw sagged. “I don’t understand,” she said.

“It is for you, for Rris. If something happens to me they will be in a safe place.”

“But you’re going to talk to others. They will want to learn how to read the stuff on your machine, learn your language. You can teach them. “

“I...I’m not sure how much I want to tell them.” I hung my head, realising how that must sound. “I just think maybe it would be best if there were... if there were copies in a safe place. In case something happened. Anyway, you wanted to learn my language, didn’t you?”

“All right. I will look after them. Don’t worry.” She smiled then, “Ah, there’s a few others come to see you off.”

I looked: a small group of cubs, a half-dozen or so, scampering over and drawing up short, as if suddenly struck shy. Shyia beckoned and they came

closer. I knew them: Chine, Ithi'tsa, and Feher. "You're going now?" that one asked.

"It looks like it," I smiled and crouched to bring myself to his level. "I would like to stay longer, but... " I trailed off and just shrugged.

"It'll be boring without you," he said and came closer, reaching to touch my face. I suffered his finger stroking the skin of my cheek. "Do you have to go?"

"I think I do," I said. "The Mediator wants me to meet some people."

"Red tie it," he 'pouted', his tail lashing.

"Why can't he stay longer?" another cub demanded of Chihirae.

"It's not safe for him," she explained. "Those people tried to hurt him, they might come back."

"But Mikah killed them!" Chine piped up, taking a bloodthirsty delight in the fact and Chihirae gave me a sidelong look before trying to explain that there might be more. They seemed convinced that I could take on anything. My months of convalescence seemed to have slipped their minds.

"Are you coming back?" Feher eventually asked.

“I don’t know. I hope I can,” I said, meaning every word.

“They don’t let you out either?” the cub grinned at me with tiny teeth. In the background I could see adult Rris watching; trusting me enough to let their cubs get this close, but still...

“No,” I told Feher, “not often. I think I will miss you also.”

He laughed then, then one of the others poked him with a claw and muttered something. He hissed back and Ithi’tsa stepped up to prudly present me with a small package. “We made these. A travelling gift.”

“I thank you,” I accepted the package made from scraps of leather. Inside was a pair of gloves: neatly tanned tan-colored deerhide, rough stitching, and they fit and they were warm. I flexed my fingers and grinned, “These are perfect. How did you know?”

“Saw it on your box,” Feher exclaimed, obviously proud of himself.

I smiled and thanked them again and they preened in the praise, laughing and joking, throwing Rris puns around in word games I still didn’t really understand. That was the enjoyable part of the farewell, a time I remember fondly. It was the part an hour or so later that was so much more difficult.

When I said my final goodbyes to Chihirae.

“I have never liked goodbyes.”

She ducked her head. “Me neither. It will be... quiet around here without you.” She smiled wanly, then offered her hand. I looked at it, at her face solemnly waiting. She’d most likely seen the gesture on the laptop and I hesitated for a heartbeat before taking her hand in mine, feeling the fur and muscles and bones. For a second we stayed like that, then in front of all those Rris who were watching us I hugged her close, ignoring the protests from my broken arm, lowering my head to the wiry fur of her head, tufts on her ears tickling me. “Oh, Christ! I’m going to miss you.”

She stood there at a loss, tense and uncertain, then she sighed and her arms were around me her head nuzzling my chest. I heard Rris exclamations at this display but I really didn’t care what they thought. My friend, and christ only knew when or if I’d ever see her again. It was hard to let go.

—v—

“You’re going to miss her, aren’t you.”

I pulled my coat a little closer and looked up at the Mediator. There wasn’t much spare room in the wagon, just a none-too wide space cleared for us in the back where we sat facing each other, my feet not too far from touching the opposite side. “Is it so easy to tell?”

He cocked his head. Damn, didn’t he have a sense of humour? “With that

display back there I think anyone could tell. You know that could be dangerous. If someone wanted to get to you they could use... “

“Fuck that. Enough with your games for a while. I just wanted to say goodbye.”

He huffed, fur bristling. “Games? Is that what you think this is?” Then he coughed and looked away from me.

I hadn’t meant it like that. For a second I considered saying something , changed my mind and settled back. The wagon wasn’t comfortable. It’d never been designed for passengers, human or otherwise. No seats and no shocks, we had some canvasses bundled up as makeshift cushions, but besides that there was nothing between my butt and the boards.

We’d headed north, up the valley, away from the town, following the stream. I remembered looking back at that final turn before Westwater passed out of sight to see that familiar figure standing, a hand raised and fell in a final wave. Someone who’d come to mean so much to me, into my life, then out of it. Goodbye I whispered as the town was lost around the corner.

It was white out there, a white world of ice and snow and trees bowed low under their burdens. Surprisingly, the forest wasn’t as dense as it’d been back home. The trees were huge and old and widely spaced, the undergrowth not as heavy as it’d been in the parks I’d known. Puzzling; the Ris couldn’t have accomplished nearly the amount of deforestation and replanting we had. The hills were green and white, natural patterns, none of the firebreaks and man-made scars I remembered. The wind that came off those mountains was as cold as the snow. Midday brought sunlight but little warmth, instead there was a white glare that - after my time in that dimness of the cabin - had me reaching for my

Oakleys. It was the first time Shyia had seen them and he stared openly, “What are those for?”

“They are... They make seeing more... easier comfortable in much light.”

He hissed. “Too dark, too light. How can you see at all?”

“We manage,” I grinned.

His ears went back a little. “You’re going to have to stop doing that. Especially with those things on.”

Stung, my humor deflated. “Sorry,” I said and as he watched wondered - not for the first or last time - if I wouldn’t be better just running.

—v—

I don’t know how they could call it a road. I guess in warmer times it was a pair of rutted lines through the countryside but at that time it was buried under a deceptively smooth-looking layer of snow that did a damn good of hiding the worst of the pot-holes. No bridges either: the times we had to cross a stream or small river it was by ford.

As the sun sank the temperature plummeted right along with it. So it was late and freezing when the pair of wagons drew up to stop for the night, the only

light was the cold blue wash from the moon and stars that polarised the snowscape into a crosshatching of light and dark. Judging by the fire-pit and small supply of wood stashed away that place was a regular stop for them. The Rris set about unhitching the bison, getting the fire started and breaking out food. I broke into my pack and pulled out another sweater and even with that under my jacket it was cold. At least the wind had died.

Later:

We sat around a small fire while a thread of smoke climbed to dissapate into a sky dusted with the pinpoints of stars and the spill of the milky way. I still find it soothing to look at that, to know something in my life was staying constant. The Rris had their near-raw meat, mine was shis-kebeb: well done with meat, potato and citrus on the skewer. Sounds weird but it sure tasted alright. I chewed slowly, my jaw aching as the cold got into the scars.

‘What happened to you?’

I squinted across the fire at the Rris who’d spoken. One of the wagondrivers. The first time one of them had spoken to me. “Happened to me?”

“Your face,” he pointed. “Those marks... Or is that normal?”

I touched the scars. “Oh. Trouble with a bandit.”

“What happened to them?”

Shyia coughed, drawing attention his way. “They were taken care of,” he said softly and I saw the other’s ears draw back as they stared at me. A sure way to kill a conversation I thought as I returned to my meal. Until one of the drivers startled me by venturing, “Where do you come from?”

“A place... a place where there are a lot like me.”

“Near here?” the other - Hesya - asked.

“No. It’s... It’s a very long way away. I don’t know just where.”

The Rris tipped his head, in a gesture or just because he had a kink in his neck, I wasn’t sure. “Then how did you get to Westwater?”

“An accident, I think. I don’t know. I didn’t have any choices.”

“So how are you going to go back?”

That hit close. I glanced at Shyia and he looked away. “I don’t know,” I finally said. “I... don’t think I can.”

The pair exchanged looks before one asked Shyia, “Are you taking it to Shattered Water?”

“I don’t think you need to know,” the Mediator replied.

The other looked annoyed, then shrugged and looked at me again, “What are you anyway?”

“A human.”

“H’an,” he tried the word, laughed along with his companion. “Why is that so hard to say? H’an. Are you male or female?”

I blinked at that, somewhat taken aback. Still, I have the same problem with Rris. “Male.”

“Wouldn’t know it to look at you.” He smiled and tore another mouthful of meat. “How did you learn to talk?”

“I had a teacher.”

“Teacher? Oh, that one. She comes here every winter.”

“Nice female,” the other agreed. “Very nice.” Then flashed his companion a peculiar expression, with his jaw dropped and tongue lolling. A leer? or perhaps they were just commenting on her pleasant personality.

Yeah. Sure.

“That explains your [something].”

“My what?” I asked. “I don’t know that word, c’rocth.”

“They mean the way you speak, the way your words sound,” Shyia told me.

“Right,” one of the wagoneers said. “You sound like someone highborn.”

His friend waved a hand and said, “From you it’s like a bison wearing pants.” There was laughter from all three Rris, Shyia included. I shrugged.

No beds that night. The Rris drivers settled their bedrolls on top of their cargo; not very comfortable, but better than the ground. I used the last of the firelight to pitch my tent. The Rris made surprised noises and sat up to pay attention when I gave the bag a practiced flick of my wrist and the small igloo popped into shape. It was a couple of minutes work to stake it out in a rock-free patch of ground and make sure the poles’ joints were locked.

Shyia cocked his head and said, “Useful.”

“Ai! Where can you get something like that?” one of the teamsters called.

“A long way from here,” Shyia retorted.

At a pinch it could take two people; human-sized people. With a smaller Ris, there was a bit more room. Shyia lay back on his bedroll with just a light blanket and his fur. While I wormed myself one-handed into my own bag he reached a furred hand up to touch the Thermstal fabric, poked the tent with a claw and snorted.

“Something you don’t like?” I asked.

“You need another wash,” he said. “You smell like sweating hands.”

I just looked at him. For someone who’s sodden fur had an almost-unbearable wet-dog reek, he was a fine one to talk.

And he didn’t even seem to notice, just lay back and stared at the roof. “You enjoy sleeping in these things? So flimsy, like climbing into a trap.”

“You would rather sleep in the snow?” I hinted.

He lolled his head around to fix me with a glittering stare, then snorted and rolled over.

Three days travel. Two nights of lying and staring at the roof and worrying before drifting into a restless sleep. It was the second day that the track we were on linked with another, then another, with wheel marks showing there'd been other traffic using it recently. There were other signs of civilization: stone and wood bridges over a couple of the rivers, once something I was told was a signal tower: a few huts around a small stone tower at a crossroads. A couple of Rris wearing what looked like brass breastplates and quilted leggings leaned on the tower railings and watched us pass. Soldiers? Further on a much larger river had to be ferried. A barge more than large enough for the pair of wagons nestled at the end of a short stone pier. The ferryman was watching from the stoop of a nearby clapboard house as we rolled up. A short, stocky Rris of indeterminate gender - a male I think - who dutifully argued fares with the wagondrivers, glared at Shyia, pulled a knife when it found I wasn't on a leash.

After he'd been calmed and disarmed it was another quarter-hour to load the wagons and draught animals and secure them. There was a rope as thick as my arm strung across the river, running through a heavy pulley on the barge. The ferryman just angled a rudderlike thing against the current and the barge began scooting crabwise across the river. Neat trick.

A peaceful crossing. I spent it leaning against a railing and watching scabs of ice floating downstream, shattering and spinning away when they struck the sides of the ferry. The ferryman spent too much time watching me instead of the river. We grounded on the far bank with a crunch of ice and a jolt that had the teamsters shouting at the ferryman as they calmed their animals. Shyia led me ashore where we waited on the icy jetty while they sorted everything out and that night I had dreams where my old life and acquaintances and friends mixed and mingled with Rris in a tangled morass that prevented me getting much sleep.

The third morning we left the hills behind us. We crested the last rolling

hilltop to look down on a rolling winter landscape, the Adirondack Mountains in the distance, the glittering of ice on Lake Champlain - Thief's Lament was their name - stretching away to the north. Civilization there, more than the few odd buildings of the previous days. Farmland, swathes cut from the forest across the breadth of the valley, kilometers of cleared land subdivided into smaller parcels, onion-rings radiating out from the sprawl of the town of Lying Scales at the southern tip of Thief's Lament lake. Our small caravan dipped down into the valley, following wider roads passing between snowdrifted hedgerows and rickety-looking wooden fences, passing outlying farms where Rris went about their business, spreading feed for the livestock, cutting timber and firewood. Sometimes workers saw me and stopped what they were doing to just stare.

Closer to and the buildings were more elaborate, richer estates. Mills and granaries. A bunch of buildings with smokestacks and piles of coal outside, belching smoke. I could hear machinery of some kind chugging away inside. Another place gave vent to the most unholy reek; Shyia told me it was a tannery. Shit, and I'd thought modern factories were a health hazard.

There was more traffic on the road. A lot of sleighs, fewer wagons. We were passed several times by Rris mounted on - of all things - Llama: long-legged things with distinctly more bulk than the things I'd seen in the zoo back home. Couriers and messengers Shyia told me, carrying news between the towns. Foot traffic outnumbered all the other, with Rris - groups and individuals of all ages - bearing burdens of all manner and description, even drawing sleds of various types. Most of them were wearing coats of some kind or another, leather leggings, snow clinging to their fur and ice around their whiskers. Once a rider on llamaback drew alongside the lead wagon and chatted with the driver for a time, casting curious glances my way before leaving us behind.

"You're all right?"

I looked across at Shyia who was watching me closely. "Yeah," I nodded,

trying to get my breathing under control. “I am fine.”

He cocked his head. “You’re nervous. You smell it, rot me; you look it.”

“I will manage.”

He turned to look ahead and I saw his ears lay back for a second. “Just be careful. Don’t frighten anyone. Try not to make a [scene].”

“Perhaps it would help if I wore a bag over my head?”

He looked thoughtful, “That might... “

“Don’t even think about it,” I warned and he grinned.

The town proper was fortified. A sawtooth pattern of earthworks encircled the center of the town: a broad, shallow ditch the fallen snow turned into a gently sloping white field overlooked by a earthen rampart topped with masonry constructions that looked a hell of a lot like bunkers. There were canon up there, some big, serious-looking things with bores I could poke my arm into alongside smaller ones mounted on swivels, also armored sentries carrying a variety of weapons from muskets to polearms. The road crossed a causeway across the ditch and zigzagged through a gap where the two ramparts overlapped. There was a gatehouse there, with guards in those quilted leather leggings and breastplates who saw me and got interested enough to pull us over.

Shyia stepped down to meet them, producing a scrap of paper and exchanging words. They ducked their heads and withdrew, waving us on through.

A mixture of packed earth and cobbled streets covered with trampled snow, animal droppings, and frozen mud. Boxy looking buildings half-buried under drifts, a lot different from the ones in Westwater. Blocks were occupied by large, high-gabled stone and wood buildings with surprisingly few high-set narrow windows, brightly painted shutters and trim playing sardines in the confines of the town wall. There weren't many exterior doors; most buildings had single large entryways, like dark halls. As we passed I could see doors in those halls, sometimes stairways. I thought they looked like quite unpleasant places to live, but then I didn't know much about Rris architecture.

A central boulevard took a direct north-south route through the heart of the town, smaller roads curving off to either side while things that might have been fountains in the summer now spouted only icicles. Rris, everywhere I looked, Rris. A dazzling swirl of bodies and color in the snow. Fur: browns and fawns and grays and speckled and striped, some with dyes or paints adding greens or red or other colors, some with shaven patterns on cheeks or arms. A couple of shocking-white Rris wearing nothing but belt pouches in the freezing air were almost lost against a snow drift. Even in this weather there were stalls with Rris shouting at the passerbys, shops with gaudily colored awnings and wares displayed on racks or trays or behind glass so thick and distorted that it was difficult to make out just what was being advertised. Rris sweeping streets, repairing roofs, driving or pushing carts. The noise was everywhere, the catfight of Rris talking, shouting, the cacophony of animals and wheels rattling on cobblestones. I knew Rris, I'd lived with Rris, but this... it was giddy, confusing.

I closed my eyes, opened them and it was still real as the wagons rattled their way along that snow-covered boulevard in a town in a world that wasn't mine. The skeletons of trees lined the avenue. Probably glorious in the spring, their cloaks of snow and ice crystals gave them their own chill beauty. Cubs playing

in the snow: an impromptu snowball fight that had small bodies tumbling and scattering ice. An adolescent pulling a younger sibling on a sled that looked just like the ones my friends and I had played with in our childhoods. The Rris who saw me and pointed and stared and I wondered if this had been such a good idea. Maybe I should've tried to find my own way...

A train of thought that was derailed when Shyia had the driver stop at the next intersection and helped me out, hauled out my pack and his small duffel and then we were standing calf-deep in snow in the middle of a Rris town while the wagons rumbled on without us. Shyia slung the weight of my pack, did his best to settle straps that had never been intended for his frame, looked around at the Rris staring at us, then touched my arm, "Come on. This way."

Down a sidestreet lost under fresh-fallen snow. I followed his stalking gait that left a trail of alien footprints in the whiteness while from between coat tails his own tail lashed. Rris would cross the street to avoid us then stand and stare. And there were colors on the buildings: murals and maybe graffiti, paintings of Rris and animals and trees between the windows. Winter-bare trees here also, everything spaced out far more than they would be in a human town of a comparable period. Cubs following us and shouting questions and Rris came out of houses to watch, houses with funny-shaped doors and paths cleared through the drifts, with smoke spilling from chimneys.

There was another wall further on. A big one; the old curtain wall Shyia told me. Three stories high - higher than most buildings in town - with crenellated ramparts and age-worn stones. The tunnel through a gatehouse was dark and ice cold and something skittered across the road in front of us while Shyia's claws clicked on rock and the softsoles of my boots were almost soundless. It was a relief to get through and into the winter sunlight again.

"Shyia? Ai! Shyia!" a voice called. Another Rris was hailing him from the door of a shop across the way. It trotted across the street kicking snow flying, the

same kind of coat that Shyia wore flapping around it's legs, a steaming half-eaten pastry in its hand. "Good to see you back. Rot me you've been away a while! Now what in the name of my [somethings] swollen [testicles?] is that thing?"

"Good to be back," Shyia sighed. "Long story. Remember that Westwater affair?"

"That did it?"

"No. Not him. Look, this thing, it's sprouted heads. King's business now."

The other blinked at me with particolored eyes - left one amber, the other a darker almost brownish tint - disconcerting, looked me up and down like it might study a slightly-foaming Pitbull-Ridgeback cross, then took a bite from the pastry. "That bad? For that? Shave me but it's ugly."

I gave Shyia an exasperated look. "Do you want to tell him or shall I?"

Worth it to see the other sputter pastry. "It talks?"

"Aye." Shyia looked at me. "He talks. His name is Mikah and he's got a peculiar sense of humor. Mikah, this is Escheri and 'he' is a she."

"Oh. Sorry."

The other Mediator looked from him to me in drop-jawed astonishment, then brandished her pastry and demanded, “Shyia, you red-tied [something]! Where did this come from? What is it?”

He laid his ears back and nodded his jaw toward the few Rris who’d stopped to rubberneck. “Not here. There’s already been trouble so I want to get him back to the [something] before we left. Tell you on the way. Can you carry my bag?” He handed over his duffel and nodded at me, “Come on, Mikah.”

And as we walked they talked. Shyia related snippets of what had occurred at Westwater and in return Escheri filled him in on what had been going on in town: a merchant killed, thefts, something being built, a lot of things I didn’t understand. I tried to keep track of their conversation and what was going on around me and avoid slipping on the icy cobbles as I listened. Shyia was more open with this other Rris than I’d ever seen him. Old friends, they had to be.

And in those streets, away from the boulevard, I saw the lower side of their society: the legless cripple huddled in a dirty alley with ribs poking through its fur and an empty bowl buried in the snow in front of it; the other beggars in scraps of clothing against the cold, the Rris who kept their distance and watched the Mediators with more attention than they did me. It wasn’t a utopia. I watched another Rris stare at me and hastily duck away and Escheri asked, “Have you seen a town before?”

I blinked at her and gave a small smile: she flinched. “Not like this. No.”

She turned to Shyia. “That thing he did with his mouth... “

“That’s how he smiles.”

“Oh.” She stared at me again. “What do you think of Scales?”

I opened my mouth, closed it and looked around at the buildings: narrow windows, some with glass others with closed shutters. A Rris ducked its head and hurried on its way. Like something out of a drug trip, I wanted to say, instead said, “It is... different.”

Shyia strangled a laugh, then answered Escheri’s quizzical look with, “He knows towns but I can imagine this is different from what he is familiar with.”

“Where are we going?” I asked him.

“The [something],” he said.

“I don’t know that word,” I did my best to repeat the sound.

“No,” he corrected my pronunciation. “The Mediator Guild house. There,” he pointed.

A brick wall. A HIGH brick wall with a gatehouse and armed sentries. The guards reacted uncertainly, obviously familiar with the Mediators but confused

as to just what the fuck I was. “Sir? What the [something] is that?” one asked Shyia.

“Not your concern,” he said, then looked at me and added. “You see anything or anyone out of the ordinary around here, you report it. Any windblown talk about something like this,” he gestured to me, “you report it. Got that?”

“Uh, yessir,” the guard shifted his weight, moving his halberd back to rest. I eyed it uneasily: the damn thing was twice the height he was, with a nasty assortment of cutting, slashing and stabbing blades at the business end. “Ginsu?” I asked and Shyia caught my arm to yank me along through the gates.

There was a courtyard inside the walls with buildings on all sides: brick stables off to my left, the sounds of animals coming from inside and equipment hanging from the walls. The other sides were the Guild house. Big. Stone and brick and whitewashed plaster and exposed timbers and tiled roofs swept free of snow. The main body was three floors counting the attic rooms; the wings and various extensions not higher than two. All the windows I could see were narrow and glazed, a lot of them barred. There were Rris in that courtyard, some just wearing drab, functional clothing, working at clearing a path through snow, hauling a wheelbarrow, other menial work. Others were decked out in more expensive-looking garb: another pair hunched down into the same kind of long coat as Shyia and Escheri, others with quilted vests and pants, all with pistols and accessories slung at the hip. Mediators. And more and more of them were taking an interest in me. I heard questioning murmurs rising behind us as Shyia hustled me through to the main doors, which opened onto a tunnel similar to the one under the old gatehouse save this one was clean and finished in white marble with lanterns glowing along the vaulted ceiling. It opened into a garden.

It was an atrium; a wide, cloistered area open to the sky above. There was a garden here, a small place with grass and ornamental shrubs. Above the cloister were balconies with carved railings, ornate columns climbing to the roof, glazed

windows larger than the ones on the outer walls. Inside out. Were all the buildings in the town like this? The garden in the atrium had felt the bite of winter: bushes were bare, grass was dusted with snow, but there were evergreens that kept their color. A peculiarly bent Rris was clearing debris, turned a gray-furred face to watch us. Old I realised, staring with fascination. The old gardener made an incoherent sound, dropped the basket and fled, doddering on those peculiar Rris ankle joints. I stared after the clattering of claws on stone, the slamming of a door, not sure what to feel or do.

The Mediators were both watching me. Finally Escheri flicked her ears, “He always has been a little... nervous.”

“Enough,” Shyia admonished her and again told me, “Come along.”

More Rris were appearing along balconies above. I could hear questions and comments drifting down. Shyia led the way out of the atrium, through doors plated with engraved metal into another corridor, this one paneled with wood, a whitewashed plaster vault curving overhead, the complex, orange-tinted lamps hanging there glowed with the hiss and slight flicker of gas. Our feet tracked melting snow and sludge across the floor, Rris footprints and my boots; up a staircase with a spectacular stained-glass window above the landing into another corridor like the one below, this one with solid black doors along the left side of its length, another heavier pair at the far end with another set of waiting guards who hastened to open the doors for us. Another hallway similar to the others, this with patches of color where pictures hung on the wall. I hesitated at a painting of a bridge across a garden pool with glimpses of fish below the surface. The colors were odd: broad jumps in the graduations, lack of subtle tones in the shading, and there was something funny about the perspective and POV, but it wasn't a bad picture, better than the prints I've seen filling a blank space in a lot of offices. I didn't have a lot of time to study the thing before Shyia caught my arm again to hustle me along to a door. “I want some guards on him,” he told Escheri as he opened it.

“What’s so important?”

“Shyia,” I asked. “What is going on?”

“Later,” he told me. “In.”

I stepped into the room and got first impressions of small and white.

“Wait here,” Shyia was telling me. “Just, stay here. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“How long...” I started to say as I turned to find myself talking to a closed door. There was no latch on my side. “Hey!” I yelled at the voices I could hear outside and pounded on the black wood: almost broke my hand and there was no reply as the voices faded away. “Hey,” I said, to myself.

It was a spartan whitewashed room. There was a low-woodframe bed with white sheets and a small table with a stool and a candle in its holder. Sunlight streamed in through a slit of a window high up in the far wall, my breath visible in the light. Nothing else: an antiseptic little vestibule, not quite a cell. I touched my broken arm and sat down on the bed to wait. It’d been a long day with too many new things that I was still trying to assimilate. It was a long wait.

I woke with a jerk, my heart still racing, blinking at a plaster ceiling illuminated with a flickering orange light. Shit. I licked my lips. I'd dozed off, still fully dressed, but something had woken... there was a Rris standing there with a lantern, staring at me squinting into the light. Finally it said, "I brought you food," and pointed to a tray on the table.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. "Thank you." I glanced at my watch: about six hours. The Rris was still there, watching me curiously. No shock there, just watching. "Do I know you?"

A slight wrinkling of the muzzle. "We met earlier."

I tried to remember the name. "Eseri?"

"Escheri," she corrected my pronunciation. "A. You didn't remember?"

"I'm sorry. I have trouble telling Rris apart." I looked at the dishes: covered by small woven baskets but the aroma seeping through set my mouth watering. I lifted one.

"Shyia said you liked your meat overcooked," she volunteered. "You have some time to eat that, then the commissioner wants to meet you."

I looked at my watch: 23:47. "Now?"

She looked me up and down. “They seem to think you’re important enough. Hurry up and eat that.”

And they’d got it right: Cooked meat, gravy, and a heavy, warm bread with a mug of water. My stomach growled eagerly. I took up the Rris fork and ate while the female Mediator leaned against the wall and watched me intently. When I’d finished she was still staring. “Thank you,” I told her.

She cocked her head, her ears twitching. “That was all right for you?”

“Very good. Thank you.”

She smiled then, that pursing of her face. “Good. Now, please come with me.”

I did. There were a pair of guards outside the door and they were staring at me like they hadn’t known exactly what they were supposed to be guarding. With their ears still back the pair fell in a few steps behind us. Escheri led the way back along the hall, through more doors and around one of the balconies in the atrium; I could see stars above the rooftops, my breath frosting in the chill air. The opposite wing was warmer, furnished differently with more paintings and lamps casting their eerie orange-tinted light. A loud bang made me jump violently and stare at the Rris who’d just come out of his room and slammed the door. Escheri in turn had flinched and was staring at me with her ears plastered flat against her mane, the guards standing back with swords half drawn. I just froze, afraid to move and for a second that tableau held, until she shook her head and glanced at the interloper who ducked his head and scurried off, then she turned back to me, “Just a door. Nothing to worry about.”

I looked at my hand: I was shaking. I clenched my fist, trying to keep control.
“Sorry.”

“Nervous?”

“How did you guess?” I asked.

She touched my arm then; just a tap to get me moving again.

The commissioner’s office was situated in the corner of the building. Escheri scratched at the door, then opened it and ushered me in. I stepped inside and hesitated, taking stock: a simple room, plain white-plaster walls with a couple of small black and white portraits hung up, some shelves with a couple of books and other curious trinkets, a potbellied stove shedding heat from a corner. Across the room red drapes were drawn and in front of them squatted a low desk, set low to the ground like a table in a traditional Japanese tea room. My laptop was sitting there alongside a weird-looking lamp and other items of mine: toiletries, clothing, flashlight, medical kit, compass on top of my opened map, my notebook, all strewn across the desktop.

Shyia was there, watching me from an ornately tooled leather beanbag-type cushion, a similar unoccupied cushion beside him. The other occupant of the room was a dark-pelted Rris just as bulky as the Mediator with streaks of gray through its mane watching me from his seat on the far side of the desk. ‘He’, I was fairly certain. Amber eyes looked me up and down, then he grunted and said, “Thank you,” to Escheri. She ducked her head and closed the door behind her. The Rris - the Commissioner - studied me again, “Mikah, that is your name?” Deep voice, the gutturals of the Rris tongue like growls.

“Yes sir,” I nodded.

He was expecting it, but I still caught the flinch; a dilation of the pupils and nostrils, the ears jerking. He scratched a clawed hand through his cheek fur and gestured at the second cushion, “Please, sit.”

I did so. He watched as I moved, as I lowered myself into the Rris-designed cushion. It was leather, felt like it was stuffed with...what? Tiny beads? Maybe real beans. “How well can you understand me?” he asked.

“I do not know some words. Stay simple and I won’t have too much trouble.”

“Huh,” he breathed and glanced at Shyia, then reached out to touch the laptop’s keyboard. “This is yours.”

“Yes sir.”

He sighed and said to Shyia, “Shave me. Shyia, you do find a way to present me with interesting puzzles.” He looked at me again: “Why don’t you tell me your story. Why are you here?”

With the time that Shyia had been in there he’d had plenty of time to relate my story. The Commissioner probably wanted to hear it from the horse’s mouth and see how it corroborated with the Mediator’s. I took a second to gather my thoughts. “I was taking some time away from my job...”

“A job?” The Commissioner glanced at Shyia: something he’d neglected to mention? Sheesh, if that went on we’d be there all night. “What did you do?”

“I was a... an artist of sorts,” that was as close as I could come to commercial graphic designer with my fingerhold on their language.

“Ah,” he cocked his head at that but didn’t ask me to elaborate. “Go on.”

“I... I was taking some time away from work, coming up north to rest...”

I told my story again and for the most part they listened. When my voice began to falter from the strain of speaking Rris for such a prolonged period they gave me a glass of water and some time to rest. Five minutes maybe, then I was talking again. How long did it take? With the questions the Commissioner asked, maybe two hours. When my watch read 02:16; my throat was aching. I started to raise my glass and found it empty.

“You make yourself difficult to believe,” the commissioner told me. “If it wasn’t for your equipment I think I would be [something] to trust you.”

“I tell you the truth.”

“A. You sound bad. More water?”

“Please.”

Ice water. It helped. I sipped while the commissioner watched me. “You really don’t remember anything about the Rris you saw in the barn?” he asked.

“No sir. They looked... they looked like Rris.” I shrugged, it was all I could say.

“What kind of Rris? Male? Female? Young, old... If you saw them again, would you recognise them?”

Shit. I’d been through this with Shyia. “I don’t know. I’m sorry, but I just can’t say.” Hell, I didn’t even know for sure that the commissioner WAS male. At least he hadn’t corrected my use of the masculine honorific.

The commissioner glanced at Shyia who tipped his head, maybe a gesture like I told you so, then he settled back in his cushion and clicked his claws together. “You ARE going to give some people real problems.”

“So I’ve been told.”

He chuckled at that. “We will talk more tomorrow. I am interested in seeing what this,” he indicated the laptop, “can do. Shyia, see him back to his room. Anything he needs.”

“Sir,” Shyia ducked his head and gestured for me to follow him out. The guards waiting in the corridor fell in behind us. The Mediator looked me up and

down: “How are you doing? You seem a bit shaky.”

“I’ll live,” I touched my broken arm in its sling. “It’s been a long day. Tired.”

“A,” he ducked his head, “Do you want anything?”

I touched my coat, my beard. “A bath? Clean clothes? Shaving?”

He snorted and scratched at his chin, “The first two are a no problem; good idea. That last: we’ll see.” At my door he stopped. “Get some more rest, a? I will call for you in the light.”

The door closed behind me: heavy wood, no way to open it from this side. Once again I laid myself down on the soft bed, just taking time to kick my boots off before sleeping.

—v—

The water was deliciously warm, enveloping and soothing. I sank down into the copper tub, luxuriating in the first real bath I’d had in months.

It was light outside. They’d let me sleep late before Escheri came with my wakeup call, a breakfast, then taking me to their version of a bathroom: a small room lined with glazed brown and azure tiles, a drain in the floor, a baroque-ornate brass faucet and sink, a small table, a stove with pots of water simmering

and a hammered copper tub. Rris-sized. A bit cramped, but I wasn't complaining. Escheri told me how they used it: rinse the worst off with warm water before getting into the tub. She showed me the brushes and abrasive clothes they used, most of which were capable of taking my hide right off, then left me to my own devices.

I'd rinsed, then soaked, dunked my head to try - not so successfully - to dislodge some of the fleas I'd picked up, the first time I'd been clean in... How long had it been? That July an eternity ago when I'd been happy and knew where I was and where I was going, then months of hiding and running and hurting. Five months. December now. Huh, December 1st. Back home they'd be looking forward to Christmas and the New Year. Jackie had said something about wanting to go skiing, I'd been going to spring a weeks vacation in Colorado on her. What was she doing at that moment? She and everybody else I'd known must have thought I was dead by then, fallen off a cliff somewhere, swept away in a flash flood, kidnapped by Elvis in a UFO... any number of gruesome accidents. And there was no way I could get word to them. Looked like I'd be spending Christmas alone.

I sighed and sank down to enjoy the last of the warmth the water offered. The sound of the door opening made me jump. Escheri stood there, an armload of clothing hugged to her chest, staring at me with a sort of stunned expression. I looked down at my exposed chest and flicked water, smiled slightly, "Different, a?"

She grimaced, "I thought... I thought you might have more fur than..." she just trailed off and gave a little shake of her head, not the same kind a human might give. "I've got some clothes for you to try on. They should be the right size. It was difficult to find someone who might have something that would fit.

After my time with Chihirae any hang-ups I might have had about nakedness in front of a Rris had been pretty much hammered out of me, and while the Rris

themselves don't have any real problems with nudity, I was a novelty: Escheri stared openly when I got out of the bath and began to towel myself off, her eyes roving openly. "Those marks," she ventured after a while, "they're not normal, are they?"

"These?" I touched some of the red streaks winding around my arm and said with a tinge of bitterness, "No, not since I came here."

"How..."

"Crossbow," I interrupted, pointing them out one after another, "Crossbow, sword, teeth, claws, more claws, and some more claws. You have a lot of claws."

She didn't seem to be able to take her eyes off the scars. Slowly her ears wilted, then she shuddered and tore her eyes away. "It's a pity you couldn't have met us on more [amicable] terms."

"Believe me, nothing would have pleased me more," I laughed wryly, then hurried to placate her when she flinched. "Sorry, that's how I smile."

"By showing your teeth?" she eyed me like she wasn't sure that I was being entirely straight with her. "That is... that's not something to joke about, Mikah. It could get you hurt."

"So Shyia keeps telling me," I sighed. "It's not a joke. That's how I smile."

“Oh.” Her tail lashed back from behind her legs, agitated. “You can’t smile properly with those ears, can you. I suppose those teeth can’t harbor too much anger. Just be careful who you do that to. Now, see how these fit you.”

I looked through them. All Rris outfits. “What about my clothes?”

“They all be cleaned and we’ll try to have them repaired,” she told me. “Wear these for now.”

She’d brought me a green tunic that came down past my hips and was too tight across the shoulders. Over that there was a tan quilted jacket, also too tight across the shoulders and chest. While I gingerly eased my broken arm into the sleeve Escheri was inspecting the pants she’d brought. Then I heard, “Oh.” She was holding up a gray pair, poking a finger through the hole intended for the tail. “I forgot.” She looked - if I may anthropomorphize - sheepish.

“It shouldn’t be too difficult to sew it up,” I said.

“I never thought I’d be asking someone to do that,” she said, hanging the pants out in front of her, then tossing them over to me. While I sized them up she watched me, her head tipped to one side, then asked, “Are you usual for a male of your kind? I mean, your genitals are... strange.”

Strange? No, I wasn’t about to ask. I turned away slightly, “I haven’t had any complaints.”

“Not yet.”

I stopped what I was doing to eye her uncertainly, “What does that mean?”

A twitch of her ears and a wave of her hand. “Don’t try [something] with females. That might scare them off.”

I just stared at her, not sure what to say. It hadn’t been something I’d been thinking of, and looking at that... person in front of me, the thought was ludicrous, the idea was... it was... it brought to the surface memories of a night with someone who’d come to mean so much to me, holding each other, afraid to say what I was feeling unless I was stoned. In a undefinable way I’d wanted to love her, I’d wanted her to be a woman, but what had she wanted from me? There had been nights she came to me, she’d kept me warm. Why? A hollow sensation caught at my gut and I had to turn away from Escheri, embarrassed, confused.

“Didn’t worry that teacher too much though, a?” Escheri said after a short time.

I looked at her face: impassive now, studying me, and I realised that for a Ris who’d first seen me under 24 hours ago she was damned relaxed. “Shyia told you quite a lot, didn’t he,” I said.

“Not as much as I’d like to know,” she came back. “He’s right about you, you know: you are going to cause some real ripples in the pool.”

“Escheri,” I hesitated, not sure how it was going to sound. “Has there ever been... have you ever heard of anything like me being here before? Any story... or something?”

She watched me again. “No. No, never. Then, I’ve never been one for the old literature. Maybe someone in Shattered Water will be able to tell you more.”

“Maybe.”

An ear flickered again. “Come on, stop standing around like a water spout and get those pants on. I’ll find someone to fix that hole for you. The Commissioner wants to see you again, preferably sometime today.”

—v—

Today the drapes were open in the Commissioner’s office. Winter sunlight ebbed in through the windows overlooking the outer courtyard, refracted by the warped panes into myriads of rainbows and prism-smears on walls and papers on the desk. The Commissioner was seated, waiting. A pistol sat in prominent view beside him, primed and most probably loaded. He’d stared at me when I came in, as though he thought the previous night had been a dream, as though he still didn’t quite believe I was real.

We talked. He had questions of course, a lot of them. Parts of my story he wanted me to repeat, parts to clarify. He wanted to see more of what my laptop could do: the multimedia, the games, the films. It was late evening when I was

taken back to my cold little room and once more the door was locked.

Shyia brought my food that night. He closed the door behind him and set the tray on the rickety table with its flickering candle. “A long day?”

I dropped down off the bed, where I’d been standing to get a view out the window to the courtyard and open world beyond. “A good way to describe it. ” I sat down and raked my fingers through my hair, clean for the first time in a long while. “I could get tired of these very quickly.”

“A,” I saw muscles under the fur moving as he tried to stop his ears going down. “How are the clothes?”

Changing the subject, I noticed. I tugged at the collar of the jacket: I couldn’t button it all the way. “A bit small.”

“Not many Rris your size,” he shrugged. “We’ll have your own back to you soon.”

“This is where you live?” I asked. “This town?”

“A,” he gestured ‘yes’.

“Have you got a home here? I mean, family? do you have cubs here?”

He looked past me and up, at the clouds outside. "I don't really know." He shrugged again. "I've mated with a few females. I don't know if they bore or not."

"You never wanted to find out?" I asked, somewhat incredulous.

"Not really, no," he replied in an offhand fashion and gestured at the food, "You want to eat that or just watch it?"

I blinked at him as another fundamental bit of my worldview eroded away. I almost said something, then shook my head and turned to the food. A stew with some kind of hard-crust black bread to follow it down. It wasn't particularly tasty, but it was filling. While I ate Shyia filled me in on what was going to happen over the next few days. Shit, sounded like a manager taking his group on tour, and on this gig we'd be seeing some of the sights of northern Rrisland.

The Commissioner agreed with his decision: they wanted me out of here ASAP. The northern waterways were closed, the rivers and lakes being slowly choked by the encroaching winter ice. The unpredictable winter storms that blew out of the north would easily render the largest of their wooden boats kindling so the Lakes route was out. It'd have to be overland. First south, downstream; out of Thief's Lament into what I'd known as the Hudson and here was known as the Runoff River. A pun, I found.

Wait a second...

“You can do that?” I asked.

“What?”

“You can get to the Runoff River from this Lake.”

“Of course,” his muzzle furrowed. “Why?”

“But...” I caught myself. Things were different here. They didn’t need the canal network from Champlain down to the Hudson; it looked like nature had done that job for them. “Never mind. I forgot. Sorry, go ahead.”

He looked askance at me, then continued to outline the rest of our itinerary. South, along the river to about where Albany should be, then west, following another river valley through the Adirondack Mountains and on to Shattered Water.

“How long will that take?” I asked.

“About two weeks.”

I choked on my mouthful. “What? Two weeks?”

“You know a faster way?”

I opened my mouth, then shut it again. What was the point? “All right,” I sighed. “Two weeks. When?”

“As soon as possible. The [Governor] has already got wind of you. You’re King’s business so that’s keeping him from making a local political showpiece of you, but we want you out of here before he finds some reason to keep you around.” He made an obscure gesture. “It’s going to take a day or so to get the wagons and supplies and escorts arranged.”

“I can hardly wait,” I enthused, toying with my stew.

He huffed, wrinkled his muzzle. “When you get to Shattered Water you’re going to have all the time you need to settle down.”

“Hnnn,” That didn’t sound like it was going to be such a good thing. I scratched my chin, then remembered, “What about getting a shave?”

His ears went down and struggled back up again. “You know, telling someone to go shave is an insult?”

“Please. I’m not Rris. This,” I grabbed my beard, which by now was over an inch long, “it won’t stop growing like your fur does. I’ve never liked growing it and it’s getting beyond uncomfortable.”

“Uh,” he eyes my locks, hanging down around my shoulders and scratched at the tufts of fur growing from his own cheeks. “I’ll see what I can do.”

—v—

It was the next day when Escheri stopped by. She had another one of those kits like the one Chihirae had owned: a small leather roll-up pouch with grooming tools nestled in the loops. Her’s was more functional than Chihirae’s had been, with wooden handles on the brushes and combs that were worn with use, gleaming metal scissors with black stone handles. She spread them out on the bed. “You really want your fur shaved?” the look she gave me was one I might give someone who asked me to cut their foot off.

“Just a bit,” I said, tried to explain that I just wanted to trim it back. “I can do it myself...” I started to say.

“With that arm?” she snorted. “Anyway, it’s going to be important that you look right, and I’m not sure you know what ‘right’ is.”

“You don’t have any problems with... touching me?” I asked, somewhat surprised.

She blinked. “Why should I? Shyia has vouched for you. Anyway, I’ve got the claws and there are two guards outside the door.” She yanked the stool over beside the bed. “Now, sit down.”

I sat and she started working, displaying the same sort of skill Chihirae had shown. I asked and learned most all Rris have grooming kits of some kind. They have to take care of that fur somehow or suffer the knots and burrs of outrageous fortune, so they've had practice, but she wasn't familiar with actually cutting it. Nor was she familiar with me: I could feel her touching, leathery fingerpads stealing surreptitious tastes of my skin.

"How do you live with such a thin hide?" she wondered. "Don't you get cold?"

"Yes."

"Oh. That's why you need so many clothes."

"One of the reasons."

"Oh," she brushed a hand against my hair then. "I didn't think it would feel so different to fur. Softer than it looks. Would you mind if I kept some?"

That surprised me. "What for?"

"I don't know... maybe make a [something]."

"What is that word?" Another tongue-twister.

“You don’t know? A decoration, to wear on the wrist. You understand?”

Yeah. I understood. I hesitated a second. What harm could it do? I was pretty sure they didn’t practice voodoo. “I understand. Help yourself.”

So as she worked she kept slipping choice cuttings aside. It took a while, a while during which I relaxed under her ministrations, and she talked. Different from Shyia: A more outgoing personality, one I liked. Shyia was all right once you got past the stormtrooper facade he carried around, but he didn’t have quite the same... likability that Escheri had. If they’d been working together, it didn’t take a genius to figure out which half of the good-cop/bad-cop routine he played.

She did a good job on my hair, even though the final result was - IMHO - somewhat unorthodox: cropped short along the fringe and coming down to shoulder length at the back. My beard she rounded off at about an inch long. Not too hippyish I hoped, not that anyone would notice.

Another friend I had to leave behind the following day.

—v—

I got to see more of Lying Scales the next day; early the next day. Shyia roused me out of bed before sparrowfart. We were already making our way through the freezing, snowbound streets when the sun decided to make an appearance, struggling through the sluggish clouds. This time there was a wagon, along with a armored dozen guards with guns and blades. I rode with

Shyia, rubbernecked, asked questions about the town. The buildings in this quarter were larger than the ones I'd seen on the way in. Guildhalls I learned later, along with warehouses, some production houses and more Mediators patrolling the area. There was an enclave larger than the Mediators' hall, with the same kind of high wall and guardhouses: the hall of the local lord.

"Didn't want him getting his hooks into you," Shyia growled to me. "It'd be months before we could get you away from him."

The docks were a kilometer of stone-reinforced landfill jutting out into deeper water, fronting the lake at the northwestern end of the town. Dockside swarmed with life: Rris carrying crates and baskets, animals jostling in their traces, wagons and carts cluttering the docksides, wheels and hooves scraping the stone and ice, turning the snow to a mush underfoot. Shouting and animal noises and the sound of water and the creaking of timbers from the boats. A forest of masts at anchor there, wooden ships and boats of all types riding at rest in the lee offered by the spit of land to the north that protected the harbor from the winds and storms that could blow down across the lake. A few larger vessels loomed over the others, but for the most part the boats were on the smaller size: fat, low draught coasters; potbellied boats with drop-down Lee boards on each side; small trim-looking sloops, caravels, others ships whose names I haven't the faintest idea of. Weather-faded colors peeked out from under trimmings of ice and snow, pennants and flags caught the breeze.

Our transport turned out to be one of the broad-beamed vessels docked at the western end of the wharves. There were more guards around it, looking anything but inconspicuous. Of course a small crowd had gathered just to see what they weren't supposed to see. A snarling Shyia escorted me across to the gangplank with a small battalion of gawking, gesticulating Rris watching.

The boat was a fifteen or twenty metre, tubby-hulled, two-master hanging patched and sun-faded orange sails. There was a raised cabin running almost the

length of the vessel, the roof perhaps a meter higher than the decking around it. Railings and scuppers were carved and painted with paints that had seen better days. I saw Rris cuneiform across the bow, a name that I tried to translate, then had to ask Shyia the meaning of: Shallowater Flyer.

Crewmembers gathered along the rail to stare as Shyia ushered me across the gangplank while our guards fell in behind. I glanced down at the water lapping below: dark, encrusted with broken ice. The deck was swept clean of snow, showing mats made from woven rope, wood scored by clawmarks. It echoed hollowly under my boots as Shyia led me back along to the steps down into the cabin. A Rris intercepted Shyia along the companion way, almost grabbing his coat sleeve before pulling his arm back, “Sir? We had agreed on the [something]. You said nothing about animals! We can’t... “

Shyia stopped, curled his lips to show teeth at the other Rris, “That’s the passenger. And don’t call him animal. He doesn’t like it.”

The other hastily moved out of the way, eyes wide and ears going down as the Mediator shouldered him aside and pushed through to the steps down to the cabin. He poked his head in to check it out then waved me in. It was a narrow, cramped little space without enough headroom to stand upright. There were wooden benches down each side, spaced out by posts with hooks on them. No sign of any beds. Tiny glazed windows along the walls cast slivers of light. Through them I caught distorted glimpses of Rris legs on the deck, light strobing.

“Have a seat,” Shyia gestured at a bench. “Wait here.” Then he was gone again. Some words outside and a pair of guards came in to take up positions on each side of the door; two pairs of fur-tufted feline faces watching me from under the odd engraved and segmented coalscuttle helmets they wore. I sighed, then had a seat and waited.

We left the town of Lying Scales at 08:12 am by my watch, which I was beginning to suspect was an hour or so off. A smaller boat with a dozen oars giving it the appearance of a gargantuan water-bug towed the ship out of the protection of the breakwater. The wind caught the sails with a dull boom and the ship heeled about , tacking into the westerly breeze sweeping across the lake. Belowdecks I could hear periodic thumps as ice was broken by the hull and I fervently hoped we didn't run into anything thicker.

By midday the town was out of sight behind us. All around was nothing but lake and hills with snow-clad armies of firs marching down to the rocky waterline. Low clouds shrouded the peaks with indistinct gray. In the sheltered v where the railings came together at the prow I sat on the solid timber of the the bowsprit and stared out through rigging and ropes across the metal-gray waters of the lake, the hills and clouds reflected there. The crew members sometimes stopped to stare at me before getting on with their duties. I had to notice they all wore peculiar-looking gloves: like cycling gloves with heavy pads on the palms.

“What are you doing here?” Shyia walked up to lean against the rail beside me, his travel-stained leather coat flapping in the breeze.

“It's the only place where I won't get in the way.”

He grimaced at me. “No, I mean, what are you doing.”

“Oh. Just thinking.”

“Ah? About what?”

“Where my life goes from here.”

He looked at me, then waved a hand out at the waters ahead. “Downstream, I think.”

My turn to grimace. “In my language, that does not promise good things to come.”

“I never promised.”

No. He never had. “Well, I’m... happy you are here. It would be lonely.”

He idly scratched at the railing with a claw, then tried to smooth the mar over with a fingertip. “The Commissioner wanted me along. He considers me an expert on you.” He snorted at that, his breath freezing in the air. “He wants me to stay with you until you are settled in Shattered Water. After that...” he waved a shrug.

“You are someone to talk to. They,” I gestured at one of the guards busy lurking nearby, “don’t seem very talkative.”

“You do take a while to get used to,” he said, then startled me by patting my shoulder. “Don’t worry. It takes a while, but it does happen.”

I gave a smile at that and he took it as his due and stalked off around the deck, out of sight behind the sails. I turned back to the lake, the cold water, the mist, the stillness and wondered just how long it was going to take.

If ever.

We kept heading in a southerly direction, following the convolutions of the shoreline. By that evening we were almost out of the lakes, down in the lower reaches of Thief’s Lament and approaching the headwaters of the Runoff River. As the sun settled low and red beyond wooded hills, casting shadows of twilight and purple across the lapping surface of the lake, we rounded a headland where the lights of a small settlement nestled amongst the trees. I saw cubs run across the snow to the waterline, waving. I smiled and waved back and they froze, then ran away. I could hear distant cries.

Shit.

—v—

The rest of the journey was peaceful. We made good time downstream through some impressive scenery. There were a few small villages and ferry crossings, once the skeleton of a vessel caught on rocks along the riverbank, but for the most part the landscape was pristine. The Rris hadn’t invented synthetics

or anything that was seriously non-biodegradable so there weren't any of plastic bags, tires, Styrofoam bin liners and old refrigerators that decorated the waterways back home, here it was a white wilderness straight from a travel brochure.

It was another day and a half on the river. I'd never realised how good Rris night vision was until those nights. When darkness fell I'd expected them to put ashore, at least string lights out. They didn't. Some of the crew went off-shift, stringing up hybrid bunks and hammocks belowdecks, the others continued working. When I went above decks the ship was still moving and all I could see was the snow on the hills around, seeming to glow under a sliver of moon, and the river was a black ribbon with a slight glittering sheen. When that moon went behind a cloud all that was gone, it was black as pitch and we were still moving. Despite Shyia's assurances that they could see just fine it scared the living crap out of me and gave them something to laugh about.

The river leg of the journey ended at a town called Chaskerit's Peak. An odd name, considering it was in a valley. I guessed there was a story behind that name as well. Somewhat smaller than Lying Scales, the town didn't warrant a garrison, but there were a couple of mediators based there who pulled the strings necessary to move on to Shattered Water.

Reindeer and sleighs.

Well, actually they were elk. It was another peculiar experience to add to my scrapbook - and it's getting to be quite a hefty one. Cats bundled in winter furs driving teams of elk: black harnesses and polished brass, it's an image that's stuck with me. The sleighs were actually quite beautiful; wooden chassis about the size of station wagons, with arched wooden-slatted roofs over the passenger sections at the back. The panelwork over the whole vehicle was decorated: engraved with amazingly carved wooden panels depicting a spectrum of Rris activities throughout the seasons, figures that couldn't be more than a centimeter

high, all done in minuscule detail. I spent hours just studying the little shapes, trying to decipher just what they were doing: farming, baking, riding, building, fishing, hunting, fighting, cutting wood, harvesting crops, metalworking, mating... Huhn. I grinned as I lay back while the sleigh shushed through the countryside: pity they weren't bigger.

It was a quiet journey, not entirely uncomfortable. Of course they didn't have shock absorbers, but Shyia'd had an entire herd of furs loaded into the sleigh I was to ride in. They helped keep the chill out and smoothed out most of the bumps. The road we were following was better demarked than the one from Westwater to Lying Scales had been: wider, straighter, bridges over the smaller streams, still not paved, but it was an improvement. It wound its way through what seemed an endless forest: pines, oaks, juniper, spruce, birch, poplar surrounding us, arching up to naked branches lacing overhead. Sometimes I caught glimpses of the rest of broad valley: snowbound trees lining the valley floor to the mountains to the north and south. For the first week or so we followed what back home had been the Mowhawk River valley west from Chaskerit's Peak. Not called the Mowhawk here, instead the it was the Wrongturn Tail. When I asked about that, Shyia told me it after the Wrongturn Mountains: their name for the Adirondacks. Here the Wrongturn Tail - Mowhawk - wasn't navigable by shipping, but they were working on it: I saw the works under way to install locks on the lower rapids and a small shantytown had sprung up around the earthworks. We steered clear of the place.

After the valley the world opened up. We skirted the northern tips of what I knew as the Finger Lakes and here were called the Bear's Whiskers. A beautiful area, I'd been camping there a couple of times back home. It was still beautiful, brushed in white with ice crystals wrapping themselves around every branch and twig, but the vineyards and resorts I'd know were gone of course. There were a few settlements along the shores of the principal lakes, mainly agricultural communities with farms along the icebound lakeshores. Shyia told me they also made incomes from trapping and fishing, and salt was mined in the southern reaches of the lakes.

The road improved. Rather, the forest hemming it in spread out and the undergrowth fell back to a respectable distance; the road itself was still lost beneath snow and we often passed between drifts stacked metres high. Lake Ontario - Rider's Song - was a sometimes-glimpsed shimmer on the northern horizon. When the road crested a hill I could catch glimpses of the landscape through gaps in the foliage: a landscape of trees and whiteness, mile after mile of it stretching away. Empty and cold, not a sign of habitation visible, and through it all we kept moving.

I don't know what kind of speed we averaged. Uphill was slow, downhill wasn't much faster; I guess it can't have been more than about forty kilometers a day. My atlas gave the distance between Troy and Buffalo as about 400 kilometers, as the crow flies. As the sleigh goes, I put it at about 550: Shyia's estimate of two weeks was a bit conservative. We lost more time on those days we couldn't travel, the three days or so we spent snowed in when the entire world turned white with freezing blizzard. Time crawled by and Shyia used it to continue my lessons. The other two guards who rode with us lounged down by the curtains at the back and watched with interest as he tutored me. My vocabulary improved even if my pronunciation didn't. In turn I gave him lessons on how to use the laptop. Teaching him English wasn't practical, so he had to memorize icons and sequences, but eventually he was able to work his way through the utilities, playing games and movies and MP4 music files. He developed a taste for some of Gary Moore's earlier work. You've never really had to question reality until you've seen a five-foot bipedal cat laying back listening to the extended mix of Over The Hills And Far Away.

The nights were dark and cold, with the temperature plummeting well below zero. Every evening we stopped; not because of any reluctance the Ris had with traveling in the dark, it was just that the elk suffered from the similar limitations I did in regard to night vision. There were usually places to spend the night: clearings, places that were regular watering holes, small villages sometimes. I used the time while the fires were being lit to get some exercise. It was a time when I could stretch my legs and when the sling finally came off it was the closest I'd come in a long time to actually feeling in decent shape. Shyia, however, didn't like the idea of me walking around by myself: 'dangerous

animals' he'd said and had made sure a trio of guards kept a close eye on me.

Food was... edible. For the most part it was meat packed in ice, thawed and heated in the evenings. The first couple of times Shyia had guards cook my food they burnt it: burnt on the outside, almost raw inside. After that he agreed to let me prepare my own meals. It was an improvement, but after a week of that I'd have given anything for a salad, a banana, even a bowl of cereal.

In the mornings the camp would rouse before dawn, eat, take their toilet stop, and be on the road before the sun fully cleared the horizon. It got to be a familiar process; one that repeated itself sixteen times before December 26th, the day after the most unspectacular, unusual Christmas I'd ever had and the day of our arrival at Shattered Water.

—v—

Settlements became more numerous: small towns and hamlets. There was more traffic on the roads: single riders on llamas or deer, sleds and sleighs, some wheeled wagons taking it very easy. We even passed signposts: I was able to make out the Rris scratchings spelling Shattered Water engraved on an stone marker peeking from under a cap of snow.

Gradually the forest began to petre out, surrendering the world to the hamlets, the orchards and vineyards, the farmland.

As the road dipped down from the hills to the flatter plains east of lake Erie the landscape showed more and more signs of Rris habitation. One moment you couldn't swing a cat for the trees, the next there were farms wherever you

looked. For hours the road led on through drifts banked higher than my head, fields lying under their white blankets, small clusters of buildings dotted here and there. Gray smears of smoke rose from chimneys into a flat grey sky and I saw Rris out working, feeding cattle, cubs playing, whatever it was they wanted to do that winter morning. Several times we passed watchtowers, these with what looked like bunkers at the bottoms. Rris soldiery watched us and scratched themselves and up in the tower a light blinked out patterns toward the town.

Gradually the fields got fewer and the buildings and enclaves more numerous until we were in the suburbs of the city proper. Shyia cocked his head at me, “Welcome to Shattered Water.”

A dozen times larger than Lying Scales, it followed a similar pattern: focal squares and plazas and parks throughout the city with intersecting boulevards radiating outwards from each, subdividing the city into separate quarters. Beyond the suburbs old walls surrounded the very heart of the city, stratifying the quarters like the rings in a log. It was built on the mouth of a slow river, the two halves of the city connected across the estuary by bridges of different designs and materials, some of the older ones with buildings on them. Where the river passed the walls there were towers to either side with the snouts of cannon poking from under tarpaulins. Under one of those towers a group of cubs were throwing snowballs at a target they’d scratched on the stones and the guards didn’t seem to care.

Nobody bothered trying to keep the streets clear of snow here - in places it was banked up in drifts a couple of meters deep - so the sleighs were able to keep on going right into the city proper. We passed another wall like the ones at Lying Scales: an earthen berm, two stories high and very thick. Overseen by shuttered blockhouses at strategic points and armed guards on patrol. It stretched off to the north and south as far as I could see. In front of the wall a swathe of land about the length of a football field was free of buildings, dotted with cattle grazing on rolls of hay being dropped from a wagon. A product of the invention of gunpowder: the old curtain walls abruptly became obsolete when a besieging

force could batter them to rubble from a distance. When they developed artillery even those earthen berms wouldn't be any protection.

But just the fact the walls were there... Every large town I'd seen so far had walls of some kind. Did they have need of them that often? Shyia had lectured me on the kingdoms often enough and I knew there was sometimes... friction between them, but how far did it go? Disturbing thoughts, but there was too much else happening to pursue them further.

We stopped inside the gates while Shyia jumped out of the sleigh to have words with some of the guards there. There was animated discussion, he produced a fold of paper emblazoned with a scarlet seal, then led a couple of soldiers over to look in the sleigh. I stared back and their eyes snapped wide. "As I told you," Shyia said to one of them, "King's business. Now, I asked for an escort."

He got it. Within minutes fifteen or so city guards mounted on llamas were flanking us as we made our way along the arrow-straight boulevard leading straight to the heart of the city. While the Mediator was distracted with looking out over the driver's shoulder I inched my way to the back of the sleigh, to a spot where I could catch covert glimpses of the city through a gap in the heavy leather curtains. The town was typical Ris: shops fronted with windows - some glazed, others with wooden shutters - other large buildings showing only walls and thin window slits. Houses built inside-out; like Lying Scales.

Ris and vehicles were moving aside to let us pass. I could see curious Ris staring after the procession, some irritated riders shouting things I couldn't understand but which can't have been very flattering at the guards. It was a ten minute ride to the end of the boulevard where it terminated in a plaza near the old center of the city: a circle lined with evergreens and statuary and waterless fountains that I caught glimpses of as the sleigh swung to the right and we followed another avenue, northwards this time. We circumvented a circular

plaza buried beneath a layer of snow. A statue stood in the centre of the plaza, again covered with snow and ice, but glimpses of something underneath were disquieting.

North from that plaze there were more buildings, shops and industry buried in snow. I saw a Rris out with a shovel, shifting snow from a doorway while sunlight gleamed on a bronze plaque on the wall above. Further along we passed between a pair of old stone towers. They looked deserted, stark against the sky with snow sitting untouched on windowsills and the crumbling crenellations. Beyond a boundary delineated by those towers the city changed. There were larger enclaves along here: I saw manors and estates with sprawling buildings surrounded by snow-covered gardens and wrought-iron fences. Definitely upmarket real-estate.

Shouting from up ahead and the sun was blotted out for a few seconds as we passed through a gatehouse. More shouting and the sleigh drew to a stop. A hand touched my left shoulder and I jumped, looked around into Shyia's frozen green eyes as he crouched beside me under the low overhead. "Wait here," he told me. "Just do what I say, stay here, keep calm and move slowly. Understand?"

"I understand."

He patted my shoulder again, then pushed the curtain aside and climbed out. I heard Rris moving around outside, their voices, then the curtains were pulled back and Shyia beckoned to me, "Come on. Out."

He held the curtain back as I climbed out and I hesitated there, squinting in the light. There was the gatehouse we'd come through: two stories of carved, marble-clad facade. To either side a high, ornate wrought-iron fence stretched off to the north and south. Rris were watching me; a lot of them. Armed and

armored guards everywhere, muzzles and ears turning to follow me, amber and green eyes watching me. I froze stared, slowly looking around at the guards on the top of the gatehouse, the ones nearby with hands fidgeting near weapons: swords and knives, pistols and longarms.

“Mikah,” Shyia said again, more urgently this time as he beckoned me.
“Come down... slowly.”

Very slowly. I didn’t jump, instead took the small ladder a rung at a time until my boots crunched on snow. I felt very small there, very exposed as I hunched down into my jacket.

“Shave me,” a Rris hissed, “That is King’s business?”

“Amongst other things,” Shyia said. “I have the [something] from Lying Scales. Now, can we get him inside. I’ve come to far to see something happen to him here.”

“Yes sir,” the other said and tipped his helmet back a bit. “Follow me.”

“Mikah,” the Mediator patted my arm to start me moving and called to another one of our escorts, “Bring those packages. I don’t want anything happening to them.” Then his coat whirled around his legs as he fell into stride with me along a short road enclosed by the interlaced boughs of huge old trees

A palace...

That was my first impression of the edifice that came into view at the end of that road. Big, sprawling through snow-shrouded parkland. Walls of massive polished granite bricks, roofs and eaves showed copper-green under the snow: perches from where carved stone Rris kept a blind vigil over the surrounding lands. Windows were high, larger than on other Rris buildings. Winter sunlight glared as bright as molten metal from latticed panes while relief carvings of Rris and animals decorated the lintels. Wings and annexes spread hither and yon; haphazard at first glance - as if the architects hadn't been sure what they wanted - they didn't work by the rules a human architect would. To my eyes the proportions were... odd, but in their own way they did work. The gardens around the building were expansive, stretching away as far as I could see, the boundaries lost in the scumbled blending of sky and icy trees. Not the kind of landscape I was expecting, nothing that'd be welcome at Versailles. No manicured lawns and landscaped flowerbeds and topiaries, instead these garden catered to different tastes that ran to open fields of wild grass, icebound ponds and forests, fountains and streams. Acres upon acres of estate.

I wasn't given time to gawk. Gravel buried under snow scraped beneath by boots as the guards hustled me across the sweeping drive and up to the main doors: huge oaken things decorated with wrought ironwork. My boots tracked ice and snow onto the marble floor as we entered a reception hall: a two-story high hall with walls of fantastically grained and polished wood panels, a gothic arch to the ceiling where murals of Rris - dancing? Fighting? - covered the length of the hall: a feline version of the Cistine Chapel. Tapestries and paintings hung from the walls: what could be heraldic devices mixed with portraits of various regal-looking Rris while a strip of burgundy and gold carpet ran the length of the room, covering an exquisitely inlaid marble floor. Expensively dressed Rris stared at us. Individuals, pairs and groups moving aside and staring openly as my escorts led me through the hall. I heard muttering and exclamations rising behind us and I could understand, a fine sight we must have been, after that time on the road when the only washing facilities had been a damp cloth. We'd both certainly looked and smelt better.

More guards moved to intercept us at the end of the hall where a door opened onto another antechamber, a bulky civilian running up with a loud spattering of claws on marble floor, “What’s going on here? What is this? Captain? Mediator? Do you have an explanation for...” it looked me up and down and nostrils flared, “for this?”

“Sir,” the soldier who’d been escorting us bowed his head. “The Mediator just arrived from Lying Scales. Says this is King’s Business.”

The newcomer hadn’t stopped staring at me: a somewhat... portly individual. On a Rris it looked strange, like a fluffy pillow, especially with those clothes: bloused pantaloons trimmed with lace. Streaks and curlicues of dark red and green dye colored his glossy brownish fur. Still, there was nothing foppish about his eyes. “This is King’s Business?”

Shyia ducked his head. “Yes sir. It’s a tale that would take a while to tell, but Mikah is important. I’ve been ordered to make sure he is safely received here.”

“Rhi... Mikah?”

“Me, ” I ventured. And the Rris’s eyes widened, muzzle drawing back to reveal fangs. Guards stirred and metal clanked. “Yes, it talks. Surprise,” I rolled my eyes.

“Mikah!” Shyia snapped.

“Sorry,” I sighed and bowed my head to the other Rris. “Sir, I meant no disrespect, it is just that Rris reactions to me are... predictable. I am pleased to meet you.”

Amazing how quickly he recovered his composure. It was just a second before he smoothed over the shocked snarl and looked back at the Mediator and his voice was loud in the sudden silence. “A long story you say. I think it’s going to be worth hearing.”

—v—

We’d been separated, despite Shyia’s protests. The Mediator had been taken one way while a half-dozen guards escorted me off in another. The room they put me in was tiny: a windowless cubicle with only a Rris-sized cot, no blanket, no light, no heat and a lock on the door. All I could do was sit in cold darkness and wait.

It was a long, long wait through the night. I tried to sleep once and gave that up. There wasn’t enough room to pace. I sat down on the cot and hugged my knees to my chest to trap some warmth. All I could do was shiver and stare at the dim line of light glowing under the door and wondered what was going on as I lost track of time.

It was many hours later before a key turned in the lock. I raised my head then turned away from the glare of the light as the door opened. There were voices, someone said my name and I squinted blearily into the light as the shapes of armored Rris appeared outside. I shrank back, shivering violently.

“You could have given him a blanket or a light,” one of them said and I recognized Shyia. He’d cleaned up. He was wearing a white quilted sleeveless vest and brown bloused breeches that finished at his knees. His fur had been cleaned and brushed.

“Sir?” a guard asked.

“Never mind,” he hissed and beckoned to me, “Come on, Mikah.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, not moving.

“You’re causing waves again. Suddenly, there are a lot of people who want to see you,” he said, and added, “They aren’t the types who like being kept waiting.”

“Is there any chance of having a bath or something first?”

“Not a very good one. Now, come on.”

When I stood to follow my muscles ached from the cold and inactivity. The guards all fell back a little when I stepped out into the hall. There were eight of them escorting us, all with steel armor polished to a mirror sheen and carrying a mixture of clunky iron-and-wood firearms and more subtly lethal edged weapons. The corridors we walked through were spectacular: bright, with polished wooden floors, carpets and tapestries and paintings. The high ceilings were arched and crossed with wooden inlays in a repeating diamond pattern. In

the center of each diamond was a small shield with what I took to be a heraldic device painted on it. Carved wooden paneling faced the whitewashed walls. Through latticed windows I could see the courtyard in the center of the palace, built to a... well a palatial scale, complete with ponds, fountains and a small forest. They liked their trees, the Rris did.

They took me to another wing and another room, this one much more elegantly appointed. Shyia patted my arm as he showed me in and closed the door behind me. I turned to face a shut door with a Rris's face carved in it, then turned again. Things had been changing so quickly, I felt slightly... stunned, like things were just flowing around me and I wasn't able to absorb them. Nice room... a study. There was the mandatory low-set desk in front of a window overlooking the courtyard, papers on the desktop and a typical Rris cushion-chair behind it. The ceiling was lower here, comfortable for a Rris maybe but uncomfortably close for me. A big city map, presumably of Shattered Water, covered a good part of a wall. There was a Rris in the chair behind the desk: it was the Rris official who'd stopped us, who'd hustled me and Shyia off in different directions. And he filled that position behind the desk very well. Furry folds blended in well with the folds of the cushion, almost as if he were a part of it. He reached out to lay a quill pen down on desk but those amber eyes watched me: steady as two crystals. Shit, he reminded me of Elliot: a substantial physical bulk, and behind that a... a competence.

"Come in," he told me. "Sit down." A hand with gray streaks in the fur waved toward the cushion on the other side of the desk. I slowly crossed the ornate carpet and carefully sat, the cushion rustling as I put my weight on it and crossed my legs. Why the hell didn't they use chairs? The Rris behind the desk didn't blink.

"What are you?" he asked.

"I thought Shyia would have told you."

He cocked his head, “He told me. I wanted to hear what you had to say.”

“I’m a male human.”

“A strange word that doesn’t say much.” He glanced down at the blotter on his desk: there were papers covered with tiny Rris script there. He looked up again and leaned back, lacing his fingers across his ample stomach. “Ah, but where are my manners, I haven’t introduced myself. I am Kh’hitch of Woodmaker, his highness’s liaison to the city. Welcome to Shattered Water.”

“I... uh, thank you, sir.” He hadn’t been nearly this friendly the last time I’d seen him.

“I’ve greeted a lot of visitors in my time, but you... I’ve never heard of anything like you. The Mediator said that you claim to have come from... what did he say? ‘A world like ours, but instead of Rris it is populated with creatures like that’. This is true?”

“To the best of my knowledge it is.”

“You aren’t sure?”

I shook my head and he flinched slightly. “I don’t know what happened to me. I don’t know how I came to be here. All I can say is that somehow I came from my home to here; I don’t know if that is true, I don’t know if my home still

exists. Maybe I've gone mad and this," I made a carefully restrained gesture at the room around us, "is all in my mind."

He blinked, slowly. "What do you remember?"

"I was walking. There was a noise, a bright light and... I was here. I didn't know it. I was walking for days before I found Westwater."

"A shock for you."

I looked at him, unable to tell if he was being facetious or sympathetic. "Yes. Quite a surprise."

"You met that teacher there. What was her name? Hiasamra'thsi? Chihirae?"

"Yes."

"It's good to hear that program is paying off. She almost killed you though."

"Almost. She also saved my life." I hesitated, then added, "She was a friend."

"Shyia mentioned that she seemed... attached to you. She was either sick in the head, or there was a reason. I'm hoping it was the latter. She taught you how

to talk?”

“Yes.”

“She has done a remarkable job.” He glanced down at his desk and the papers there. “Now, Shyia also mentioned there was some trouble, the reason he was sent to Westwater in the first place. What was that about?”

I swallowed. Back to that again. “They said I... killed someone. There was a female who said I killed her... the male she lived with. I didn’t.”

“Why did she say that?” he asked and his voice was soft.

“Their house was the first place I went to in Westwater. There were several Rris there and when I saw them ...when I saw Rris... I ran. They shot at me. Later I learned the male had been killed. The female said I was the one who had done it. I don’t know why.” I hesitated before adding, “She lied. About some things, she lied.”

Kh’hitch made a noncommittal noise. “You have killed Rris though, haven’t you. That’s where you got those marks on your face.”

I almost protested that; it was a different kind of situation. All I said was, “Yes.”

“Why?”

“They would have killed me and the cubs who were with me. I didn’t have much of a choice.”

There was an interruption then. The door opened behind me and Kh’hitch looked up, his ears going back slightly. Then he waved a hand impatiently and said, “Bring it here.”

Another Rris took a detour around me to lay a sealed envelope on the desk, then ducked its head to retreat and close the door again. Kh’hitch broke the red seal with a clawtip and read the contents. “Huhnn,” he said, and scratched his muzzle with the claw, then laid the paper down and looked at me, “It would seem I’ve been [something]. His highness would like to meet with you. Immediately”

—v—

A big, white room.

The door closed behind me and I stopped, blinking in the light. Afternoon sunlight flooded in through latticed panes in tall, narrow windows that stretched from the floor to the high ceiling above. Everything was marble, white marble: The floor, the buttresses arching up to the ceiling, the ceiling and the carvings up there, the mantle around the fireplace in the center of the wall to my left. Over in the far corner was a russet carpet; sitting on that a desk and cushion, but no sign of any other furniture.

Nobody around, so I slowly walked over with my boots squeaking on the floor and breath frosting. There were paintings on the wall above the fireplace: important-looking Rris of indeterminate sex. Another set of white laminated doors in the northeast corner. The south and east walls were lined with floor to ceiling mullioned windows looking out over the palace grounds, also white: the forests and paths under their layers of snow, in the distance I could catch a glimpse of the lake waters glittering under a pale-blue sky. The desk was set low in the style of most Rris desks and made from plain, old wood, the surface scored with what looked like claw marks with a comfortable-looking beanbag-style cushion set behind it. My laptop sat on the desk, along with my solar pack, map, wallet, inkwell and rack of quills, and several sheaves of paper covered with Rris script.

... here. Not Rris but [something] as [something] as Rris. Male. [Something] a form of [something] with well[something]...

I gave it up. My reading comprehension wasn't nearly up to that level, but I was sure they were referring to me. My laptop... I touched a key and the display flickered onto the screen it'd been on when last shut down: the movie selection.

"You... you must be...Mikah," said a voice from behind me and I froze. I hadn't heard anyone enter. Slowly I straightened and just as slowly turned. The last thing I wanted was to alarm the Rris king.

Hirht Chihiski, that was his name. I remembered that much from my lessons. He was standing in front of the other set of doors. Tall and slender, dark tan fur with dark stripes across his ribs and a lighter blaize on his throat, wearing a dark green sleeveless vest hanging open at the front and a russet kilt-like thing wrapped around his waist. A sheathed knife hung at his hip. He wasn't the grizzled old patriarch I'd been half-expecting. As best as I could tell he was

young, and judging from his lashing tail and the lay of his ears, a bit worried. I caught a sudden tensing of muscles and stiffening of posture as he got a good look at me.

“Yes, sir,” I answered after a pause.

Hirht stared for a bit longer, then slowly stalked forward with his claws sounding a regular staccato clicking on the marble. His eyes were green, like Shyia’s, his pupils shrinking to sharp pinpoints in the light. “Red tie me,” he murmured. “It is true. You can talk, can’t you.”

I smiled a bit at that. “Yes, sir. I can talk.”

‘Shave me.’ He walked a slow circle around me and the desk, looking me up and down. “You are... what is that word? H’uan?”

“Human,” I corrected.

“That word.” He said and got a bit closer, his nostrils flaring, then he winced and jerked back a bit. “Sorry,” I said, “I haven’t had a chance for a wash properly for some time.”

“Ah,” he said, snorting slightly through his nose, as if trying to dislodge a disagreeable scent. Probably was. “When I was told we had an unusual guest, I didn’t expect you to be so... ah...”

“I think ‘strange’ is the word you’re looking for,” I offered.

“That...” he broke off. “I didn’t mean to offend. You must hear a lot of that.”

I shrugged and he flinched at the motion, “I’m growing used to it. I am a bit out of place here.”

“Was that a joke?” He asked after a moment’s reflection.

“Apparently not a very good one.”

He blinked and almost smiled. “Maybe you just need practice. Like your speaking... You had to learn how to speak?”

“Your language. My kind have... our own language.”

“Ah. So you’re still learning. Give it some time.”

“I don’t think that will help. It’s my mouth. I am not built to speak Rris. It’s... difficult.”

He looked a bit startled. “Well, then I think you’re doing well.”

“Thank you.”

Hirht blinked. “Is there also a reason you wear so many clothes?”

“Don’t you find it a bit cold in here?”

He seemed a bit taken aback, glancing around before waving a negative. “It’s a bit [something], but nothing so bad as to [something] that.” He gestured at me, my clothing and jacket.

I brushed a hand down my lapel. “If I was dressed like you I would be dead quickly.”

There was shock at that. “You really don’t have any fur!” He blurted, then caught himself. “No, of course you don’t.” His claws clicked again as he stalked around behind his desk. “Of course you don’t.” Fur and the stuffing of the cushion rustled as he sat and settled himself. I shifted uncomfortably: tired and hungry and thirsty. “You know,” he said, “I didn’t believe them. I was told a Mediator had brought in a grotesque, oversized, bald beast that could talk and I didn’t believe them. They showed me this,” he reached out to touch the keyboard of the laptop. “It is very persuasive. Yours, isn’t it.”

“Yes.”

He tapped out a random pattern on the keyboard before looking up at me,

“Like a window to another world.”

“I’d prefer a doorway.”

Hirht blinked at me, then lowered his gaze to the laptop and his ears laid back. There was a heavy silence before he asked, “Could you show me more of this?”

Shyia hadn’t had time to show him much. He could move the icon selection around, but that was about it. “What are you interested in seeing?”

“The Mediator said you had a lot more of pictures of your home. Show me.”

I nodded and crouched to lean toward the laptop.

The Rris monarch just about went over backwards in his jerk away from me. I looked at him - wide-eyed with a hand hovering around his knife - then slowly and deliberately reached out to punch the macro that ran the slideshow and stepped back. Music sounded from the speakers, animations flicking across the screen. Hirht’s eyes went from me, to the laptop and he moved his hand away from the knife. He was panting.

“I don’t hurt people,” I said. “I’m not dangerous.”

He brushed at the fur tufts on his cheeks, collecting himself. “I... It is easy to hear that, not so easy to believe it.”

I moved back a bit more and didn't say anything. He stared at me, wide eyes, then shook his head and turned his attention back to the laptop.

Sleek cars, tires hissing and raising tails from rain-slicked roads reflecting the sodium and neon of streetlights. Sleek people in fashionably baggy suits and fedoras. Computer-generated humaniform robots extolling the values of soft-drinks. Water-slicked people on the beach, skintight bathing suits showing curves that disturbed me in a way I couldn't pinpoint. Aircraft overflights of valleys. Computer generated shapes. Delta clipper launches. Astronauts on EVA at Alpha station. Rush hour downtown. Mountain biking...

Here, in this heart of Rris power, surrounded by nonhuman creatures and immersed in an alien culture, the scenes in the laptop seemed... remote. How long before my memory of these things seemed no more than that: a memory, distorted by time.

Dancing telephones. Amorphous black and white objects of textured human skin morphed slowly, suggestively glistening under drastic lighting. Children playing. Radically altered offroad buggys careening around an indoor course. F-22s engaged in a mock dogfight above the clouds...

"Can you stop this?" Hirht asked.

"Press the space bar... that long piece there."

He did so. "Those machines; they really fly? Humans ride in them?"

“Yes.”

“You have flown like that?”

“Not in one of those,” I gestured at the sleek lines of the F-22. “They’re... military. There’re other vehicles for passengers. Not as exciting to fly in. Get on, sit down, and hopefully it gets you to where you want to go without hitting something and you get off and try and find your luggage.”

He started to say something, then his ears twitched like Chihirae’s had done when I tickled the fur in her’s. All he asked was, “What keeps them up?”

“Oh, Christ. I was an artist, not a ... someone who makes things like that. I don’t know too much about that. This will have a bit of information though.”

“What kind of information? Can you show me?”

I leaned over the laptop again, ran the encyclopedia and a search then scrolled through the resulting hits. The screen flicked from text listings to diagrams and schematics. The king stared, his jaw twitched, then he asked, “What about ships?”

I listed those, from rowboats to racing yachts to aircraft carriers. Details on sails and hull construction and boilers and screws and paddles. *Etc.* He tried other topics: medicine, construction, farming and I got the distinct impression he

was scrupulously avoiding any mention of weapons.

Hirht shifted in cushion and just sat for a few second, then raked his claws through his facial fur. “Shave me,” he murmured. “How much... how much of that kind of information is in that thing?”

How could I put that in terms he could understand? “A lot. Same as over a hundred-hundred-hundred books.”

He stood in a single fluid movement, his tail lashing as he crossed to one of the windows and stood there, looking out over the gardens outside. I waited quietly, not sure what he was doing or even how he was taking this.

“What are you?”

“Sir?” I squinted into the light.

He turned and claws spattered on marble as he crossed over to me, closer than before. He hesitated, then reached up, paused when I flinched. “Don’t,” he told me. A single fingerpad touched my cheek, feeling like a patch of warm leather stroking down my skin. Utterly inhuman. I shuddered, flinched again when he touched the scar tissue and he pulled his hand away.

“What are we going to do with you?” he sighed and touched my jacket, running a claw up the zipper. “You, this device, that information... It’s not going to be long before other kingdoms learn about you, if they haven’t already. It’s all

going to go crazy.”

I swallowed, afraid again. His nose twitched and he moved back, just a step. “What are you going to do with me?” A question I’d asked repeatedly and never got a satisfactory answer.

I didn’t get one this time either. “We’ll have to see,” he said, then huffed and asked. “Is there anything you need?”

I looked down at myself and plucked at my jacket. “I... I haven’t eaten for a while. And I don’t remember when I last had a good wash.”

He gave a small laugh at that. “We’ll see what we can do.”

—v—

Guards took me back to that tiny room.

I turned and asked, “Could I at least have a...”

The door shut in my face.

“Light?”

I sighed, then fumbled back through the darkness to find the cot and sat down to wait.

Maybe two hours. I was woken from an unrestful doze when the door was opened again and propped myself up on one elbow, squinting into the light.

“Ah, sir?” It was one of the guards, suddenly so much more polite. “Could you come with us. Sir.”

I rubbed my eyes, still muzzy from fatigue, and followed them. They led the way through elegant halls, guarded doors, to a final dark-wood paneled corridor I’d get to know very well. Ten heavy oak doors along each side; tall, narrow paintings showing slivers of landscapes and cityscapes. Light came from a few hissing gas lamps. Guards stood in niches down the hall.

“What is this place?” I asked.

My guards flinched, one licked his jowls. “Ah... guest quarters, sir. Your quarters, sir. Courtesy of his Highness.”

“Oh.”

They led the way to a heavy door at the far end and ushered me in. I entered and stopped, somewhat taken aback. It wasn’t the monk’s cell I’d been expecting; in fact, if this was anything to judge by, things seemed to be looking

up. I turned around, somewhat stunned by my sudden promotion in the general scheme of things. A big room, whitewashed plaster walls, the lower half covered with carved wooden paneling. Sunlight streamed in through mullioned windows set in an alcove in the far wall, the seats there were upholstered with green leather and gold buttons. To my right a fire crackled in its open fireplace behind a perforated copper hearth-guard, a stack of firewood in a box beside it. The black wooden floor was almost completely covered by a flat-woven dark green carpet inlaid with russet geometric designs while down the far end of the room a king-sized bed - a real bed - with a massive carved frame took up most of the available space. With all the furs stacked on it, it looked like a bear had crawled in there and died. Over in front of the windows squatted a low desk, really low: maybe fifty centimeters high with an inlaid top. A floor cushion was set behind it, decorated with orange and brown abstract patterns. Paintings hung on the walls: A landscape, a couple of Rris portraits and still lifes. A light fixed to the ceiling: a damn stupid thing like one of those cheesy wagon wheels they hang up in 'genuine western' eateries, with small gaslamp bulbs around its circumference and a big glass hemisphere at its hub. Scarcely high enough for me to get underneath without having to duck.

"Sir," the guard spoke and waved to another door in the same wall as the door we'd entered through. "There are washing [something] in there."

I opened the door and looked. A bathroom with a floor of glazed, multihued tan tiles and a recessed circular wooden tub the size of a decent spa pool with a broad wooden sluice beneath the faucets. Wan sunlight seeped in through a narrow window, below that was a bench with a basin and some shelves holding bundles of cloth. In another niche was the toilet, with the same kind of seat with that raised piece in front of the groin. I'd learned Rris males can't urinate in a tidy stream as a human male can and if that piece wasn't there things would get messy.

"There is hot water," my guard told me and showed me. There were a pair of gold faucets on the wooden tub, one for hot and one for cold. I tried them for

myself, touched the broad stream that flowed from the sluice and jerked my hand back. “Ah!”

“Sir?”

“Nothing.” I shook my hand, it wasn’t scalding, but just the fact it was hot startled me. Most of my life it’d been something I’d taken for granted, now it was a luxury. “Just been a long time.”

The guard’s tongue flickered around his jowls; he looked confused, alarmed. “Yes, sir.”

Back in the bedroom he showed me drawers built into the bed frame. “There are clothes in there. Ah, my lord said there’ll be food arriving later. You have time to wash and rest.”

“Tell him thank you,” I said.

The guard ducked his head as he backed toward the door, anxious to be gone. “If you need anything, there will be guards outside.” With that the door was closed. I heard the tumblers in the lock click into position.

The window had a second floor view overlooking the barely-tamed wilderness that was the palace’s southern park and the ornate wrought-iron grillwork doubled as very serviceable bars. Maybe a gilded cage, but still a cage. I sighed, then went to see just how much hot water I could get out of that bath.

After an hour-long soak during which I must have dislodged a kilogram of dirt I roused myself, climbed out, dried off with a starchy towel and headed back to the other room and bed. My clothes - along with my boots - were gone; something I noted without much surprise or interest as I slipped between clean linen sheets. Despite its lack of pillows the bed was luxurious, soft and spacious and smelled faintly of something like potpourri and that scent's the last thing I remember of my first day in Shattered Water.

—v—

Something landed on my feet. I started awake, blinking groggily in orange-tinted early morning sunlight and wondering where I was, then rolled onto my back and looked up into a grinning Rris face. "Shit!"

"Morning and waking," Shyia greeted me then stepped back and looked around at the room. "Looks like you've plucked a ripe one here."

I sat up in a tangle of sheets and eiderdowns, trying to get my breathing back down to a more reasonable rate. "It's a nice change." I glanced at my watch, something I've learned to rarely take off. 08:14 am. "Do you have to wake me up like that?"

"It's not so early you know."

"I mean with all those teeth."

“That’s how you smile, isn’t it?” he asked, rubbing a finger across the desk.

“On you it’s... not the same.” I yawned and rubbed my eyes. Of course he’d known that. His idea of a joke, or... he was irritated at something. I grinned myself, “How long are they keeping you?” I asked nonchalantly.

His head whipped around. “How did you know?”

I shrugged and rubbed gingerly at my scarred shoulder. “You’re the only Rris in this city who really knows anything about me. Did you think they’d just let you walk out of here again?”

He looked out the window and growled softly, then eyed me suspiciously, “How long have you known that?”

“A couple of weeks.”

His eyes narrowed. “You keep surprising me, don’t you. You could’ve told me.”

“I wasn’t sure. Sorry.”

He huffed, a glittering puff of breath momentarily visible in the chill. “Ahh.

Well, they want me to look after you for a while. Until you settle in.”

“That makes me feel much better.”

The Mediator laughed at that. “I’m sure it does,” he said and reached out to scratch an aimless pattern in the frost on a windowpane. “Now hurry and get dressed. His highness wants to see you again.”

I groaned and got up, shivering in the morning chill; after the warmth of the bed it was fucking freezing in that room. He’d brought my clothes along, lying folded at the foot of the bed. My underwear, jeans, socks, a couple of shirts. They’d been cleaned and pressed, but there was no sign of my boots or jacket.

“Huhn, you look like a map,” the Mediator commented. “How are the scars doing?”

I moved my right arm, flexing it, watching the raised tracks of scar tissue writhing over muscle. Felt stiff, especially on cold mornings like this. He kept watching me, head tipped to one side. “They really don’t know what to make of you. Hirht’s sent for some scholars from the [university? library?] I think he wants them to shake your bushes a little, find out if you’re really what you claim.”

“What else would I be? Maybe this is a costume?” I gestured at my scarred hide and grinned.

“You know what I mean,” he said and frowned. “And don’t DO that with your teeth.”

It wasn’t something I could help.

Food arrived while I was pulling my pants up. A guard wheeled in a tray with a covered platter and his ears went back at the sight of me, bare-chested, half into my pants. Shyia waved at the trolley, “Leave that.”

“Sir,” the guard ducked and backed out.

“Hope he doesn’t get the wrong idea,” I told Shyia. He didn’t get it,

Breakfast was meat, sliced into thin slivers and cooked in some kind of bitter-tasting sauce, several light pastries speckled with what tasted like sour cream, wholemeal bread, a wedge of pale cheese and a glazed ceramic mug of water. “You were asleep when they brought food last night,” Shyia said. “Thought you might be hungry.”

I was; It went down without touching the side while Shyia watched impatiently. When we left the room, the trio of guards outside the door fell in as escorts; I noticed the glances at my bare feet which were so radically different from Ris pads.

I wasn’t sure where they took me. I thought it was the same wing I’d been in the other day, but it was a different room. A door was opened and I entered,

finding myself standing on deep carpet among whitewashed walls with tapestries and bookshelves, a high ceiling, a fireplace taking the edge off the chill. A low table - only calf-high - filled the center of the room; oak, it looked like, with parquetry designs inlaid in the surface. Morning light shone outside the windows and the seven Rris seated on cushions along one side of the table turned as one to stare at me. "Shave me," one blurted, half-standing before catching itself sitting again with a few self-conscious glances at the surrounding Rris.

Hirht fanned a sheaf of papers on the tabletop before him, "Sahh, Mikah. Come in. Sit, over here. Mediator, that will be all."

I hesitated. Shyia patted my arm, then left and closed the door behind him. I glanced after him, then swallowed and did as the King had asked. Heads swiveled as I approached; the only place to sit was a round cushion on the unoccupied side of the table. I took it, gingerly sitting tailor-fashion while the Rris watched me like I was an act at a circus. Seven of them on their own cushions; individuals ranging in size and age, fur coloration varying from dappled sienna to smooth tan. There were a couple I thought were female, but I couldn't be sure, not with them seated and wearing winter tunics. Some of them had dyed patterns of their fur, one had a series of sigils shaved across dark cheek fur: the skin underneath was a lighter gray and speckled with stubble. The cushion was well used, worn to fit the shape of a body; only it wasn't a human body.

Hirht looked me over, like he was assuring himself what he'd seen the other day was real. There were papers on the table, also books, also my laptop, leatherman toolkit, wallet... Mine? I wasn't even sure I was my own property anymore.

"You rested well?" he asked.

“Yes, sir. Very well.”

“Glad to hear it. And that bath has done you some good,” he sniffed then said to the others, “Goodfellows, this is Mikah. The owner of these artifacts and a guest to our lands. He speaks - surprisingly well - but he does have a limited vocabulary and some trouble pronouncing some words.”

An elderly Rris wearing a tooled and wool-trimmed brown leather vest gestured at me, then at the laptop, “You’re telling us THAT built that?”

“Him or something like him,” Hirht said. “Actually, I was hoping you might be able to help me determine that.”

I looked around: seven pairs of eyes - green, amber, some almost red - flinched. “You don’t believe me?”

The King waved his hand across the papers. “I have to confess I’m not sure what to believe about you. That’s why these people are here.” Introduction time. He started with the Rris to his immediate left. “This is Achir ah Ner, senior [something] of the [university? library?]”

Achir was an elder Rris with a broad face that was mostly tan fur, a white muzzle speckled with darker flecks, and lazy-looking green eyes. The simple rustred tunic he wore was thin and couldn’t have been much protection against the cold. To his left sat a Rris called Rasa, head of their animal studies department at the University. That was the one who’d been so surprised when I came in, and it was a female. Her pelt was a uniform dark tan with a few darker streaks around her ribs and through the thicker fur down her chest and belly, but

her eyes were different: an amber so deep it was almost red. A rare trait for Rris, and - I was to learn - not a very desirable one.

Yase'tco was another elder one: white and gray fur, green eyes, a tip missing from one of his ears and some patches on his chest where the fur grew in wrong testified to a youth spent pursuing activities more exciting than senior study in architecture. Chirit maintained the university archives. I guess that explained his paunch and his gray, frazzled mane, but it didn't explain the nicks in his ears or the small scars I noticed on his chest where his shirt hung open. In a way he reminded me of the Liaison, Kh'hitch, but his personality wasn't what I'd have expected of a librarian. Beside him was Hai'kya, the university's senior technical lecturer; a younger sienna-furred male whose ears twitched nervously.

Chaeitch wasn't affiliated with the university. As near as I could understand he was a private entrepreneur, an industrialist, an inventor. A youngster in comparison with the others, he had an unobtrusive tawny pelt with a lopsided white blaze across his left ear. He was the one with the patterns shaved into his fur: small spiral sigils across his shoulders where grayish fur was bared. He'd practically invented the Rris steam engine. I was meeting the Rris equivalent of Thomas Newcomen. He was there in the company of Rraerch aesh Smither: a dignified looking female who owned the largest shipyard in the city as well as a number of other industrial institutions.

All prominent in their fields, all experts in their fields. I realised why Hirht had brought them here.

"You want them to say if what I showed you is real," I said when Hirht had finished the introductions.

He waved a small gesture of affirmation. "Can you show them what you

showed me yesterday?”

I looked down at the laptop that was pushed down the table toward me, hesitated before opening it. The battery level was low and I didn't know what they'd done with the spare. “It won't be able to work for long,” I told him. “It needs to... rest.”

“Rest? Is it alive?”

“No.” I frowned, thinking how best to explain this. “It is a machine, but it is like a fire. It needs to be fed to keep working. Does that make sense?”

Hirht pondered that, then said, “Just do what you can.”

So I showed them. The slide shows, some of the simulators, maps and encyclopedia entries. The Rris watched, with growing interest and disquiet. There were mutterings, quiet asides and more and more often they asked me to stop, to go back, asking questions. When I was finished the battery level was flickering on the last line and Hirht looked at me, then asked Rasa, “Have you ever heard of anything like him before?”

She never took her eyes off me. “There is... I've seen pictures from Chihes Os [Lands-Beyond?] [Africa]. There are animals there that look like him, but from all accounts they're just animals.”

“Chirit?”

The Rris from university archives looked uncomfortable. “I’ve seen the texts she’s referring to and there are resemblances, quite striking too. Quite striking. But I’ve never heard tell of any behaving the way it... ah... he does. Never.”

“Do you think it’s possible that his kind actually comes from somewhere on another continent?”

“Sire,” Achit said. “I think we would have seen some sign of them before this. If that’s to be believed,” he gestured at the laptop, “they’ve covered most of the lands. We would most certainly have run into them before.”

Hirht flicked his ears back. “And what are the chances that that is telling the truth?”

“Then someone’s gone to a lot of trouble to weave a lie nobody I know would be capable of.” Eyes turned to Chaeitch who in turn was watching his fingers as his claws clicked on the table top. “Nobody I’ve ever heard of could make something like that [gadget?]. If they can do that, why not buildings like that? But I am curious about those flying machines: is there a simple [something] you could explain?”

“I’m sorry, but that word,” I did my best to repeat it, “I don’t understand it.”

“Ah,” he glanced at Rraerch who just smiled back. “Ah, is there a simple way to explain how it works?”

I thought for a second and called up a picture of a hot air balloon on the screen. “A simple way... If you make a very light round shape, like a bag, smaller than this one. Fill it with hot air. The hot air will try to rise and lift the bag.”

He blinked. “That simple?”

“It’s something that cubs make. There are other kinds but they aren’t as easy to make.”

Next question:

Rasa reached out to tap a claw on the table, then leaned forward to ask, “You seem as intelligent as a Rris, but you are nothing like us. How can two kinds as different as our own succeed? Learn to think?”

The way she was eyeing me... it was like a taxologist might scrutinize a previously unknown specimen. I swallowed and studied the pattern inlaid in the tabletop: a repeating geometric abstract that seemed almost Greek.

“Mikah?” Hirht ventured. “Do you understand the question?”

“I understand. I’m just trying to think how to answer.” I sighed and gave it my best shot. “Time changes a lot. My kind started over the sea, the land you call Chihes Os we call Africa. A very long time ago, before we had tools or could

even think. We were just animals.” Ears went down around the table but I continued. “We weren’t the fastest animals, we weren’t the strongest, we didn’t have claws or sharp teeth, so we had to use our brains and our hands. It was the smartest who lived to carry on those... characteristics.

“With Rris, I’m not sure what happened. Something that happened on my world didn’t happen here. Instead of my kind... growing, your kind did. My kind is here... those animals you were talking about, I think that’s what happened to my kind here.”

Rasa sat stock-still for a few heartbeats, then said, “That idea... of [species] changing, that’s... it’s something that’s being taken very seriously. You’re saying it’s true? That we did change from animals? Do you have Rris where you come from? What... “

“Good lady,” Hirht interrupted her, “there will be time for that later.” The naturalist subsided, her tail lashing to and fro behind her while the King looked further down the table, “Rraerch, you had something to ask.”

Owner of a shipyard. Of course her question would have a bearing on that. “If your boats don’t have sails or oars, how do they move?”

“You use steam? It is like that. Steam can turn a... a thing like a wheel with oars on it to move a boat.” I saw both Rraerch and Chaeitch flinch at mention of that, exchanging glances.

“I didn’t see anything like that,” Chaeitch said.

“We use another way. A ...a...” I just didn’t have the vocabulary to describe it properly so I used the laptop and the Britannica to illustrate how a ship’s screw worked. Both the industrialists leaned forward, drinking in every detail.

More questions after that, from all of them. Mathematics, biology, metallurgy, construction techniques, agriculture... I lost track. The laptop died, batteries depleted, and I had to struggle on without it, using paper and charcoal pencil to illustrate points I couldn’t describe. There were questions I couldn’t answer: I either outright didn’t understand them or they were in fields about which I knew little or nothing. Hour after hour it went on, until my voice started to fail and Hirht finally put a stop to the questioning.

“I think that will be enough for today.”

“Sir,” Rasa protested, “I’ve got more questions. I’d like to examine him. I have to have time...”

He raised a hand to cut her off. “There’ll be time enough later. Mikah, thank you, you’ve been very helpful. If would please leave us now, the guards will take you back to your room.”

It was all I really felt like doing. I just ducked my head and stood, somewhat awkwardly: my left leg had gone to sleep. The Rris were silent as I walked to the door and I could feel them watching me, could hear the outbreak of voices as I closed the door behind me.

Shyia hadn't waited around. I couldn't tell if the trio of guards who escorted me back to my room were the ones who'd brought me out, but they kept their distance. I took my time, dawdling at windows where I had the chance, stopping to look at the paintings.

Almost all in a portrait format. The perspective, that was what was bugging me. Everything was compressed ever so slightly along the x-axis, appearing distorted to me. Also there wasn't as much depth to the paintings, the horizons usually just hints of color; as if the painting had been done by someone mildly myopic. The use of color reminded me somewhat of a Degas. Not only their color sense differed from mine, the actual way they saw the world: more vertical, less detail in distance or stationary objects.

The guards had their limits though, they kept me moving, politely and trying not to touch too much. Occasionally there would be other Rris in the corridors: servants in simple breeches or kilts or just decorated sashes. Nobles - not necessarily wearing more, but what they did wear was more elaborate: brighter colors, more jewelry, patterns shaved and dyed into their pelts. Invariably they moved aside and stared openly at me. Once, a noble - female by the prominent nipples - out with her entourage ordered the guards to stop so she could get a better look at me.

"Ma'am," the officer looked uncomfortable, "we're supposed to take him straight to the guest wing."

"Stop making noise," she brushed the guard aside and approached me. Barely up to my shoulder, pale tan pelt, strips of white leather hanging in loops from her hips, rustred curlicues dyed in the fur of her chest. "Mothers milk! What is it?"

"A guest ma'am," the officer replied miserably. Stuck between his orders and

a hard place.

“Dangerous?”

“A... ” he never got beyond opening his mouth. She just reached out and touched my arm, then reached up toward my face. I flinched away from the visible claws and she hesitated before withdrawing her hand. “Ugly son, isn’t it?” Her friends chattered amusement.

I didn’t say anything, looked at the guards and saw his ears twitch down, then turned my back on the female and just walked away. Weapons clattered and claws pattered on marble as my escort hurried after me. Their officer glanced sidelong at me but didn’t say anything. I made a conscious effort to relax my jaw.

—v—

There were deer in the palace grounds. I watched a buck with an impressive rack stalking through the snow at the treeline across the garden, hesitate with one hoof raised, then bound away until it was lost among the trees and frozen white mist blowing in from the lake. I rubbed a bit more of the frost off the windows, but there was no further sign of the buck or of whatever had startled it. I sighed, got up from the window seat and went to toss another log on the fire.

Not a lot to do. The guards had returned me to my room about mid-afternoon. The weather had closed in, the fog rolling in from the lake and covering the palace grounds with shifting banks of gray. I’d poked through the draws in the low desk, finding something that might have been a blotter and a small wooden

box full of fine sand, whatever that was used for. Not very interesting. I killed more time lying on the bed, studying the paintings and trying to figure out the styles and composition. The portraits: a dark, 'dramatic lighting' one of a sober-looking Rris noble whom I promptly dubbed 'Chuckles', a much lighter one of a nude individual I decided was female. Difficult to tell, even if she was naked. That inscrutable, slightly-dazed expression on her face that might or might not have been caused by a crack in the canvass made her an unmistakable 'Mona'. Last was a thickset elder Rris with a distinctive paunch and a lot of white through his mane and facial hair, settled comfortably in a chair beside a fire laid in a huge hearth; for some reason he struck me as a 'Henry'.

The sound of voices outside interrupted my reverie, a key turned in the lock and I sat up on the edge of the bed as Shyia entered with my laptop tucked under one arm, the door closed behind him. He tipped his head, studying me, before he asked, "How are you feeling?"

"All right."

"His lordship said you were having trouble talking. They kept you talking too long, did they?"

"A bit." I rubbed my throat, "Speaking Rris can be like trying to swallow sand."

He snorted, almost amused. "I think you might have to manage. That aside, how did it go?"

"A lot of questions."

“What did you expect?”

“I know,” I nodded, looked down at the pattern of the carpet. “I answered as best I could. They have more questions, they were... arguing.”

“Ah.” He slowly bobbed his head and didn’t say anything else, stalked over to the desk and folded himself down onto the cushion there, laying the laptop on the desktop. “His lordship wants you to fix this.”

I shrugged. “Need the solar sheet. To feed it.” Their language has nothing analogous to ‘recharge’. “Or you could find the other battery.”

“Ah.” He looked down at the plastic case. “I’ll try and get them. Is there anything else you need?”

“Would I be able to go out? Look around the town?”

He hesitated, “I don’t think that would be possible.”

“Just around the palace then?”

His ears went down. “I’ll have to ask. Understand, Mikah, I don’t have [something] here. My authority ended when we entered the city. I don’t have any

say in what happens to you, the best I can do is ask.”

“Okay,” I nodded. “Thank you.”

He scratched at his muzzle with a single clawtip. There was something else on his mind. “There’re already rumors floating around about you. His lordship knows it was impossible to keep people from seeing you, but he hopes we can keep your knowledge buried, at least for the time being. He would appreciate your cooperation in that.”

“What does that mean.”

“Try not to be too conspicuous. Don’t talk around strangers and don’t discuss what you are doing here with anyone. Understand.”

“No. I don’t. Who am I supposed to be hiding from?”

He laid elbows on the desk and leaned forward. “I’m not sure. I suppose... there are people in other kingdoms who wouldn’t want us to get an advantage, merchants or guilds who might see new ideas as a threat to their income and lives. What some fool might decide to do... ” He moved a hand in a Rris shrug, letting me make what I would of that.

“That is... likely to happen?”

“I don’t know... It would be dangerous. For the Guilds it would be foolish. If one acted against you and was implicated, it would find itself [boycotted/embargoed] by everyone else. There are limits to their authority. Other kingdoms would probably face similar consequences.”

“If anyone could prove they were responsible,” I added.

“Ah,” a grunt of assent that said he realised that. “That’s not something to think about though.”

True. It wasn’t. “Do you know what happens now?” I asked. “After those questions... did they believe me?”

“They have more,” he told me. “They all wanted more time to talk with you, so you will be seeing them and other people individually, possibly going over to the university sometime.”

“What’s that like?”

“I couldn’t say. I’ve never been to Shattered Water before,” he admitted.

“I thought you knew your way around.”

His ears went down. “Huhnn, I’ve heard a lot from travelers and Mediators who’ve shifted out from here.”

“What’s it like? The town?”

He looked thoughtful and brushed the tufts of fur on his cheeks back. “A beautiful city, I heard. A million people. Biggest market in the land, with ships coming from kingdoms all over the waterways. Almost all the Guilds have enclaves, with some of the best craftsmen, artisans. Thihicarm armories have their works here, the best in a dozen kingdoms. Also the Smither shipyards and docks. The [heat/ expanding-water/steam engine] was invented here. . [Pubs/bars] with drinks you can’t get anywhere else, theaters, [something] houses, the mint. There is the Ithemina gallery. The [aqueduct?] bringing water to surrounding lands is supposed to be impressive.”

“I’d like to see some of those.”

“Ah, I’m sure you’ll get a chance.” He stood then and strolled across to the window, reaching out to wipe a clear patch in the frost across the leaded glass before peering through. “Are you comfortable here?”

I plucked my jeans. Those, along with my shirt just weren’t very warm. “Can I have my clothes back? It is cold.”

“Uhn,” he turned to cock his head at me. “I’d forgotten... I’ll see if I can get something for you.”

‘Something’. Not necessarily my property; if that was what it was anymore.

“Thank you,” I said and he never caught the flatness of that, just scratched at his crotch. “Uhn, his highness also wanted to know what food you’d prefer. I told them how you like it cooked, but is there anything you want?”

Hopefully I asked, “Are there any plants? Maybe fruit?”

His ears laid back. Obviously wasn’t his first choice of a meal, but he said, “I’ll see what I can find.”

It wasn’t too bad. They burned the meat though.

—v—

I remember there was darkness. There were voices calling something I couldn’t understand and I was running again. Trees ripped at me like claws and just as quickly turned into teetering jigsaw-buildings amongst who’s alleys I caught glimpses of sinewy shapes moving whippet-quick while I tried to run again, heart laboring, and a snarling head lunged from shadows and there was that memory-picture of a wet gleaming mouth gaping wide as the fangs ripped through my face.

A gut-dropping sensation and I screamed and was aware I sitting bolt upright, my legs tangled in drenched sheets while perspiration turned clammy in the cold air and I was gasping like a marathon runner. Shapes moved in the darkness and I jumped in utter fright as a half-dozen Rris materialized from the gloom. Guards, I realised belatedly, my heart hammering so loud that they must’ve

heard.

“Sir?” someone ventured. I couldn’t see whom.

Another noise, light as the door opened and more Rris silhouettes entered.
“What’s going on? Mikah? What’s wrong?”

“Shyia?” I asked in confusion and blindness.

“Yes. It’s me. What’s going on.”

“He was screaming,” a guard said. “We came in and there was nothing. He was just kicking at the blankets.”

There was a low hiss, then Shyia’s voice again. “I see. The dreams again?”

I pulled the sheets up and nodded. Dizzy and confused and embarrassed.

“He dreams?” another guard asked.

“Wait outside,” Shyia said and there was a hesitation before one replied “Sir,” then came the sounds of metal and leather shifting as they exited.

Again a silence. I caught a flicker of movement then a more distinct shape as Shyia stepped into the patch of diffuse moonlight filtering through the windows, seated himself on the cushion at the desk. While he could see me well enough, that gave me something other than a disembodied voice in the darkness to focus on. "I thought you were over those," he finally said.

"So did I." My voice was rasping, my throat sore. I pulled the eiderdowns up over my shoulders and sat hunched down into them.

"Maybe it was too soon to bring you here."

I ran a hand through my hair, sweat slicking it back. "I don't know that would change anything."

"Why?"

"It's... It's... I don't know. It's everything. A million Ris out there," I gestured at the window, "only one of me. All the changes. Everything just pulling me. It's like a river I'm drowning in. I haven't got any control."

"It's not so bad," I saw him making gestures, unable to really see any more.

As if you would know. "If you were in my place... If you were on my world, what would you do?"

He hesitated. “That’s nothing I’ve ever experienced. It’s difficult to say.”

“You are alone. Everyone you ever knew is gone. There’s nowhere to run to. You can’t speak properly. You can’t understand what’s happening and people who see you run or hunt you down! Your life is never your own again. What would you do?”

I saw him cock his head and realised how passionate I’d been getting, just trying to make him understand. “I would survive,” he eventually said. “There is always hope.”

Survive. Hope. Transliterations of Rris words and concepts. I’m not sure I got them right and I’m not sure he understood what I was trying to say. I remember looking at him there, that shadowy figure sitting crosslegged on that cushion with his peaked ears twitching, his eyes flashing like a brief flare of sun off oil on water. A different species: how did he see the world? did he really understand how different I was?

His kind was a predator, had once preyed on mine.

Did those racial memories run both sides of the line?

I shuddered.

“Do you want to try and sleep?” he asked at length. “I might be able to find

some marijuana...”

“No,” I interjected. A bad trip... I didn’t need that. “Thank’s. No. I’ll manage.”

“All right.” He got to his feet in a single flowing movement. He hadn’t paused for clothes I saw now. Shit, didn’t the cold bother them at all? “The guards will be outside if you need anything,” he told me. I just nodded and he left, the door flashing a wedge of light from the corridor as it opened and closed. I heard voices outside but the words were muffled and indistinguishable.

I lay down again and tried to get comfortable. For a long time I lay and just stared up into the darkness and it felt like it was staring back.

—v—

Next morning I was given clothes. Not mine, but my hosts had gone to some trouble. The pants were of Rris manufacture and a material lighter than denim, but it looked like the pattern had been copied from my blue jeans right down to the rivets. No zipper, instead there were wooden buttons on the fly. They fit all right, as did the long-sleeved green and brown patterned tunic I had to belt around my waist and the cream-colored quilted sleeveless vest. That vest was a blessing, the warmest thing I had.

Following breakfast I was taken to see Hirht again. It was back in that oversized white room with the desk over in the corner. What was the purpose of that place? To show who was in charge? A Rris statement of power like the human convention of facing your clients from behind an oversized executive

desk?

It was a gray day outside, periodic flakes drifting out of the overcast. The shutters on those ceiling-high windows were open for what light they could admit: a greyish dimness that didn't do anything to add warmth to the room. This time there was another cushion at the desk and Hirht waved me to it with a flick of his hand from his seat, just watching me and not saying anything. I sat down awkwardly, again wishing they had proper chairs, even if they were the rickety things I'd used out in Westwater. He was only wearing a pleated kilt of some dark material but his knife still hung at his hip.

"I was told you didn't sleep very well last night," he finally said.

I nodded slightly. "I've had... better."

"Does that happen often?"

"Sir. I haven't... it's the first time for a while."

"Uhn." His cushion rustled as he shifted. "Is there anything we can do? Do you want something to help you... no, you can't, can you."

"No sir. Thank you."

"Is it going to be like that every night?"

“I don’t know,” I shook my head. “It’s... I can’t tell.”

“You don’t know what causes it?”

I opened my mouth, closed it again and swallowed. Just shook my head again.

“That mean’s ‘no’, doesn’t it,” he said. “Huhnn. The Mediator said you were quite upset when he left you. Maybe it’s just the changes. I know for you they must be difficult. I’m sure you’ll get used to it. He said you had disturbing nights in Westwater and those calmed down. These will too.”

“I hope so,” I forced a smile, for what little that meant to him. Sheer force of habit, but I was careful not to show teeth.

His ears flickered backwards, but only a flinch. “Are those clothes enough for you.”

I reached down to rub the linen of the vest between thumb and forefinger. “They are fine, sir. I like this coat. Warm. But would I be able to have my foot coverings back? The floors are very cold.”

“Cold?” He glanced downwards in surprise, then looked at my bare feet and this time his ears did go down. He stared for a few seconds before drawing his gaze back to my face. “Good lady Wilder wants to see you at the university this afternoon. You would need them to go there?”

“Out there?” I looked out one of the windows at the snow and ice outside, thinking frostbite. “Yes, sir. Yes. I’d freeze without them.”

“All right. I’ll make sure you have them. Now, your machine. Can you fix that?”

“It doesn’t need repairing. It’s just that it needs to be... refilled. You can use it for about eight hours, then it needs to be refilled. I need the shiny cloth that was with it to do that.”

“Can you do that this afternoon.”

“It will take longer. It needs sunlight. When there is not much sun it takes longer to refill.”

“You fill it with sunlight?”

I suppressed the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose. “Something like that.

“Something like that,” he frowned, a crest of wrinkles marching up his muzzle. “Can you be more specific?”

So I tried to explain about electricity and batteries and found that necessity

drew me deeper and deeper into a mire of metaphors that ended up confusing us both. He was getting the impression that electricity was a liquid that could be stored in jars, I was getting the impression that this was going to drive me up the wall. Preschoolers accept the fact that electricity is there, it works. They just have to stick a fork into a wall socket and they have the proof. Here I was trying to explain it to someone who'd never had anything to do with anything even remotely electrical in a language I couldn't speak properly. When I stopped to try and get my thoughts together he raked his claws through his mane. "Maybe this can wait for a while," he said. "Mikah, can you say [something] for your kind is ahead of Rris? You understand?"

I hesitated. "I think so. My kind went through a time like this maybe three hundred years ago. I'm not sure. I think it's impossible to say exactly. I'm not sure it's very important."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "My kind doesn't exist here."

"Comparing ourselves with something that doesn't exist. Huhn? But what if we DO meet your kind someday? What could they do to us?"

Didn't he realize... "You've already met them. What are they doing to you?"

He looked puzzled, "I don't understand..." then he stopped in his tracks as comprehension dawned. "Ah," he said and looked down at the papers on his desk and whatever was written there. "Ah." When he looked at me again it was a different expression: wary, startled, as though he were seeing something he

hadn't noticed before. "[something] of change," he said.

"I don't understand that word."

"A messenger. Carrier of gifts or otherwise. [harbinger]. " He snorted. "Shave me but you're right. That's a twist I hadn't noticed. Just you and in two days you've already started a fire under the university."

"I haven't... ." I started to protest, then realised. "That is a... figure of speech, isn't it."

"Yes."

"Oh."

He smiled then. "That's something else we're going to have to address. There've been concerns about your language skills so we will have to find a tutor for you. You will need a couple of days a week, but I think that shouldn't be too much of an immediate problem. See how you get on with Aesh Wilder this afternoon."

Aesh Wilder, a female name that rang a bell. "That is Rasa? The one who studies animals?"

"Huhnn," he frowned. "Animals. Rris. The way life works. Yes."

Her. I remembered the way she'd looked at me, like she wanted to open me up to find out how I worked. "Why does she want to see me?"

"Mikah, there're over a dozen scholars tearing at each other's throat to be able to talk with you. I think it's best that she's first."

—v—

It was just after midday when the guards came for me. They brought the solar sheet for the laptop along with my boots and socks and stood watching with interest as I put them on. Someone had been playing with the buckles and fucked up the settings. Finally got them settled and the officer asked, "Finished?"

"Ready." Felt good to get something warm on my feet and I was equally grateful for the gloves the cubs had given me. My guards led me out of the palace by another route, this one ending at a side entrance on the northern face of the palace that opened onto a cobbled yard. A group of low buildings with peaked roofs were situated on the far side of the square, carriages and wagons visible through opened double doors. A Rris in servant's livery led a pair of lamas through a door and into one of the larger buildings. The palace stables I guessed.

A pair of wooden four-wheel passenger carriages were waiting in the courtyard. Elegant things that vaguely resembled Wells-Fargo stagecoaches, save that every available surface was elaborately decorated with relief engravings. The lamps on the roof, screw heads, door handles and other fixtures were polished brass. Each coach had a pair of elk or somesuch in the halters, their tracery studded with more brass. A guard held the door open while I

climbed in. The entire interior of the cab was upholstered in studded green leather, from the ceiling to the facing benches that wheezed as I settled myself. The cab rocked as two Rris guards in all their armor climbed in to sit opposite and stare at me.

There were voices outside, then with a lurch we started moving. The windows were glazed, but the glass was so distorted they let light pass but it was impossible to actually see anything through them, from the inside or the outside. I guess that was the idea. It was a rough ride. There were cobbles under the snow and no suspension in the coach. The cushions helped, but it still felt like you could feel every stone the thing ran over. I had to copy my guards and make use of the leather loops set around the inside as handholds but that didn't offer much comfort when you could feel the wheels skidding sideways on the ice.

"Is it a long way?" I asked.

Both my escort's muzzle twitched back in hurriedly-suppressed grimaces. "Ah, no sir," one said. "Not far. The eastern quarter."

Wherever that was. "Is there anyway to open the windows?"

"What for?" the other guard asked, warily.

"To see out side."

"No sir." He said. "We can't do that."

I'd figured as much. I just sat and watched amorphous shapes going past through the warped glass. There were starts and stops, occasionally voices shouting, the complaining noises of animals. If the guards hadn't been there I'd have probably opened the door or at least tried to open a window. That was probably one reason they were there.

The ride didn't take too long, about a quarter of an hour before we stopped and the door opened. Four other guards ushered me out onto a snowswept drive. It was a big old building built of dark clapboard and hidden away by the trees that surrounded it: green and white evergreens, the skeletons of deciduous. I wasn't sure how many floors there to the place: the frontage was a riot of shingle roofs and gables, annexes and additions, windows of all shapes and sizes. This was the university? It wasn't what I'd been expecting.

Looking around I could see other buildings through the trees. There was a large brick place nearby and another slate roof visible a short distance away. "Here," a guard guided me toward the front porch.

"This is the university?" I asked him.

"Part," he grunted. "Other buildings the rest."

A man of many words. The steps looked worn with use and the front door was open with still more guards in the reception hall inside. It was warmer there and everything was made from polished wood that glowed golden-red in the meager lamplight. What parts of the floor weren't laid with threadbare rugs were scored and marked from claws. No paintings here, instead the walls were decorated with ornate tapestries featuring geometric designs that could almost have been

old Celtic. Rasa was on me as soon as I stepped into the place. “Ah, welcome, Misah. I’m glad you could come.”

“Mikah,” I corrected. “I mean, Michael. I like seeing more of your town.”

“Good, good,” she said, looking me up and down and I wondered if she’d even heard me. “Well, we don’t have much time, so if you would follow me... Watchkeeper, do you need an entire army [something] around after him?”

“I have orders,” the officer responded.

“Orders,” she hissed softly and waved a hand. “Oh well, come along. This way. We don’t have all day.”

I followed her agitated tail and heard the guards fall in behind me. Down the hall into the dimmer interiors, up a narrow staircase. The place had an old smell to it: wood and fabric, the underlying scents of beeswax and oils and something else. It was stronger when we got to the next floor and reminded me of hospitals.

Halfway down a corridor and guards grabbed me, pushing me against the wall and closing in around me as a stranger in great haste rounded a corner and wisely froze when it found itself staring down the muzzles of four flintlock pistols. “This area [something],” a guard snarled. “Who are you.”

“Hysck,” Rasa provided with a snort. “A student in the wrong place. What are you doing here? You were told this building was closed today.”

The student stared wide-eyed at the guns, ears laid down flat. “Ah... I had to get my [something].” There was a sheaf of tatty papers clasped in his/her hand. “I was leaving.”

“You know?” the officer asked Rasa.

“Huhn? Oh. Yes. She does have a [something] she’s working on. Not much trouble.”

The officer snatched the papers from the student’s hand, leafed through them, snorted and passed them back before waving her along. She ducked her head to him and sidled past, staring incredulously at me before scampering off down the stairs with a clattering of claws. She’d have a story to tell her friends all right.

There were no further incidents. The corridors were empty, as were the rooms we passed. I caught a few glimpses through open doors: cushions and a few low desks, parchment drawings on the walls, charts and wooden models, other rooms with containers like glass mason jars with things suspended in greenish liquid lining the shelves. Now I realised where I’d smelt that smell before: biology labs. Formaldehyde. That didn’t do anything to reassure me.

Then Rasa opened a door and gently took my arm to show me in. I went along, all the time plagued by the gut feeling I was making a bad mistake. It was a large room lit by a chandelier of gas lamps in pale glass globes; if there were windows they were behind the heavy green drapes opposite. There was a bookcase with glass-lattice doors protecting thick leather-bound tomes. On the walls hung charts and framed pictures of all sizes, anatomical diagrams of Rris, deer, beavers, other animals painstakingly rendered in charcoal and ink and

some in startling color. Ten or so Rris had been seated at low desks and were standing as I entered. I could see the fur bristling on several of them as voices rose in excited chattering and then all my attention was focused on the table in the center of the room: large enough to lie on, padded with green leather and with several sets of heavy leather straps dangling from the sides. Two guards had followed me in, closed the door and taken up stations on each side. My heart lurched into double time. I couldn't take my eyes off that table.

Rasa was talking, waving her hands and gesturing as she tried to get the others to sit and calm down. Eventually they did so and their eyes stayed locked on me while she led me forward. "Nothing to worry about," she assured them. "He looks dangerous, but he is civilized. He won't [something]."

"Goods words for your memorial speech," someone said and there were chuckles.

"Very amusing," she sighed. "Now, as you see he appears to be [something]. He can think, possibly as well as a Rris. He has a [something] language of his own. His [something] hands are well [something] for using tools. I've tried to [something] a match in [something] journal of [something], but there was nothing [something]."

"Understandable," a young-looking Rris spoke up. "But what exactly IS it?" those sentiments were echoed from several of them.

"I have a few ideas. He claims his kind [something] from a variety [something] in the [something]... "

She went on at length like that. Parts I could understand but so much of the time she was using names and words I was completely unfamiliar with. Others started asking questions: How could she be so sure? Could anyone verify my story? Was there anything like this on record? What was I exactly? What did I eat? Drink?

It went on. I was shivering and only partly from the cold. A couple of the others went to the bookshelves and retrieved several books and a couple of cylindrical scrolls they opened to unroll A2 sized parchments. Pictures of chimpanzees. Dissected chimpanzees.

I flinched wildly at the touch on my arm and Rasa jerked away in shock. “Mikah?” her hand came up, like she was ready to ward me off if I came at her.

“W... ” I had to try several times to pronounce the Rris words, ” What is happening?”

“They just want to talk. Do you understand? Mikah? Just talk.” She reached out again, slowly, and touched my arm. I know she could feel the trembling there and she looked worried, then looked around at the table with its straps, across to where a line drawing of a dissected chimp was spread out across a desk. “Oh. Shave me... Mikah, you think we... ” she laughed then, drawing attention from the other Rris. “Mikah, his lordship would cut my [something] out if he thought we would even scratch you. You understand that?”

“I understand.”

“Good. Now come over here. We just want to look at you.”

This time I went where she showed me, across to the desks to be seated on a cushion. “All right?” she asked.

I nodded and she patted my hair, made me feel like a dog.

The other Ris gathered. Scholars, their equivalent of biologists - I can't call them anthropologists - I guessed they were that, but looking at them it was so hard to believe it. Fur of different hues, odd joints in the limbs, clawed fingers over illuminated texts and those feline visages that twitched and stared at me. One of them crouched opposite me and tipped his? her? head back and forth while amber eyes examined me. “You can understand me?”

“Yes.”

The pupils snapped to dark pools. Ris muttering and whispers went around the room, sounding like wind across a thatched roof. “How well can you talk?”

“I... I can manage. Please, talk slowly.”

”[Something] sounding,” another growled.

“With that mouth I'm surprised he can talk at all,” another answered.

“Quite [something] though. See... ” A clawed hand came up toward my face and faltered. The Ris looked worried, “May I touch?”

I swallowed, then slowly nodded, “Okay ... Yes.”

Fingerpads poked my cheek and stroked along my jawbone. “He has more [something].”

More Ris were touching me then. Fur and fingerpads felt inhumanly strange as they ran over my beard and skin, exploring and probing. They opened books to show sections of primate skulls and jaws. Apes of various types; something that almost resembled a chimp but had the damndest coif-style hairdo. A Ris wanted to examine my hand, which I reluctantly extended. Three of them joined in, muttering and exclaiming , folding and bending my fingers, feeling for tendons and joints and comparing it with drawings of ape bones. A Ris with white and black speckled muzzle had produced a drawing board from somewhere, a black-stained hand moved quickly and competently as he/she sketched me.

I went with the flow.

They wanted me to strip: asked, then insisted. Like modeling for life drawing I tried to tell myself as stood there shivering in the cold. Embarrassing; not just the nudity but the exposure, the vulnerability, the way they treated me like a piece of meat. The examination was very thorough and impersonal. The two guards watched, wide-eyed at first, then one whispered something to the other and they sniggered. There were exclamations over this and that: my ribs, my spine, shoulders and arms. My legs and feet drew a lot of attention, especially my ankles and heels. Ris were startled when I convulsed as furry digits ran over the soles of my feet: hell, can I help it if I’m ticklish? One touched the mass of

scar tissue on the back of my shoulder and there were questions asked about that and all the other marks that criss-crossed me. I learned my heart is in a different position to theirs. My genitals caused remarks and more comparisons with anatomical diagrams and more questions. Of course I don't have a sheath, something I had in common with the apes in the sketches. I still didn't know what Rris male organs were like but apparently my physical shape bore more of a resemblance to the primates than to Rris. My genitals are also disproportionately larger than Rris. I don't know why; maybe we breed for it. I don't have mating cycles. They wanted to know how well I could balance without a tail, why my grip was so much stronger than a Rris's... The questions went on, as did the examination, until I had to stop: I was literally freezing.

"Shave me, you are cold," Rasa sounded astonished when she touched my violently shivering arm. "Why didn't you say something."

"I tried to," I said. It was true, I had. It'd dragged out into a debate about what kind of climate I could've come from. "I don't think anyone was listening."

"Shave everything. I should have thought of..." She hissed in annoyance and scratched at a cheek tuft. "Get your clothes."

The Rris who was sketching me complained. The trio who were trying to find a precedent for my ankle joints complained, but Rasa had a few words with them. They looked at the guards and I didn't hear anything more out of them. The next couple of hours passed more quietly. They wanted to hear my version of how humans evolved so I sat on one of their cushions and recounted as best I could: arboreal primates forced from the trees when the veldts of Africa began to open out, working in groups, scavenging and hunting food, learning to stand erect which freed the forearms to carry rocks, then shape tools...

A Rris wanted to know what we'd been before we were apes.

Another asked, "If your kind grew from the apes, then did we also grow from something?"

There were a few low growls and tails lashed, then the officer returned to announce I was through for the day. Time to return to the palace. Rasa saw me down to the front door where she patted my shoulder, "We'll see you later in the week."

It was night outside. A cold wind stirred the trees and I saw distant lights through the branches. The carriage was cold and dark. My guards sat in the gloom and watched me as I stared at the glass and listened to wheels clattering on stone and ice. Occasional lights passing by outside scrolling across metal on their armor, flitting across their inscrutable features.

At the palace they shepherded me through a side door and along corridors with their feeble oil and gas lamps. I saw Rris servants and a couple of times we passed by better-dressed nobility who stared openly at me. Once a high ranking pair blocked the corridor, demanding to know what I was. The officer smoothly diverted them to the side while the other guards spirited me past.

Back in the sanctuary of my dimly-lit rooms I ran the bath, stripped of and sank into the water. When the water got cold I kicked the faucet and let it run until water gurgled into the overflow. Just soaked, trying to unwind. I guess it worked: I never heard Shyia come in.

"How did it go?"

I flinched; water sloshed. The Mediator was standing in the door, hands tucked in the waistband of loose-fitting black breeches. “Oh, you,” I rubbed my face and looked at my watch: 22:23. “It’s been a long day.”

“Not so well.” His ears flickered. “I heard they were quite pleased. You feel otherwise?”

“I just don’t enjoy being goddamn exhibit A,” I muttered.

“What was that noise?”

I slapped water. “It’s different from the other side.”

His tail lashed, then he gestured at the bedroom and said, “I brought your food. I’ll leave it for you.”

“Thanks,” I said and he left me alone then, something for which I was grateful.

—v—

It snowed heavily the next day. The heavy fall muffled everything and made the world a silent, gray place glimpsed through the ethereal clouds of drifting

whiteness as I was driven back to the university.

My eyes were sore. I had the beginnings of a headache even though it was barely 7:00. I hadn't slept well that night, spending most of it lying and watching the gas lamps in that pox-ridden chandelier flickering. Still hadn't figured out how to turn the damn thing off. Maybe I couldn't. It seemed to have a life of its own.

More of the Rris had brought sketchpads and this time there was a fire in the grate. At least this time no matter how physically uncomfortable their examination was I wasn't freezing. Just as embarrassing though. They were thorough, impartial and merciless: I felt like a cadaver at a medical school. Their furry hands felt so weird and worst of all they tickled.

There was hour after hour of that while they questioned and probed and sketched: close-ups of my fingers, and hands, feet and ankles, musculature, bones and ribs, my genitals, ears and nose, the patterns of my teeth. Of course it's a slow process, I should know. I saw how much detail they wanted to get and I saw how long it took one of them just to draw a finger, and I resigned myself to the fact that I'd be doing this for some time to come.

I did learn a few things from my time there. A few snippets of information about Rris history and evolution. They had evolved from cats, some kind of proto -felid that may have looked something like a distorted bobcat or lynx. They'd uncovered fossilized remains of creatures that bore a superficial resemblance to Rris but they'd summarily decided the remains belonged to a completely different species. My few remarks about evolution were causing stirrs in academic circles.

As did my correction of their belief that muscles were powered by blood

pressure.

“Of course it is,” a rather thin male laughed when I queried this. “What else could it be?”

I gestured with my hands as I fumbled for words. “There are... very many small parts of the body making each muscle. They are like many tiny muscles, very many, all making one. When a muscle has to move the brain tells all the tiny parts to grow small. They all grow small, therefore so does the muscle.” I frowned. “Make sense?”

There were murmured consultations between some of them, a derisive bark from the skinny Rris, “It’s been proven that loss of blood weakens a body. It [something] that blood fills the muscles, [something/ expanding?] them and [something] motion. Tiny muscles making muscle... Hah! Any fools here to believe that?”

I shrugged. “The heart moves the blood. What powers that?” He opened his mouth and closed it again, doing a credible impersonation of a goldfish. I pressed on, “It is possible to make a dead body’s muscles move without any blood at all.” The old ‘frog-legs’ routine. I’d done that one in biology way back in high school, I could explain it when they asked how.

The thin Rris who’d laughed at me just glared at me and didn’t say anything more. I later found out he’d been pushing a thesis on the subject; my correction would blow holes in his credibility around the university. I hadn’t made a friend that day. It would happen again in the future, but I tried to make sure that any time I did try to correct any misconceptions or interpretations Rris held I’d do it as diplomatically as possible.

This examination lasted longer than the other one had. On top of the physical they wanted to try and find out what medicines I might have a reaction to. They questioned me at length about a number of concoctions but I couldn't tell them much: I didn't know what they were showing me so I really had no idea what kind of effect they'd have on me. It was near midnight when they let me go and I climbed back into the coach to return to the palace. I couldn't tell if the guards were the same ones from the first night, but like that night they sat and stared at me the whole way back.

—v—

Shyia brought my breakfast again in the morning, just as the first sunlight was filtering across the horizon. I hadn't eaten the previous night: I'd crashed as soon as I'd got back to my room. I guess whoever prepared my meals took that into account because my breakfast was large with things like hot cheese scones with melted butter, a drumstick of what tasted like turkey, blueberries, and a glass of water.

"Hungry," Shyia commented as he watched me eat. "They didn't know whether to wake you for food or let you sleep. Huhn. How is it going?"

I chewed and swallowed my mouthful of turkey. "How much longer is this going on?"

"I don't know." He settled himself in the window niche and watched the dawn outside. For a while I ate in silence, then he asked, "What are they doing to you?"

“They want... they want to see how I work.” I gave him a few details and his ears went down. “Are they hurting you? I’m sure his lordship would order them to...” “

“No, not hurting. I will survive. It could be worse.” Hell, if our positions were reversed: if a Rris had ended up on my world the medical examinations would be a hell of lot more uncomfortable. “You were the one who told me it would be bad.”

“Huhn,” he grunted and there was another moment’s silence. “They’ve got something else for you today. I heard you’re meeting with someone called Chaeitch Ah Ties. You know him?”

“I’ve met him.” The young Rris who’d been present that day Hirht introduced me to some of the Rris I’d be working with, the one who was working on the steam engine. “Do you know what he wants me for?”

He snorted. “You know about something he’s probably spent a good part of his life developing and you ask what he wants to talk to you about.”

“Good point.”

He looked out the window again and scratched at his right cheek. “I’ve been wondering how long before something catches fire.”

“What do you mean?”

“Huhn. Talk about you... it’s spreading everywhere. Other kingdoms are going to hear about you, if they haven’t already. They’re going to start asking questions, then making demands. Depending on how his lordship handles things, there could be trouble.”

“Bad?”

His tongue flicked across his nose and he looked away. “Hard to tell. But, an insect falls into a fish pond, it doesn’t last long.”

Great. I lost my appetite.

It was about forty-five minutes later when the guards came for me. The laptop had charged and Belfast Child sounded through the room. When he came through the door the officer stared at the laptop for a few seconds. One of his ears flickered a couple of times then he turned to me, “Sir? Could you come with us. You might want warm clothes. Also, bring that.” He gestured at the laptop.

Same procedure as the last two days: carriages waiting at the postern gate. Two guards rode with me in my carriage as morning sunlight filtered in through the warped glass and I held the laptop to stop it bouncing around too much. This time the ride took longer and we didn’t make the same turns. Outside I could hear shouting Rris, animals, wheels on the streets and also the sounds of construction: hammers and saws. I climbed out when the door was opened and squinted into crisp winter sunlight. We were in a large courtyard surrounded on three sides by high brick walls and buildings, the other side was dockside,

crowded with snow-dusted stacks of crates, barrels, timber and milled lumber. There were ships docked there: four fat-hulled things with two masts lay at anchor. Another two ships were dry-docked at the end of slipways while a few cold-looking Rris workers labored at scraping down the hulls. The harbor was a deep bite out of the city, probably a river mouth, protected by stone breakwaters at the mouth to the west. Sheets of ice crusted the water, especially closer to the shore. I could see more boats and ships at anchor on the docks across on the southern side. Further along the docks were buildings: a series of big wooden sheds that had the Spartan look of warehouses built right out on the edge of the docks. The chill blowing in off the lake brought tears to my eyes and went right through my coat; I pulled my gloves out of my pockets and pulled them on.

“Sir?” The officer and his guards were waiting for me. “This way.”

I followed them across the docks toward the buildings while workers took time out to stare at me. A foreman howled in outrage and paraded around, waving his/her arms to get them back to work. My guards shifted a bit closer and kept their weapons ready.

The building wasn't a warehouse, it was a covered dry-dock. Inside was a large workspace with another ship in there, or parts of a ship. It was still under construction, just a keel and ribs surrounded by scaffold, ropes and tackle, stacks of lumber and racks of tools. Light found its way in through small windows high in the walls, water lapped under the big doors at the foot of the slipway leading down to the waterline. Apart from that, the building was deserted.

My escorts led me on through to another door on the far side of the shed. Beyond that was a small hallway with a rickety staircase and another door with a couple of soldiers on guard. The ducked their heads to the officer and stepped aside to let us through.

It was another construction shed, even larger than the other one and as cold inside as it was outside. The ribs of a half-completed hull were nestled in a web of wooden scaffold, like the ones outside except for the paddle wheels mounted on each side and the stubby funnel rising from the wood-bound boiler. Tools of all description and a few that defied it littered workbenches, along with sections and pieces of wood and metal. Hoists, ropes and chains hung from the ceiling joists, hammered panels of metal stood propped against walls. There was a Ris sitting on a pile of lumber with his back to us, tail twitching as the person regarded the carcass of the ship. Didn't even notice us until the officer spoke up, "Sir?"

"Uh?" The Ris turned, taking a smoking corncob pipe out of his mouth and his ears flicking up. "Ah! About time." I recognized him now: Chaeitch Ah Ties. In a flowing move he was on his feet and hurried over, ignoring the guards and grabbing my arm without any hesitation. "Come on, come on. Here." He pulled me over to the boat. The port-side paddle wheel was taller than I was. "What do you think?"

"Very nice," I said. "What is it?"

He gaped at me.

"Sorry," I said. "Joke."

"Joke?" He stared at me and took a puff on his pipe while his fur settled down again. "I didn't think you were the type." He hesitated again, taking the opportunity to tap his pipe down. "You do know something about these?"

“I know a bit. Not too much. I was an artist, not a... a... someone who makes these.”

”[Shipwright],” he offered.

“Shipwright. Thanks.”

“But you know a bit. What do you think of this?”

I had another look. When I was a kid I’d built a model steam engine, a small brass one based on James Watt’s original design. I’d lathed the shafts and screws down myself. It worked. It leaked and jammed and whistled, but it worked. The Rris steam engine worked on the same principle: a single-expansion engine with boiler, piston chamber, a weighted wheel that I realised replaced the unwieldy walking beam and piston shaft driving a gear train which in turn powered the paddles. Steering was by a rudder. A hell of a lot bigger, but I could make something of what they were doing.

“Be better steering by changing the speed of these,” I said, patting a wheel. “Also, you are using a... one-time system for the steam. You get more power from a...a more-than-one-stroke, also use less... .wood.”

“Multiple-stroke?” he looked thoughtful.

I put the laptop down on a handy bench and climbed inside the scaffold to get closer to the guts of the engine. “Here,” I pointed to the valve assembly on the

piston. It was all in brass. “Steam is heated, it pushes this out, then in again, then the steam comes out here, right?”

“Yes.”

“You can use the steam again. Steam pushes when it heats, but when it cools it pulls.” I moved my hands, trying to demonstrate. “Get rid of this,” I patted the metal wheel intended to power the piston on its return stroke. “Now, steam loses power, expands. Use more than one cylinder. Use small cylinder, then used steam goes on to larger cylinder, then larger one. Understand?”

His tail lashed slowly as he squinted at the engine, took a long drag on his pipe. “I think I see... Multiple cylinders. I’d been considering... it works? Better?”

“Much. More power, less fuel. Look.” I took him back to the laptop and fumbled with gloved hands to load an animation showing a triple-expansion engine with its steam tubes running through the fire cylinder. Looks easy enough to build, but I wasn’t sure Rris industry was up to it. The pipes and cylinders had to be cast properly and sealed by advanced welding techniques. A fault in a boiler and the thing could go off like a bomb.

I translated the animation’s narrative as best I could, again stumbling through that uneasy territory where concepts and words that just didn’t translate made a linguistic fog. He listened attentively and often asked me to stop the animation to have a closer look at something. When it was done he touched the plastic casing and tapped it with a claw, “Shave me, to be able to carry a library around with you... I don’t think I’ll ever be able to look at a quill the same way again.” He snorted: a cloud of white condensation. “Ah well. I think we’d be more comfortable talking in the office.”

The office was upstairs. It was a little room with racks of scrolls covering a wall, a low desk with a pair of capacious beanbag style cushions, a single grubby little glazed window rimed with frost and - most welcome - a fire in the potbelly stove. I made a beeline for it, my hands just about touching the hot iron as I tried to work some warmth back into my chilled extremities while Chaeitch bustled about collecting scrolls and papers. He looked surprised when he saw what I was doing. "Ah? You're cold?"

"It's not the warmest around here."

He glanced at the window and the snow falling out there and his ears went flat. "Rot it! I forgot! They said you were [something] to cold. I forgot. I shouldn't have kept you down there... oh rot it. I'm sorry..."

"Don't worry," I interrupted. "I'll thaw out."

"Oh." His eyes flickered sideways, toward the door and the guards who were waiting outside. "Would you like some wine? That can help warm you up."

Rris wine. I hadn't had alcohol for... how long was it now? Months. It was the first time anyone had offered me any. "Please. I'd like to try some."

He ducked his head and fumbled out a pair of Rris mugs and poured from a wide-bodied glass bottle wrapped in a wicker framework. I took the proffered mug and sniffed: smelled like wine, with an unfamiliar undertone. Chaeitch took a swallow and busied himself spreading scrolls out on the desk and weighting

the ends down to stop them rolling up again. I took a sip of my own and coughed. If it was wine it was about fifteen percent alcohol, and on top of that it was spiced. Chaeitch's ears went flat against his head. "Fine," I assured him. "Fine. Just a different taste."

Not too bad once you got used to it, and he was right; it did seem to warm you up. Or at least numb you to the cold.

The papers and scrolls he'd produced were plans. I recognized the details of his steam engine. None of the plans were real blueprints or technical drawings. They were just hand drawings. Detailed, that they were, but they reminded me more of sketches from Leonardo da Vinci's notebook than a diagram from a technical engineer's drawing board. Measurements and notes in a Rris cramped Rris crosshatched cuneiform scrawled in red and black ink everywhere, so cramped I could only make out the odd word. Tough to follow but it gave me an idea of what they'd done to the inside of his engine.

We spent the entire day poking through those papers. Jesus, when he got going he was unstoppable. He knew every inch of that steam engine, he didn't have to even glance at the plans to tell me about something: why something was done in a particular way, what an individual piece was made out of. It was something he'd designed himself and practically built himself. His baby.

I guess I was expecting him to be somewhat pissed at me, at least a bit disillusioned. I mean, he'd built something he'd believed was unique, something that would change the world, and he was right in that. Then someone - not even someone he might consider a person - appears out of nowhere and tells him it's old hat. I think I'd at least be annoyed, but he didn't seem to give a damn. I was a source of information, and he used it as best he could.

Engines of all types: steam, rotary, infernal combustion, wind power, solar, electric motors. Those last were a bit beyond him, but he was quite taken with the concept of the steam turbine.

“An [something] idea,” he enthused, then scratched at his chin. “Difficult to build. To move at the speeds you are saying... I doubt we could work to such fine [tolerances?]. How can you lathe out a chamber from solid metal? What material are the bits made from? Something that can cut iron...”

Talk went to methods and materials. Easy to see how something works, but how the hell do you make tungsten-carbide steel? Carbon-fiber? Synthetic Spidersilk? Heat-resistant ceramics? The answers were in the laptop, but from those answers more questions propagated.

The guards brought more wood for the fire and later, lunch. Slightly stale bread, the baked fish was a lot better. They also brought water, which went largely untouched while there was still wine in the flask.

Much later that afternoon Chaeitch spread his notes out across the desk and raked his claws through his cheek tufts. “Rot me... I never dreamed there could be so much. You need tools I’ve never heard of just to build the tools to make these things. Metals, chemicals, tools... Everything is linked to everything else. Where the rot do you start?”

“The beginning is always a good place,” I said.

He snorted. “Seriously.”

“Seriously.” I sank back in my cushion and contemplated the piles of notes and scribbles on the desk. Where did you start? “I’m not too sure. Keep it simple. Start at the bottom, maybe better furnaces? Then better metals and tools... build up from there.”

Chaeitch flicked his lips back and hissed through his teeth then reached over to run a single digit over the laptop’s keyboard. His claw sounded click, click, click across the plastic. ” His lordship had wanted to try and keep this within the workshops here. I don’t think that’s going to be possible. I think I can [something] the [something] engine. I’ve got a few ideas to work from, but the rest... I think it’s going to take a long time.”

I nodded and sighed, “I’m not going anywhere.”

He blinked, then asked, “How long are you staying?”

“What?” I stared, not quite sure I’d heard him right.

“How long are you staying? I mean before you go back to your home?”

“Didn’t they tell you... ” I swallowed, and told him, “I can’t go home.”

His irises flicked to black pools with a lambent corona. “I... they said you came here by accident; you are a guest. I didn’t know you couldn’t go back.”

“It’s no great secret.” I said and reached for my mug, polishing off the last dregs in one mouthful.

Chaeitch stared at me a while longer, then asked, “Another?”

“Please.”

The guards came for me later that evening. They were polite but firm when Chaeitch wanted more time. “Ah well,” he hissed, his tail lashing, “Until next time then. I’ll have another bottle waiting.”

“Sounds good,” I smiled and he only flinched a little.

Dark again outside, cold enough to freeze sound, but the sky had cleared and a blue moon hung over the skyline. My guards’ breath were puffs of crystal in the moonlight as they escorted me across the shipyard compound to where the wagon waited. Ris voices called out questions from the darkness and a couple of my guards replied, telling them to go home.

22:46 by my watch. I did my best to doze during the ride back to the palace, gave up after I’d almost been jolted out of my seat for the third time. My guards were watching me. I stared back, then on impulse asked, “Is this what you joined for?”

They both looked surprised, then confused. “Sir?” one asked.

“This,” I gestured at the cab, “This is what you were expecting when you joined the guard? This is why you joined? Did you want excitement? See new places? Money? Maybe you liked the uniform?”

The younger one on the left snorted a burst of laughter, the older one took a closer look at me and sniffed, then reared back. “You’ve been drinking?”

“Only to excess.” In the darkness I saw them both stiffen, as though I might launch myself at them. “That is a joke,” I hastened to add.

“Huhn,” the older one rumbled. “He gave you wine? I’m not sure... “

“Lighten up,” I said. “I only had a few.”

“I think it might have been a few too many,” he said.

I didn’t feel drunk. Effervescent, maybe, more mellow than I had for a long time, but not drunk. Was that forbidden to me also? That realization came like a splash of cold water in the face. Conversation lapsed for the rest of the trip. My guards were more tangible shapes in the darkness opposite. Dim patches of moonlight periodically washed through the windows as the carriage rattled through the cobbled streets, the dim, blue-tinged illumination painting the pair in eerie halfflight.

Back in my quarters there was a fire roaring away in the grate. It took the edge

off the chill, but couldn't do much more than that. I dragged the cushion across and dumped myself into it, wrung out after a long day. Minutes later a mute servant ducked in to deliver a covered tray and retreat again with tail lashing. Dinner: Chunks of liver cooked to some degree with side order of salad, berries, bread and water. I was hungry enough to eat it. Maybe I was drunk I reflected as I pushed the remains of the meal away. Liver... unggh.

A scratching at the door heralded the arrival of Shyia. He closed the door and hesitated, eyes flashing like oil on water as they caught the firelight. "The guards said you've been drinking."

"Did they," I said.

He coughed, "Chaeitch wasn't supposed to do that. They really don't want you... doing things like that."

That rankled. "Goddamn it! Why? It was just a couple of cups. I'm not going to go crazy."

He didn't say anything but his tail lashed.

"That's it, isn't it," I sighed. "They don't want me getting drunk. 'Monster goes crazy. Kills eight.'... Shit, Shyia, I can handle my drink."

"The guards said you were acting a bit... strange."

“There’s a difference between strange and drunk, isn’t there?”

“In your case?” He bobbed his head from side to side. “Who would know?”

“I do. And I know I wasn’t drunk. I’ve had stronger than that.”

He raised a hand to scratch at his ears, maybe to also try and hide the fact they were laying back. “Mikah, I really don’t have the authority... If his lordship doesn’t want to risk you drinking something you shouldn’t, there isn’t a lot I can do.”

“They’d listen to you,” I said. “They think you’re an expert on me.” The Mediator’s eyes flickered but he didn’t say anything. “Chaeitch treated me like I was a person. He talked normally, he joked, he offered me a drink... Not many Rris do that.”

“No, they don’t, do they,” he said and scratched at his ear again. “I will do what I can. No promises.”

“No expectations,” I said and this time he didn’t try to hide his ears when they laid flat, he just turned and left, the sound of the latch closing quite loud in the stillness. I sat for a while longer, not really intending to doze off.

The water was as dark and sluggish as oil, swirling around me. A speck of light fell into the depths, glinting like metal as it spiraled away into the depths and the river swept me away. Downstream, buffeted by the current like a twig, and the river branched, branched again, moving onwards, viscous, endless, the trees on the banks hunched and stunted. Darkness moved across the sky, twisted limbs knitting in a net that captured the moon and the blackness closed over me and I fought and...

Woke gasping and lunging on the floor before the fire, feeble light of dying embers outlining the inhuman silhouette of a guard, glinting highlights off armor as the Ris bobbed uncertainly on his ankles, "Sir?"

"Uhn?" My muscles protested as I tried to sit up, cramped and getting cold. "What...? What's going on?"

The guard shifted around, keeping a safe distance. "You were sleeping badly."

"Oh." I sat dumbly for a few seconds, then rubbed my eyes and flicked the light on my watch: 03:26. God.

"Are you all right?" the guard said.

"Fine. Thanks."

I saw the guard's ears flicker back and tail lash. "Perhaps you should be in bed? It would be more comfortable."

“Yeah,” I nodded. At least there was only one guard this time, not the whole damn squad like last time. The guard watched me warily as I got up, yawned and still watched me as I stripped to get into bed. I realised I didn’t know the bug-eyed guard’s gender, then realised I really didn’t give a fuck. Give them something to gossip about.

The guard was still staring. “Is there anything else?” I asked.

“Ah?” The guard flinched, then laid ears back, “No sir. You will be all right?”

“Yeah,” I nodded wearily. “I’ll be fine.”

With a respectful duck of the head and a glimmer of brighter light as the door was opened and closed, the guard was gone. I lay back under the mountains of sheets and furs and tried to listen to the silence of snow on the windowpanes.

—v—

The following days followed the same tracks: early mornings and late nights, a lot of work. I went to bed exhausted and cold and often hungry. I guess the cooks did their best, but they were still learning just what I found edible... and that didn’t consist of just overcooking a heart. They didn’t seem to know the meaning of weekends, or if they had them, they didn’t apply to me.

For the next week or so I had more meetings with Chaeitch. Sometimes with

him alone, a couple of times with other Rris associated with his guild in various capacities: engineers, metallurgists. There were more questions of course and a couple of times Chaeitch took me down to the workshops where Rris were working on the steam engine.

Every time I went in there something had changed. On the first trip the paddle wheels had vanished and I could make out the props and braces where a driveshaft was going to be run out through the stern. On the following visits the engine itself was being reworked. I could recognize the changes being made to the boilers and steam lines where they were intending to install secondary piston chambers. Chaeitch showed me parts of the drivetrain they were working on, a gearbox to let them increase the gear ratio. He explained they wanted to build a high speed pump to power a blast furnace, so there was more work to do on that: researching the compressor and the material needed to line the converter. They were also making some progress in processing tungsten: they'd at least been able to identify most of the chemicals used in extracting it from the raw ore.

That was essential to the refitting. We needed to work to much higher tolerances and harder materials than the Rris were accustomed to, and to do that we needed better tools. High-carbon steel bits would cut cast iron, but to cut steel we needed tungsten bits on the new machine tools the Rris wanted: the lathes, die presses, saws and planing machines. They were coming, but again they'd take time.

Days I wasn't at the workshop I spent over at the university. The Rris doctors had a seemingly endless number of tests they wanted to try on me: How well could I see? How strong was I? What kind of endurance? What light levels did I find comfortable? What kind of temperatures? At the same time they were absorbing and mulling over what I could translate from the medical resources in the laptop: tidbits about diseases and viruses, operating and first-aid techniques, antiseptics and the two-edged sword of antibiotics. Their microscopes were still in their infancy: enough resolution to make out some of the larger inhabitants of a drop of water. A Rris savant in another town had been postulating that these

might be responsible for diseases and illnesses. I remembered Chihirae saying something about that back in Westwater.

It was another four weeks, my watch telling me January had turned to February, before I had something extra added to my schedule. I guess someone complained about the effect my difficulty with the Rris language was having: slowing things down while I struggled to make myself understood. In any case Kh'hitch was the one who led me through the palace corridors to another wing. The library was constructed along Romanesque lines with a central 'nave' bisected toward the far end by a perpendicular transept and separated vertically into two tiers by a wooden balcony. Each of the tiers was lined floor-to-ceiling with shelves and these in turn were packed with books and scrolls and envelopes and wooden tablets. Sunlight streamed in through an arched stained-glass window high in the far wall, throwing shards of multihued light across the maroon carpet that ran the length of the room. Low-set desks and cushions were set out like pews in a church. Mobile stepladders squatted at the foot of the shelves. If the library had ever been a busy place, it was deserted now.

I followed Kh'hitch's substantial bulk along the 'nave', squinting into the brilliance of the stained glass: A stylized sun flared against a darker backdrop. To each side the shelves were weighed down by bulky leather-bound volumes: brown, red, some stark black covers. Gold and silver foil embellishments gleamed. We passed a rack of books behind glass, the leather bindings and covers so worn that on most of the whatever had originally been there had been polished down to a few flakes of gold foil or a few etched lines. "How many books?" I asked.

The Advisor snorted, his breath condensing. "Nearly a thousand I think. I don't have the exact figures. The collection at the university is larger but there are more [somethings] here."

"What is that word?"

He glanced up at me, then said, “First ones. Before there were copies made.”

“Ah.” Originals .“Impressive.”

His ears twitched. “Being able to fit all this into a box you can carry around with you... Now that that I find impressive.”

More conventional lattice windows filled the ends of the transepts, the left-hand one flooded with early-morning light. There was a Rris seated at a window desk. He looked up as we approached and I was momentarily shocked by the gauntness, the almost metallic grayness that dusted what had once been a tawny coat. Black eyes rimmed by amber flashed at me from what could have been a bare skull covered with velvet. One ear was a ragged stump. Old, really old. This was my tutor?

Kh’hitch ushered me forward and introduced us, “Esseri, this is Mikah, your student.”

“This?” The elder grinned slowly at me: a front fang was broken, the other capped in gold. His? Her? voice rasped, adding a grating tone to the normally sibilant Rris language. “Bigger than he looks in the pictures.”

“He’ll behave himself. ” The Advisor gave me another look before ducking his head and leaving us.

Esseri leaned back and watched me, I saw the tip of a tail lashing agitatedly. The tip of a walking stick poked from where it lay behind the desk. “Well, come on,” the old Rris growled. “Sit down. You can understand me?”

“Yes, sir,” I said as I hastily settled myself on the cushion opposite. It smelled like Rris.

Esseri’s one good ear laid back and something like a laugh escaped the wizened old muzzle. “Not ‘sir’, ape.”

I flinched at that, “Sorry, ma’am.” I used the female honorific.

“Huhn,” she snorted. “I think some parts of your education have been seriously neglected. You speak like you’ve got a mouthful of rocks.”

I blinked, taken aback but unable to refute that. Chihirae had tried, she’d done her best, but the final fault lay with me. “Ma’am, I just can’t speak like Rris. My mouth is a different shape.”

“Yes,” she stared at me with a tautness around her muzzle, her pupils flicking down to narrow slits in those amber eyes: sharp as obsidian. “I had noticed. Well, maybe there’s a chance it can produce something that sounds acceptable. Can you read?”

“A little. I haven’t had much practice.”

“Huhn.” Her eyes never left me as her nostrils flared, scenting me. Then she flicked her head and reached for a sheaf of paper lying on the black lacquered desk between us. Her hands were wrinkled, completely gray, and shaking slightly as she pushed the paper across. “All right. Let’s see how much you do know, ape. Conjugate those.”

“My name is Michael.”

“Whatever. Conjugate.”

I hesitated before picking it up. It was a list of basic verbs. I went through a fair few of them without too much trouble but there were a lot I didn’t know. She sat back and watched me as I read them. I mean really watched me, studying my mouth. Her remaining ear flickered when I had trouble with anything or was forced to mispronounce a word, but she didn’t try to correct me. It didn’t take long.

“Now, count to twenty.”

I did so and she listened, the tip of her tail lashing like a metronome, then she asked, “How’s your history?”

Almost nonexistent. I’d picked up a few snippets here and there, but not much. She quizzed me, asking questions: who was the first to cross the Spine mountains? When did K’trei usurp the throne? When was the Atlantic crossed? Who was involved in the Highland Alliance or the Chiret Treaty. Things like that. I couldn’t answer any of them.

“Who was this teacher?” Esseri spat. “She doesn’t seem to have done a very satisfactory job.”

“You... you don’t know what she had to do,” I said, with what I considered restraint. “She did the best she could.”

“Doesn’t seem to be enough,” she said.

“She saved my life,” I retorted, getting angry. “She taught me to speak Rris. She also had to look after me and do her job at the same time as well as standing up for me against Rris who wanted me dead. I think she did more than enough.”

Esseri stared at me and her good ear laid down again, “You do, do you.” She snorted, “Truly, your accent is terrible. For a start ‘K’Kchirshi’ is pronounced ‘KI-ah-Ki-chirshih’.”

I opened my mouth to say something, then swallowed it and instead tried to repeat her.

A strange one that old teacher. She was scared of me, I could tell: The way leaned back in her cushion, away from me, that little flinch whenever I had to lean forward, the way she kept sniffing the air. She still taught me though, and that was something I couldn’t understand. Why? If she was so uncomfortable around me why did she do it? Perhaps she didn’t have a choice.

If that was it, she tried to take it out on me. Everything I did was wrong in some way. My vocalization, my grammar. She made me drill words I had trouble with over and over again. A lot of the time it didn't make any difference: it couldn't. That same day she started me on a history text, reading it through. She wanted me to learn the words I didn't know, both definitions and pronunciations, and I tried, I did my best.

It was a long day.

The sun was long gone and the puddle of light the lamp cast around of the desk left the rest of the library in darkness. Esseri was a silvery indistinctness in the dimness, leaning back into shadows with her eyes reflecting pools of flame as she watched me. For a while she sat there while I fumbled over a word that didn't seem to have any vowels in it before I realised she wasn't saying anything. I stopped and she watched me for a while longer, then snorted and picked up her twisted walking stick, using it to help her clamber awkwardly to her feet. She didn't say a word as she detoured around me, as stiffly as I seen any Rris walk, and then was lost in the darkness. I couldn't hear her footsteps, just the dull boom of the library doors as they closed.

I sat there a while longer, staring down at the vellum pages of the book on the low desk before me.

"Sir?" A voice from the darkness behind me. One of my guards.

"Coming," I told him. I was cold, stiff as I stood and picked up the lamp to follow him.

Shyia stopped by the next evening, while I was washing up after a day in the workshops down on the wharves.

“His lordship said Esseri was quite aggravated with you.” The Mediator was leaning against the doorframe. Didn’t bother him in the slightest that I was in the bath. “Said you were being stubborn.”

“What?” I stopped scrubbing, twisting around to see him better. “What do you mean?”

He snorted. “You aren’t trying. You didn’t listen to what she was telling you.”

That wasn’t something I’d expected to hear. I blinked at him, then protested, “I was! I tried! It was all day and I tried I talk better...” I was tripping over my own tongue. I sagged back in the bath and took a breath, hearing water dripping in the silence, a mist rising from the surface into the freezing air. “I tried. I did.”

“I believe you,” he said. “I’m not sure... there’s something about her. I don’t know... she was angry at you.”

I remembered how she’d been acting. “She was afraid of me.”

Shyia scratched at his arm, frowned. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” I shrugged and tossed the brush across the tub. Damn thing was Ris, intended for their hide; It just about took mine right off. “Trust me. I’m getting good at telling.”

“Huhn.” He looked at me and I saw the tip of his tail lash. “There wasn’t supposed to be a problem. Why? What happened? Did you do something?”

I shook my head.

“That’s ‘no’, isn’t it,” he growled. “Don’t do that. I know what it means, no-one else does. You didn’t insult her? She’d had enough warning, but you didn’t smile or do something like that?”

“No.” God, a gesture I’d always seen as so innocent, something so ingrained that repressing it was like trying not to breathe, now it was something that could earn me enmity I couldn’t afford. But, I hadn’t smiled; there’d been no reason to. “No, I didn’t.”

He growled again and stalked across the room, his toe claws sounding staccato clicks on the floor tiles. The washbowl pinged when he flicked it with a claw. “I’ll have a talk with Kh’hitch.” He moved along to touch a towel. “How’re you being treated?”

“It’s a pretty cage,” I said. “Pass that over here.”

“Huhn,” he tossed the towel across. I caught it as I climbed out and hastily toweled off before the chill froze the water on my body. The Mediator watched me, his ears flicking. “You’re not happy?”

I reached for my shirt. “Happy? Tomorrow I’ll be down at the docks. Day after that I have to see Rasa again. After that they want me to meet with the Foundry Guild. Then it’s back to Chaeitch. On top of that I’ve got that tutor. I wake up in the morning. I eat. I am taken to where I’m supposed to be that day, then they bring back with barely enough time to wash and sleep.”

Distracted from watching me dress, he blinked. “You were expecting different?”

“No. But, I... ” I shook my head. “I would’ve liked to’ve seen some of the town.”

“Hnnn,” he growled. “I know. It’s really not up to me.” He glanced at the narrow slit of a window. “I’m sure you’ll get your chance.”

“In this decade?” I muttered.

“What was that?”

“Not important.”

He snorted a cloud of steam, tinted orange in the dim gas light. “Someday somebody is going to understand what you say.”

“In this decade?” I grinned.

“Probably not,” he conceded. “Now, I think you should get your hairless hide out of here, before you freeze.”

Good advice. I paused to pull the plug on the bath before retreating back to the main room and the warmth of the fire there. The meal tray had arrived unannounced and Shyia amused himself with lifting the covers and wrinkling his muzzle at my food while I finished toweling my hair dry. “What are you doing these days?” I asked him.

“Me?” He replaced a cover. “They’re keeping me busy. The Guild and the Palace have questions about you, also about that situation in Westwater.”

“Do you know what it was about?”

“No idea yet,” he said.

I’ve noticed it before: he’s got a good poker face, a bit TOO good: When he’s using it it’s as if his face is cast in stone: his ears freeze, jaw takes on a certain immobile quality, and that moment he was as inscrutable as a feline Rushmore. Something he didn’t want to tell me.

“Uh-huh,” I said, and let it go at that.

“How’s your work with Chaeitch going?” he asked, blatantly changing the subject.

“Better than I expected. I never thought you could build a boat so quickly. Another couple of weeks and the engine will be ready for testing.”

“So we can do something well, for a backwards people,” he grinned then, and I really wasn’t sure if he was imitating one of my smiles or using a genuine Rris grin, with all the connotations that went with it.

“You said it, not me.”

“Huhnnnn,” The Mediator growled. “Eat your meal, if that’s what you want to call it.”

He stayed around a while longer and I welcomed the company and conversation. It passed the time and - hell - I needed the practice. Later that night when he’d left I lay back in the furs of the bed, looked at the portraits staring back at me in the light of the dying fire. “Hey, Guys,” I asked them. “How long’ve you been here?”

They didn’t answer. I burrowed deeper into the blankets, eventually to sleep and dream twisted juxtapositions of Rris and human memories.

Days passed and scarcely any of that time was my own.

At the university there were more interviews. I spent untold hours talking with a small cadre of Rris scholars, answering questions about everything from biology to cooking. They'd set up an interview room in that wooden university building. It was a small room, with a tiny window throwing light across a single low desk and a few cushions. There were always a couple of them, with a scribe lurking unobtrusively in the background and taking notes in an indecipherable shorthand. The Rris savants were always prepared, with their questions worked out beforehand and written down. They would go through their lists and their questions and when I couldn't answer, there was always the laptop. The images on that helped a lot, illustrating concepts I couldn't explain.

There were times that I wondered if I should be doing it. What was my interference doing to them? To their way of life? I wondered if I should just refuse. I also wondered what they would do to me.

Down at the workshops on the waterfront things were progressing. By late February Chaeitch had completely rebuilt the test boat. Now it was slimmer and leaner, the driveshaft ready for the single cast bronze screw. There were still modifications being made over the basic Rris engine and the result was looking vaguely like the drive system from Stephenson's Rocket. The steam chamber was enlarged, reinforced with riveted iron bands, integrating a wood-fired chamber running through its core. We could've increased the steam pressure by running extra pipes carrying hot exhaust gasses through the boiler, but I doubted the materials we were using could've handled the stress. I was quite sure the joins couldn't. It was something that would have to wait for a later model.

A cat's cradle of leather-insulated pipes linked the boiler to the multi-cycle piston system where condensing steam powered the cylinder on the return stroke. There were problems with the piston guides, mainly due to Shattered Water's industry's inability to machine precision guides. Another problem that'd have to be dealt with.

The engine certainly wasn't elegant to look at: an unwieldy mess of copper pipes and riveting and caulking, but we were more concerned with getting the thing working. Refining it down into a more manageable bundle was going to have to wait until better materials and tools were developed. They were working on it, but Chaeitch told me they were having some trouble with the Metallurgist Guild.

And the lessons with Esseri continued, her hostility unabated.

She refused to believe I had trouble with their language. I drilled words and phrases over and over, with the only result being a sore throat. If there was an improvement, it wasn't enough to satisfy her. Every time I moved too close or too suddenly she bared fangs. She kept to her schedule, but she wouldn't answer my questions, trying to teach without acknowledging I existed.

"Why's she doing this?" I asked one evening as I sat before the fire and tossed a bit of wood from hand to hand. "I tried to be friendly. She just... treats me like I am shit."

Shyia looked up from where he was perched crosslegged on the desk, watching as Luke Skywalker and his father dueled with light. "They're not really fighting," he said.

“Christ! Will you forget that?” I threw the stick into the fireplace, causing the embers to settle and send a fountain of sparks whisking up the chimney. “I’m worried that she’ll go for me, or have a heart attack. I don’t know why.”

The Mediator looked up from the laptop and blinked slowly, his eyes shimmering titanium and I had that sinking feeling. “You know, don’t you,” I said with certainty.

He waved his hand in that little gesture that meant ‘yes’.

“So? You feel like telling me?”

“His lordship wasn’t sure that we should,” he growled as his ears laid back, then he reached down to pause the film and turned to face me, perched there like a dark-furred idol. “It’s not you she hates, not really.”

“Not really?” I didn’t understand.

“It was a long time ago, about twenty years. She was younger - which should go without saying - and on an expedition ship ... to Africa. She was with a shore party going a short distance into the interior. They must have disturbed a [something]...” He looked away from me and waved a small shrug. “Anyway, the apes tore her partner to pieces. She had to run. She couldn’t help him.”

I stared at him.

“You wanted to know,” he eventually said, watching me carefully.

“I’m not an ape,” I finally managed to say.

He waved a hand, dismissing my words. “I’ve seen those pictures. Similar enough.”

That... hurt. “But I’m... She knows I could never do that. I don’t hurt people.”

“I think she does, but she doesn’t feel it,” he said, his voice a rumbling growl. “You’ve killed Rris, she knows that. It’s something that’s not so easy to brush aside.”

I mulled over this for a time while a chunk of ice slowly revolved inside me. “If you knew this, why choose her?”

“I didn’t, but the administration probably never really considered it was going to be a problem,” he said. “She’s supposed to be good and she’s trusted here. You know she used to be his highness’ tutor when he was younger.”

“I’m not his highness and as for her being good... It’s difficult to tell when she treats me like I was lower than a snake’s asshole.” Okay, so I was feeling a bit bitter.

He blinked. “I don’t know that they’ll just get rid of her. It’s not as if they can just [something] through tutors until they find one who can tolerate you. I think you might have to learn to live with it.”

—v—

Esseri was waiting in the library, ensconced at her desk in the puddle of sunlight that seeped through the leaded windowpanes. She didn’t say anything when I rounded the corner, didn’t even look up from the paper she was scratching away at, but I saw her ears go flat against her skull. My boots made soft noises on the carpet as I walked over to stand in front of her desk. I had a flash of the times I’d walked up to the teacher’s desk at school, back in another world.

“Ma’am?” I asked.

“Sit down, ape,” she rasped and I did so. “My name is Michael,” I said.

She looked up at me. A narrow face, with graying fur drawn tight over the bones and eyes that were pure Rris: the lambent amber rings around pupils like polished black stones. She just snorted and a grayed furred hand shoved a book and a piece of paper across the desk, being careful to come nowhere near me. “Eighth verse. Read it.”

Nothing more than that. I carefully leafed through the pages until I was pretty sure I’d found the page she was referring to. A history text, a section on the trade embargoes leveled against Overburdened after an incident known as Ghirits Ridge that’d happened a hundred and fifty years ago. I stumbled my way

through it, not understanding one word in ten. Rris writing... it looks like, well, chickens scratching on wet clay and it's just not... I don't know why, but it's hard to read. It's similar to the differences between the legibility of a serif and a sans-serif font in body copy, only far more pronounced; like trying to read binary, the way the characters blend together. Maybe because it's a script never intended to be read by human eyes or processed by a human brain. Perhaps Rris eyes saw that as a model example of fine typographic layout, but mine kept blending it into a mess of crosshatching.

And Esseri sat there and picked everything I did to pieces. I tried to pronounce the words as she directed me, over and over, and eventually she hissed disgust. "You are useless, you know that."

I looked at her, then slowly put the book down and leaned forward. Her nostrils flared wide as she jerked back, away from me. I reached out and laid my hand on the desk, palm upward. "Touch me," I said.

She stared: rigid and trembling. What if she had a stroke? Did Rris have strokes? "What are you..." she started to snarl.

"Touch me," I told her and she looked down at my hand. Her ears vanished down into her silvered mane but she made no move. "You aren't supposed to..." she tried to bluster and failed miserably. "You're getting out of place, ape. If I call the guards..."

"Why would you? You're afraid of me?"

"No! Shave you, you twisted..."

“Then touch me.” She looked down at my hand in utter horror.

I slowly drew my hand back and cradled it with my other, feeling the scars on the knuckles and up the back where a Rris’ teeth had ripped the skin. The marks across my face ached slightly in the chill. “They told me what happened,” I said. “In Africa. I’m sorry, but that wasn’t me. That wasn’t any of my kind. I don’t do that.”

“You’ve killed.” She was panting: her breath forming strings of transient puffs in the cold air. “They told me... you’ve killed Rris.”

“I’ve killed,” I acknowledged, looking down at the marks on my hands. “I fought for my life. I fought for people I cared about. I... barely won.”

“You murdered a farmer! That wasn’t defense!” she spat.

That stung. I opened my mouth to protest, to say I didn’t do it, and then saw her eyes and knew it was what she was wanting. “You believe I do that?” I quietly asked.

“Look at you,” she snarled.

“Because I look like this, that means I must have done it?” I asked. “Why’re you here? You hate me so much, why’re you doing this?”

Esseri turned her head away, then back to stare at me with those immobile obsidian eyes in that silver-dusted face. “It’s my job,” she rumbled in a timbre I’d never associate with a human that old. “They told me to teach. I’ll do it. I don’t have to like it, or you, ape.”

I looked away from that hatred, down at the desk where the book lay open to a woodcut of Rris aboard a barge or something. I nodded, then stood. “Neither do I,” I said and she didn’t try and stop me when I walked away.

The guards outside the library doors were startled to see me. “Sir?” one of them asked when I appeared. “Do you need something?”

“Let’s go,” I said and kept walking.

“Sir? Is there something wrong?”

One of them overtook me, blocked my way. “Sir, you can’t... “

“I can.”

They were all around me and now I saw their expressions: eyes wide and ears flat against their skulls and hands hovering near their weapons. I was walking on eggshells. “I don’t have to stay there to be insulted,” I told them. “I can do that anywhere.”

I started walking again, keeping my hands in plain sight as I shouldered through. They hesitated a few seconds, then claws clattered on wooden flooring as they came after me to escort me back to my rooms.

—v—

“Come in, Mikah,” Hirht gestured from his chair in front of the fire.

The rest of the day had been quiet, giving me time to myself. I spent it in my quarters; not that I really had much choice. The door and guards outside didn’t worry me, the solitude was a change from the pace of the last weeks. I spent hours just sitting in the chill of the window niche, watching droplets of water beading on an icicle, hesitating, then falling. Contemplating. I started a sketch of my room on a scrap of parchment, then screwed it up in frustration as a darkness I didn’t want to draw covered the paper. Wasted time reorganizing my desktop, going through pictures of home, then through some recordings I’d made a couple of months earlier.

“How does this work?” Chihirae’s face moving in the screen. “It is on? Ah! I would [something] a toy like this.” A close-up of her mugging for the camera.

Other stuff like that. I missed her.

I finally used a swimsuit TIFF of a sultry Lona Deiss not wearing a swimsuit as wallpaper: let them make what they would of that.

The guards had come for me in the late evening, escorted me through dark corridors with that indefinable taste of Rris habitation in the air. Seen by moonlight, the huge atrium garden was beautiful: White and pale blue, delicate lattices of frost on branches turned to glittering lace. Stark blackness of shadows against crystal whiteness with the paths through the heart of it forming a geometric pattern that was a balance to the organic intricacies of nature. I stood and stared through that second-floor window until a guard nudged my arm, moving me along.

Another wing, in a section I'd never been to. Double doors with guards in brown and crimson lacquered armor: the gleaming polished steel of segmented breastplates and coalscuttle-style helmets with engraved leather ear and cheek guards, a flaring rim to protect the neck. So elaborate it had to be ceremonial, but the pistols and swords at their waists seemed functional enough and their hands never left the hilts as they watched us pass.

The corridor beyond was carpeted with soft deep-blue pile, the walls paneled to waist height with carved wood, and above that in a royal-purple velvet-like cloth with patterns brought out as light and perspective shifted. Gas lamps set behind milky glass blown in the shape of leaves emitted a gentle glow that was reflected from the thick panes of a narrow window at the far end of the hall, glinting from the polished brass fittings of the three heavy doors on each side. A guard scratched lightly at one, then opened it and ushered me in.

Red. That was my first impression. Red everywhere, from the velvet on the walls, to the drapes to the grain in the furniture. Lamps behind globes of milky glass flickered softly, exaggerating the shadows in the carved wall panels, barely lighting the rows of books nestled on their shelves behind latticed glass doors. A fire crackled in the grate, wafting sparks up the chimney and throwing a pool of light across the low table and the pair of chairs set before it.

I blinked. Chairs. Big, wooden frames of dark wood embellished with fanciful carvings of Rris and trees and animals. The seats were quite low and broad, the upholstery was red, of course, leather polished smooth by furry hides. Waiting, seated crosslegged with a half-filled glass in his hand, the Rris king watched me as I apprehensively glanced around.

“Please, sit.”

I did so. The chair was lower, and broader, than I’d expected. More like sitting on a low platform than a proper chair. I settled awkwardly and tucked my legs up in imitation of the Rris. He watched me curiously, his head following my every movement, then raised the cup and I caught a glimpse of his tongue darting out to lap: their equivalent of a sip. I shifted slightly, uncomfortably; the chair was built for different proportions.

Hirht gestured at the table between us. There was a decanter and another glass there, already filled. “Please, drink. I was told you seem quite partial to our wine.”

I smiled slightly and leaned over to take it. The glass was broad and relatively shallow, without the curvature inherent in the wine glasses I knew; the liquid inside it was a red, almost ruby in the wavering light. Bristles in my beard scratched on glass as I sipped, found it tartly acceptable: strong and spiced like the stuff Chaeitch had offered. I took a longer draught. I needed it.

“That’s to your taste?”

“It’s good. Thank you.”

His ears flicked. “Mikah, I heard you had some trouble today.” Uh-huh. It was what I’d been expecting. “What happened? Was there something about Esseri you didn’t like?”

I turned the glass, watching the wine orbiting slowly. A memory flash of blood in a crystal-laced stream. I shuddered. “It wasn’t... working. Sir.”

“The guards said you seemed upset or angry. Esseri said you walked out on her. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“This is related to the questions the Mediator was asking, isn’t it.” The Rris snorted softly and I saw the tip of his tail curl out from behind him and twitch. Maybe that was why they had such odd chairs: their tails got in the way. “He shouldn’t have told you.”

“Sir. Shyia told me what happened to her, and I’m sorry, but it really doesn’t have anything to do with me. She seems to think it does though. I think she remembers what happened more than she wants to. Every time I’ve seen her... she...” I trailed off, shook my head and took another drink.

Hirht was watching me, a tension about the cant of his head now... if I was reading him right. Damn light made it difficult to tell anything. Was that intentional? “She said there were a few problems, but not of that sort,” he said. “She said you were a slow learner; you were disrespectful; you didn’t follow her

instructions.” He ticked points off on his fingers then cocked his head. “It doesn’t sound like she was the one with the problem, does it?”

I gave the tiniest shake of my head. “Not when you hear it like that. No.”

“Then why don’t you let me hear your memories.”

Mem...? Oh, he wanted to hear my side of the story. I told it, as best as I could remember. From when I’d first met Esseri, the talk I’d had with Shyia, to when I’d walked out on her. He was a good listener, not even interrupting when I mangled his language.

“Can I believe that?” he asked when I was done.

I shrugged. “She is Rris and I am... I am not. You can choose what is easier to believe.”

His face stayed impassive but his tail lashed. “Do you think that makes so much difference?”

“To her it did.”

“Huhn,” he made a noncommittal growl and turned his head to watch the flames, his fur scattering light into a faint halo about his inhuman profile. “Can you be sure?” I could see shadows morphing as he spoke, muscles shifting as his

jaws moved. It was inhuman, fascinating, distracting attention from his words for a second.

“I... I think I can.” I had enough memories of that. “I have seen it before.”

Hirht’s head shifted again, watching me. “A lot of people have said you have trouble understanding them. Are you sure you [something] her right?”

“I know what I saw,” I said again.

“You can’t be sure...”

“I know!” I snapped, my voice raising and torn muscles in my face spasming and I saw him flinch, his hand moving an inch toward the crack down the side of the cushion. What’d he have tucked away down there? I really didn’t want to find out. “I’m sorry,” I said in more subdued tones. “Since I’ve been here it’s something I’ve become very familiar with. Yes; I’m sure.”

He stared at me, at the scars ripped across my face, then looked away and I saw him shudder. His fur was bottled. “I will see what we can do,” he said eventually. “I’d hoped... She’s a good teacher. It will be difficult to find someone as good as she was and get them accustomed to you.”

I almost said ‘Chihirae’, but that was... it wasn’t fair on her. Dragging her away from her home and her work.

“I’ll talk with Esseri again. Perhaps something can be arranged.” He picked up his glass again and this time didn’t just sip. I watched his throat working as he swallowed, then blinked at me. “What about you? How are you doing?”

“I am doing all right.” I hesitated before asking, “I haven’t seen anything of the town. I would like to see a bit of your world.”

Hirht sipped again. “You realize we can’t just let you walk around town by yourself.”

I nodded, then added, “Yes.”

He glanced at the fire, then said, “I’ll see what can be done.”

I nodded again, but didn’t say anything.

“There were a few things I’d been wanting to ask you,” he said after a while. “Some questions about your home. Do you feel like answering?”

“If I can,” I said.

“Huhn,” he scratched at his leg before asking, “The place you come from, you have kingdoms, don’t you?”

“Similar things. Yes.”

“How many?”

“I don’t know, not exactly. Maybe two hundred?”

“That many?” He made a low sound. “How many of your kind? Do you know?”

“I don’t know the Rris number. It is like a thousand multiplied by a thousand multiplied by a thousand by eight.”

Hirht took a second working this out, then I saw him jerk rigid in shock.
“You...you are sure?”

“Not exactly. It is close.”

He stared at me for what seemed like ages. Trying to decide if I was lying or not I supposed.

“You are not joking?” he asked.

“No, sir.”

“Rot it all, I don’t have that many hairs,” he growled, wrinkles marching up his muzzle. “All right, you have kingdoms. What about your government? You have highborn?”

“Highborn?” I asked, thinking back to my lessons with Shyia. Oh, yeah. Their monarchy. “No. I mean some lands have a system like yours. Mine doesn’t.”

“Ah. Better?”

I twirled the stem of my glass between thumb and forefinger, frowned down at the dregs. The sordid charades and posturing of Politics had never been a particular interest of mine. “Different. Better at some things, maybe not so good at others. We like to think the good outweighs the bad.”

“Describe it.”

Again I had to hesitate. “I’m not sure I... I don’t think I can do it properly.”

“Try.” Green eyes watched me. I saw his pupils were cracked wide, reflected firelight glowing in the blackness: nervous?

I nodded and tried. Voting, elected representatives, presidents and elections, senates and the constitution, trying to put it into words never intended to be processed by a human mind. “Our government is chosen by the people...”

“H’ans,” he interrupted.

“The people,” I continued. “Every four years the people select new governments, with a new head.”

“Where are they chosen from?” he asked.

“Anyone who wants to run.”

“Anyone can become ruler of a kingdom?” he sounded incredulous? “That is... [something]! Could a woodcutter rule a land wisely? It would be disastrous!”

“That’s not quite... I mean, it takes time. Your small towns have mayors and Lords. We have similar. A woodcutter could choose to work in government by starting in his town council.”

“But if he was a fool...”

“Then the citizens wouldn’t choose him.”

Claws tinked against glass. “Maybe your people can choose wisely. I don’t think ours can.”

I had to shrug. “We can’t either. That’s one of the problems.”

He snorted. “When you say that, it sounds like perhaps we aren’t too different after all.”

“We have our fools and we have our geniuses,” I said.

“Ah,” he breathed. “And what are you?”

The question took me aback. “I’d like to think I’m normal.”

He laughed at that, a bark of amusement that startled me. “Normal? You know things our scholars haven’t even dreamed of.”

“There’s a difference between knowledge and intelligence,” I said.

“That’s something I’ve heard before,” he said and studied me again for a few seconds, then gestured at my glass. “More?”

I glanced down: it was empty. “Please.”

Crystal chimed as he refilled my glass from a decanter. I thanked him, sat nursing my drink while he returned the bottle to its tray. We talked for a long time, the level in the bottle falling steadily. He had questions about everything: government, elections, the countries and their relations, human relations and society. I answered as best I could, struggling to find bridges between two languages on opposite sides of a vast gulf. By the time the fire was guttering the wine was gone and I was having great trouble getting my tongue around Rris sibilants. And Hirht asked me if I had a female I was bonded to.

Jackie... Why did he have to bring that up while I was in that state? What was she doing now? She must've thought I was dead. She must've been worried. Were they still searching? Could someone find out what'd happened... everything mixed together in an alcohol-sodden jumble. I blinked, the room blurring through tears.

"Mikah?" The Lord looked shocked when he saw my face. "Your eyes... What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" I asked. "She's gone. Everything's gone. My life goes to shit and you ask what's wrong!" English. He flinched back, unable to understand a word. "I think you've had enough," he said.

"Yeah, I've had enough," I mumbled. My glass tumbled and cracked when I buried my face in my hands. "God! I've had enough!"

I flinched as a misshapen hand touched my arm and I looked up at one of my guards. Hirht watched impassively as a pair of them helped me to my feet. Damn leg had gone to sleep. I staggered, lurched against a guard who hissed when I leaned against him... her. She growled something at the king and he kinked an ear. "Let him sleep it off," he said.

The journey back took a lot longer than the journey up had, probably because I didn't seem to be able to manage a straight line. My escorts had to help me on the staircases. Back in my rooms I remember they dumped me unceremoniously on the bed and then my clothes were being pulled off, my protests ignored. Someone told me to 'drink this'. Just water.

I woke once that night to go to the bathroom and puke my guts out. When I'd finished heaving and coughing and raised my head there were the shadows of guards lurking at the door.

—v—

“Morning and waking!”

I groaned into the mattress. Light flooded the room and I felt it burn through my eyelids and ricochet around in my skull. I groaned again and pulled the heavy sheets over my head. A second later they were yanked off completely and I cried out in protest as the shock of the morning air hit me. “How are you feeling?”

“Shyia,” I growled through clenched teeth. “You shit!”

The Rris grinned at me and laid his ears down. “That’s a swear, isn’t it? Shit?” It was an English word that could have been designed for their mouths. “I’ll take it that means you are feeling better.” He cocked his head then, “You don’t look it though.”

“It’s called a hangover,” I grimaced as I sat up and clutched my head. Shit. What proof was that wine?

I’ve never drunk a lot. I don’t have much of a tolerance for alcohol so it doesn’t take much to get me sloshed and once I am, I’m a loquacious drunk. As Hirht had found last night. What had we talked about? More to the point, what had I talked about? What had he heard?

Had he known? How could he?

“Hang over?” Shyia was asking. “What do you mean?”

I shivered, goosebumps forming. I rolled over and swung my legs out, grimacing as the changes in blood pressure did things in my head. “You know... you drink too much...” I trailed off and blinked at him. “You never feel like this after drinking too much?”

“If you mean feel as bad as you look, then no.”

“Lucky bastards,” I grumbled in English. Hirht hadn’t seemed even the slightest bit tipsy. How many refills had I had? A lot more than him. I remembered him sitting and watching me, nursing his drink for hours, every now and then dipping his tongue to sip. Had that been his intention all along? I felt like a fool.

And a part of me wanted to crawl back into that bottle and curl up and stay there.

A heavy cotton tunic of Rris manufacture landed on the bed beside me, drawing me back to the now. “Put it on, before you freeze,” Shyia told me. “Your food should be here presently. Aesh Smither wants to meet with you and Chaeitch ah Ties first thing this morning , so you won’t have much time to eat.”

God. Work. I felt like throwing up again. I hunted through my meager wardrobe for pants, coming up with a pair of jeans. The old bloodstains were still quite visible but there was nothing else available.

“Mikah?” Shyia had flicked the laptop on and now was staring at the desktop. I’d forgotten about the wallpaper of Leona showing her assets; both of them. “What’s this?”

“A woman,” I told him.

“Oh. Yours.” He cocked his head at the screen.

“No.”

He looked up at me. “Not yours. Who then?”

“An... actor.”

“So why did you put it here?”

“I wanted to see a pretty face,” I told him, pulling the jeans on and when I looked up again he was still studying me, then used a dainty clawtip to flip the machine off seconds before the scratch at the door heralded breakfast. It was fairly unmemorable: chunks of unidentifiable meat in a heavy gravy - almost a stew - along with solid, fresh-baked bread. I forced a bit of it down, not really hungry.

The ride to the workshops on the docks was the same. The same coach, a pair of humorless guards I didn't recognize who watched me steadily. It didn't do anything for my hangover, the racket of the wheels on cobblestones going right through my skull. I tried dozing and surprised myself, waking with a jolt of adrenaline when a guard poked my knee with a clawtip to say we'd arrived.

Things had changed in the workshop. It was more cluttered than ever with more workers, more equipment. Some of the new lathes had arrived and had been set up. They were Rris built devices, requiring two Rris to power the treadle turning the shaft, but the bits and cutting blades were of improved carbon steel. They weren't precision devices, but accurate planes for a planing machines were being worked on. A Rris steam engine to turn the lathes was also on the schedule, but that was a few weeks off.

Down near the slipway the hull of the test vessel nestled among its supports while Rris workmen caulked seams and seals around the driveshaft. The prop was new, bronze gleaming like metallified fire in the sunbeams that found their way through the dusty widows up near the roof. About half a meter in diameter it hung below the stern like a whale's family jewels. The heart of the test shell was being fitted with an older model Rris engine. A hoist system was lowering the boiler down to where five mechanics were waiting to connect the tubes to the

engine. Keep the thing in manageable modules had been a suggestion of mine; we were going to use the Rris engine just to test how well the screw worked while in the meantime the improved engine was locked to its testbed.

“How long?” Rraerch aesh Smither asked.

“That’s a rather personal question,” I said. Chaeitch snorted a laugh and Rraerch’s head whipped around to stare at me.

“I think that was his idea of a joke,” Chaeitch provided.

“I hope so. I meant,” she said with a penetrating look at me, “How long until the first test.”

“Ah,” Chaeitch leapt in there, I was coming to realize that this was what he lived for. “Another two weeks. Twenty days at the most. I’m a bit worried about the seals on the pipes here. With the pressure they’re carrying there’s a good chance they [something]. We won’t let it run to exhaustion on the first trial, just lope a little. The pipes will be changed when some of the machinery Mikah’s given us designs for is finished.”

She looked uncertain. “It’s not going to explode?”

“Shouldn’t. You want to take bets?” he smiled.

Rraerch had a right to be worried. There was going to be a lot of pressure built up in that thing and if it popped there'd certainly be damage, perhaps injury, hopefully not death. The shipyard was her property and she was understandably reluctant to see it blown to pieces. I wondered how Chaeitch had managed to swing this: partnered with someone with the industrial clout of Rraerch and backed by the financial resources of the monarchy. He was brilliant with machinery, but as far as I could tell he had all the business ability of lint. He must've had some lucky breaks somewhere.

The new engine's test bed was a bulky wooden frame holding the mess of tubes and cylinders at the far end of the shed, opposite the hull. Rraerch studied it, kneeling to study a seam we'd pegged as being particularly suspect. I saw Chaeitch glance at her rump before crouching beside her, pointing out parts of the system's underbelly.

"You're testing it in here?" she asked.

"Next door," he said, referring to the other boathouse that was unoccupied at the moment. "Out in the courtyard for the first tests. Less to damage if something goes wrong."

"You're expecting trouble?"

He growled softly and rapped the boiler with the heel of his hand. It rang with the timbre of hollow metal. "I've learned not to expect anything with these things."

She snorted. "I remember that [something] with the engine you showed a few

years back, the one with the loom.”

Chaeitch grinned at the memory and I had to keep reminding myself that didn't mean good humor in a Rris. “I remember. Did the fur on his arm grow back?”

”[Something] if that happens with this,” Rraerch said and glanced up at me, just a furtive look. How much of my reputation was riding on this? If the thing blew up, what then?

“Hopefully it'll all go smoother,” Chaeitch said.

“Be easier for everyone,” Rraerch grunted.

They spent a while going over the engine. Chaeitch was getting right into it and enthusiastically pointing out refinements, modifications he wanted to do, how it could be improved when the tools and materials became available. Rraerch watched and listened, asked questions. She was interested in knowing how these engines could be applied to ships and just how big Chaeitch thought they could be made. What kind of range? How much fuel did they have to carry? How would that affect payload?

They were questions we couldn't answer. Not until we'd tested the engine to see just what kind of performance we got from it.

“And there is no guarantee that this is the engine we'll want to put into ships,”

Chaeitch said. “You’ve seen some of the other devices Mikah’s people use. There are a lot that are more powerful than this, but we can’t build them. We can’t even make the machines to build them.”

“Will we be able to?”

“I hope so,” he scratched at his crotch. “Problem is chemicals. Mikah knows what they’re called in his tongue, but that doesn’t help us any. Still, we’ve made some progress. We’ve got a metal that cuts iron like you’d bite through bone. Even cuts through steel. Expensive to make, but worth it.”

She looked across at the lathes. “The new tools?”

“Ah.” I saw his tail was fluffed out. What did that mean. Pleasure? Whatever, he kept talking as he led her over to the machine area. There were two lathes already there and several stacks of junk had been cleared away to make way for other tools. The lathes were heavy beasts: the frames were single pieces of black cast iron, as were the gears and adjustment wheels. The bits and shafts, however, gleamed with the specular highlights of polished metal.

Chaeitch showed Rraerch the high points and listed some of the other power tools he wanted set up when the engine was put in. The drills and saws and die presses. Somewhere in the shed a bunch of workers began pounding rivets through sheet metal. I winced and turned away as the hammering did horrible things with my hangover. I sat down on the heavy wooden base a lathe was bolted to and rubbed my eyes. Shit, I needed a drink. The lathe had seen some heavy use recently, judging by the amount of shavings lying on the ground between my feet. I just rubbed my throbbing temples for a while before noticing, then frowned and reached down to pick up a curled thread of metal.

“Mikah? What’s the matter?”

“Uh?” I looked up. The Rris had stopped their conversation and were staring at me. Rraerch’s ears were back, the tip of Chaeitch’s tail was ticking back and forth. “Are you ill?” she asked, looking worried.

“I’ll live.” I hauled myself to my feet. “Too much to drink last night.”

Now she looked outright alarmed. “You’re drunk?”

“No, no,” I winced. “It’s called a hangover. I just found out Rris don’t get them.”

“I think I’m glad to hear it,” Chaeitch said. “Anything you need?”

“Aspirin?” I asked.

“What?”

“Don’t worry. No, I’ll live,” I said. “Just need some water.”

I knew they were watching me as I crossed the room to the water pitcher, dipped a ladelful out of it. Still had that shaving of metal in my hand. I sipped from the cup, weighed the metal in my other hand: We were still using mostly copper and cast iron, soft stuff. Someone had been doing a lot of milling of a heavy low-carbon iron.

I was pretty sure I knew what it was from.

—v—

Warmer weather.

Water dripped from icicles outside my window as the temperature rose above freezing for the first time in a long while in the heat of mid-afternoon. Another heavy snowfall covered the brief melt, leaving a treacherous layer of ice under fresh-fallen powder and the next few days were freezing days of darkness under leaden gray clouds and driving snow.

It blew itself out eventually. One day there was blue peeking between scattered clouds, sunlight shining in my windows. The next snowfall was half-hearted, the brief shower of semi-liquid slush spattering on the windowpanes and freezing when night came again. In the town the roads were icy, the drifts subsided a few inches. The metaphorical mercury rose over the next few days and when the afternoon sun shone, Shattered Water was filled with the sound of trickling water flowing along a thousand drains and streets, punctuated by the occasional crash as an icicle lost its hold. The monochrome landscape visible from my window was changing as a few bold trees ventured forth early buds and shoots.

My life didn't change. I spent the days being shuttled from one place to another. There were still questions and examinations at the university where Rris doctors all but took me apart. The examination room was littered with charts and diagrams, sketches of various parts of my body pinned to the wall. They gave me tests: hearing, sight, pricked me with pins to see how sensitive my sense of touch was. Things like that. It was impersonal and utterly humiliating.

There were numerous interviews with Rris scholars, physicians, biologists, all trying to get as much as they could out of me. I was asked about health and illness, diseases and healing, geography and astronomy. They wanted to know everything they could and I tried to help, but it was like draining a bathtub with an industrial-strength pump: I just didn't know that much. I could look it up on the laptop, then they complained that my answers didn't make any sense: they didn't have a base of reference. For instance, the Rris who was trying to find out what governed individual characteristics - fur color, eyes. I could tell him "DNA", but that'd be utter gibberish to him. As would my best translation of the definition in my encyclopedia. A lot of talking, a lot of queries and questions, but I never had many of my own answered.

Down in the workshops things were a little easier. I liked Chaeitch and I got the vague impression he liked me. The workload was just as high, but it was of a more tangible nature. Chaeitch and Rraerch introduced me to specialists, metallurgists, engineers, craftsmen and representatives from various guilds being contracted to supply equipment and materials. There were more questions and elaborations, more problems they expected me to have the answers for.

Dammit, Jim, I'm a doctor, not an industrial engineer!

I didn't have all the answers. Not even close. They wanted so much, so quickly: Metals, casting techniques and forges, die stamps, drills and saws... there were a dozen projects going on at once, with more springing up all the time. When the Rris hit a problem they couldn't solve, they'd come to me.

Never-ending and frustrating; there was no such thing as a simple answer when each solution has to be explained, when you have to search for words to explain concepts they'd never heard of. The laptop helped, but I was the one who had to go through the files and try to wrap my brain around the various subjects, trying to get enough of a grasp on the concepts that I could relay them on to the various Rris in my still-limited command of their language. Even then, it couldn't tell me everything I needed to know.

It rained. For the first time in what seemed like years I heard actual rain drumming against the roof and washing snow from the streets and reducing drifts to icy piles of dirty slush. And along with the changes in the season there were changes in the Rris I was working with: subtle things I didn't notice at first, but as days passed they got worse. Rris workers were distracted. There were careless mistakes, little things that several times blew up into arguments out of all proportion. Once I asked Rraerch a question and I had to poke her shoulder to get her attention: she had the damndest expression on her face, staring into space as if she wasn't all there. It vanished into her laughter when I asked her what was wrong. I didn't understand; she acted as if my question was a joke or something.

That night was another of those restless ones:

Night. On the road. Sheets of rain rippled across the windshield, battling against the wipers. Lights from an oncoming car flickered through the car, warped and shimmering from the water, flashing across Jackie dozing in the passenger seat: pale skin and closed eyelids, an errant wisp of dark hair veiling her face. The old radio hissed, Chaupin coming through the static. More lights from behind. I looked back to Jackie and screamed as the furry, misshapen shape blurred at me across the car and I saw and felt gleaming teeth closing on my face, screamed and flung my arms up and whole car lurched:

Woke tangled in sheets and furs. The door was ajar, a wedge of feeble light

cast across the carpet and the foot of the bed. Outside, a gust of wind blew rain against the windows. I jumped when a Rris silhouette moved in the darkness. “Sir?”

I sagged again. One of my guards; I must’ve been making some noise. Another dream. They were getting to be all too common.

“You were dreaming again, sir.”

“I noticed. ” I sat up. I was shaking, a fine tremor in my hand. I clenched my fist and the tremor ran up my arm. “Shit.”

The guard hesitated, then said, “It’s happening a lot. Do you want something to help you sleep?”

I looked up at the guard - anonymous and androgynous in the gloom - and shuddered at the thought of what a Rris-specific valium might do to me. “No. Thank you, no.”

A slight creaking as the guard shifted, then, “Sir, if you don’t mind a question?”

“Shoot.”

“Sir?”

“Go ahead. Ask.”

“What is... Jahk’hy?”

What... ? I thought for a second, translating the Rris lisps into human consonants, then flinched. The dark shape standing by my bed hadn’t moved. “Jackie?” I asked softly.

“Ah... that was the noise.”

Snippets from the dream were still vivid; again I felt someone walk over my grave, “Where did you hear that?”

“You call it sometimes, sir. What is it?”

I hesitated. “A woman I knew.”

“A... woman.” There was a hesitation. “Your kind, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Ah. Thank you sir.” The sound of Rris feet on carpet and the light from the door was eclipsed, then a hesitation. “Sir?”

“Do you get... lonely?”

Lonely. The Rris word carries different connotations; it’s as near a translation as I can come. I looked up at the guard, a shadow backlit by the light from the door. “Yes,” I said quietly.

“Sir,” the guard ducked its head then closed the door. I pulled the coverings back over myself and laid back, listening to the rain and wind outside.

—v—

Shouts rose as Rris engineers carefully raised the engine assembly onto the heavy carriage that’d move it out into the slush-crusting courtyard for its first test. Eight Rris wearing odd-looking padded gloves hauled at the chains on the tackles that lifted the engine while a dozen more nudged it this way and that to make sure it sat properly. Chaeitch bustled around like an expectant father, making sure nothing was dropped or jolted.

“Will it work?” Rraerch asked.

“I don’t see why it won’t,” I said, trying to put on a braver front than I felt; there was so much that could go wrong and probably would.

“Another day and we find out,” she snorted, then hugged herself, ruffling the fur of her upper arms. The weight of the cast iron and copper engine settled on the carriage. I frowned as wood creaked, but it held. Rris yowled satisfaction. At least they’d been paying attention: there’d been an accident that morning when a male broke his hand with a hammer. Just missed the rivet it turned out. Careless, and it was just one of a spate of accidents we’d had in the past couple of days, all caused by distraction and carelessness, all avoidable. And I didn’t know where Chaeitch was. He should’ve been there to help with his pet project, but there was no sign of him. Nobody seemed particularly worried by his absence though, so I put it to the back of my mind and stuck to business. There was no way he’d miss the first trial of his engine.

Took most of the day to get everything ready. By evening the engine was secured and double checked to make sure nothing had worked loose. The first test would be early the next morning and hopefully that would let us find any bugs and iron them out before we had to present the thing before the nobility and patrons.

Once those final checks were done there wasn’t much else any of us could do but wait for morning, so that day they let me go early. It was barely dark as Rraerch walked with me and my escort to the carriage waiting in the dockyard forecourt. “I’ll see you tomorrow then,” she said, then flashed a smile tinted with a glimpse of her teeth. “Oh, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you,” something slapped across my backside. Startled, I glanced down to see her tail flicking back. “What’s it like not having a tail?”

“I’ve never had one, so it’s hard to compare. What is it like having one?” Her tail came back for another swat and this time I caught it, tugged lightly and her eyes widened and it whipped out of my hands, feeling like a silk bottlebrush whisking through my fingers. “Sorry,” I apologized, feeling I’d transgressed.

“No. My blame,” she said, looking me up and down with a peculiar

expression.

“What?” I asked.

“No matter,” she said, then chittered and batted my arm. “Tomorrow?”

“I’ll be here,” I assured her.

On the ride back I sat and stared at the shapes moving outside the glass. There was more noise at that hour of day: shouting and traffic, animals protesting, vendors advertising their wares at the top of their lungs. I had other things occupying my mind, nagging worries about the engine. It should work, there was no reason it shouldn’t. But supposing it didn’t? There was so much that could go wrong, there were so many little details that weren’t available to me. The diameter of the condenser line, the cylinder drainage valves, tolerance on the piston... they all gnawed at me.

In my rooms I opened the laptop and set a Pink Floyd selection playing on random shuffle, just to chase away the silence, then went and ran a bath. It helped untie some of the knots, just soaking in that warmth and darkness, the Dark Side of the Moon drifting in from the other room. Wind picked up outside and rattled the windows. It hadn’t been the longest day, but it’d been stressful and I was glad of the chance to unwind, the first I’d had for a while. I just leaned back and listened to the wind and water, trying not to think about anything.

It was too soon when the music finished and the water grew cold. I splashed out onto the freezing tiles, wrapped a coarse towel around my waist and made for the warmth of the fire in the next room. It was dark through there, the feeble

light cast by the gas lamps didn't reach the corners, leaving corners and blotches of darkness. The bright glow of embers in the hearth was a lot more inviting.

“Sir?”

I nearly hit the roof at the sound of the unexpected voice. I turned to see the fur on my bed moving and standing up and eyes reflecting firelight. “Sir?” the Rris asked again in a small voice.

“Who... who are you?” And what are you doing on my bed?

“Hych, Sir,” the stranger stepped forward and ducked its head. Dark earthen fur, mottled with black patches, amber eyes, ears notched and the tip missing from the left one. Something hanging from a slender gold chain around its neck glinted in the light. Female, by the two rows of teats showing above the small russet kilt around her waist. Didn't look dangerous. Would the guards have let her in if she was? Did they know she was here? Why was she here?

“Okay. Hych. What are you doing here?”

Closer still. A hesitation, then another step. She wasn't looking at my face when she reached out and I froze like a rabbit caught in headlights, aware of her claws and my skin and the fact I was wearing nothing but a towel. Her furry fingertips brushed my chest and claws kissed my skin in a slow scratch across my chest, down my ribs before I jerked away. She started and seemed at a loss, then reached down and fumbled with her kilt.

“What are you... “

Let the garment fall to the floor.

”... doing,” I finished lamely and she stood there in nothing but fur and firelight, the halfflight turning her alien body into a caricature of a person: twisted limbs and musculature like an ill-seen dream, like something that had been stalking my sleep for uncounted nights. The bones in her pelvis were odd as she canted her hips; I realised her pubic fur had been trimmed short. Her lambent eyes flickered up to meet mine for a second before darting aside, a furtive look at my groin, then she turned away and in a single graceful motion knelt on the carpet by the fire, rear raised and her tail sweeping aside as she spread her legs.

I gaped, a lurch of tightness in my guts. “Oh, Jesus Christ! Get up! Dammit! Get up! Now!”

She stood and now looked confused and not a little scared. “Sir?”

“Is that all you can say? Look, what are you doing...” I stopped myself; That was obvious enough. “Please, why did you come here?”

“His Lordship sent me,” she said, then added in a small voice, “You aren’t satisfied with me?”

“No. I mean, I’m sure great you are... you are... Look, I just don’t want to... mate with you. I think you don’t want to with me either.”

She flinched. “I want whatever you think is best.”

“Shit!” I sighed and circled her to sit myself on the edge of the bed. “Look, I think it’s best that you leave.”

Her eyes widened and she glanced at the door. I realised that she’d been sent here; if she was turned down someone might think she’d done something wrong. Would they reprimand her? They might send another.

“It’s not you,” I told her. “I am just... tired. Not in the mood.”

“Ah.” She ducked her head and fumbled at her necklace, removing the locket: a tiny glass vial that she offered. “Do you need this?”

I warily took it: a few drops of a cloudy fluid inside. Curiosity got the better of me. “What is it?” I popped the top. “Christ on a... What IS this?!” Smelt like cat piss.

It was. Urine, she said. I hastily returned it and she looked shocked. “Sir? It doesn’t arouse you?”

“No.” It certainly didn’t. “If you hadn’t noticed, I’m not Rris. Now please... ” I gestured at the door. “I’ll explain what happened. Not your fault.”

The look of relief that crossed her face was indescribable and quickly covered again. She didn't stop to argue, just grabbed her kilt and made for the door. I watched it close behind her and sat there, still staring as I tried to come to grips with what was going on inside. What she'd been sent here to do... it was ... it was something I'd felt for Chihirae, but it was something couldn't bring myself to follow through with. Sex with a Rris; It was a ridiculous thought, halfway between ludicrous and repellent in my mind. Something that couldn't happen and yet... Chihirae... I wished it had and berated myself for a fool.

Across at my laptop I overrode the screensaver and looked at the desktop and the picture there: smooth skin, the curves in the right places. THAT was a woman. What had just been in my rooms, that wasn't... it wasn't a human. It was female, but it wasn't... it wasn't a woman.

I shuddered and for a second it was Jackie I was picturing crouching and presenting to me, Chihirae kneeling with a flash of organic pink under her tail. What was down there wasn't the same as a human woman's. Frustrations and hormones making the urge unbearable: back in the bathroom I masturbated, groaned at the pictures spinning in my head as I finished, afterward leaned my head in my hands and sat panting and shivering and spent before retreating to my cold bed.

Jackie.

Chihirae.

I cried that night, while the wind rattled the windows and the paintings kept their opinions to themselves.

A crisp, cold spring morning. A chill morning sun turned the sky over the lake salmon pink, bathing the clouds over the city in soft light, turning them to cliffs of gray and orange mist. Columns of smoke rose from hundreds of chimneys, reaching almost vertically into the sky to merge into a faint haze.

I'd found a patch of morning sun in the lee of a cradle holding a dry-docked fishing boat, looking out over the water to the far bank upriver and the activity there. Rris were distant figures bustling through the riverside marketplace, their fur and clothes blending into a multihued visual cacophony. Smoke drifted up from open fires at stalls and shops where food was being cooked. Morning sunlight glittered off windows, the occasional patch of snow still clinging to rooftop tiles that glistened slate black and clay red. Further upstream I could see one of the bridges that linked the two halves of the city, wagons and foot traffic rumbling across it in a steady stream. Rris were busy around the wharves and the boats tied there, their masts creating a forest of timbers, cross-spars and ropes. The sounds of tools and Rris voices carried faintly across the water. I hunched down into the warmth of my jacket, hands jammed into my pockets.

The previous night preyed on my thoughts. This wasn't my home; It never would be. I didn't understand why they'd done that, I didn't understand what she'd been talking about. It wasn't sane, it wasn't the way I thought.

How much went on in those furry heads that was just incomprehensible to me?

"Something interesting?" Rraerch stepped up beside me, her ears pricked up and arms crossed, ruffling and rubbing at the fur of her upper arms like a human might on a cold day.

“Just looking. Is it a celebration day?”

“What?” she squinted at the activity over on the far bank. “Oh, no that’s just the morning market.”

“It happens every day?”

“Yes. You didn’t know?”

“I don’t get out much.”

She turned and looked up at me, cocking her head. “Are you all right? You seem... quiet.”

“I didn’t sleep very well.”

“Oh, well, I think we were all worried. You do have a lot riding on this though.” Her muzzle pursed in an expression of confusion. “I would have though you’d be anxious to see if the engine works, not standing here staring at a river.”

That wasn’t what I... never mind. I nodded. “You’re right. Has Chaeitch shown up yet?”

“A few minutes ago.”

The engine was set up over near the workshop. The carriage it was mounted on was chained to the ground while Rris were still stacking cords of wood nearby. Chaeitch was doing a last minute check on the cylinder valves, something that'd already been done at least five times. He looked around at the sound of my boots, “There you are.”

“He was watching the river,” Rraech said.

He cocked his head and scratched at a tufted cheek. “No interest in this?”

“No, it's not that. I... I don't...” I sighed, then shivered in my Rris made jacket. “It doesn't matter.” I forced a smile then, “Shall we get this show on the road?”

Blank looks.

“I mean, shall we start?”

“Why didn't you say so?”

They wouldn't let either me nor Chaeitch near the thing. A Rris laborer had

drawn the short straw for stoking, other capable Rris watching the pressure, the valves and cylinder. The firebox was stoked and lit off, a steady trickle of smoke started leaking from the stack. Low pressure test, the needle barely nudging a quarter of the way around the dial with its Rris gradient: blue to orange. Pipes creaked and trembled, but they held. The piston in its cylinder rocked, trembled, didn't move. Yelps of alarm rose when a young Rris jumped in and leaned its weight on the drive wheel and the piston started to move.

I heard metal grind, then a sound like a giant's sniff and a gout of steam vented: the piston started its return journey, picking up speed and turning the wheel. The Rris at the main steam line tapped it, bleeding pressure to hold the speed at about half a cycle per second. The engine sputtered and leaked steam and water, but it ran, better than I'd expected it to.

A hand grabbed my arm and I gasped as claws sank in. "Shave me, Mikah! It works!" Chaeitch yelled up at me, seeming like every piece of fur on his face was erect with jubilation. "It works!"

"Chae!" I winced in pain. "My arm!" and he looked confused, then shocked. "Saa! Rot it! I forgot. I didn't mean..." he babbled as he tried to unhook his claws. There was a moment of confusion, the engine almost forgotten as guards hastened toward me and I tried to assure them nothing was wrong while Chaeitch tried to disengage his claws. I was bleeding, I was sure of it, but I wasn't about to check and the shirt was dark enough to hide any patches.

Steam pressure was increased and the engine picked up speed, settling down to a smooth pattern. The gauge was under the halfway mark when the wheel being driven by the piston developed a bobble. There was a snapping noise, then a loud Spang! and a whistling shriek and panicked yells from Rris as a sheet of steam poured out of the boiler. It singed the tail of the Rris on the pressure gauge before he got clear and the steam wafted in eddies, then quickly dissipated. The piston sighed to a stop.

Forlorn wisps of steam continued to puff out of the damaged seal. There was a silence, into which I said, "Shit."

A chuckle from Rraerch, "I couldn't have put it better myself."

It was that seal again. The engine worked, better than we'd expected, but the materials just couldn't cut it. The bronze had just sheared away from the rivets, and that was at quite low pressure. If it'd been stoked up, a larger surface area to the boiler, and with everything properly insulated we'd be able to draw a lot more pressure, but there was no way the current equipment could hold that.

Everything considered, it was an educational morning. We had a product that was superior to the current Rris engine, enough so that it'd make an impression on the brass. All that had to be done was refine it enough that it didn't blow its stack when the pressure was turned up.

The man who'd had his tail singed by the steam hadn't received anything worse than a few blisters, light compared with what could have happened. Excited Rris workers set about tidying up the mess and returning the engine to the workshop. Rraerch stayed to watch as it was moved and was pleased to hear that repairs wouldn't be difficult. She patted my arm in way of congratulations before going to report to her own superiors and leaving us to our work. I didn't feel nearly as elated as I suppose I should have.

Workers were already working at unloading the engine from the carriage, the sound of hammers pounding on sheet metal and rivets filling the shed when Chaeitch took me back to his office. We spent time talking about how the seams could be strengthened, then most practical solution being to get the planing

machines finished, then machining proper screw threads and pipes from iron. He wasn't sure we'd have time for that, so we looked into reinforcing what we had. There was also the question of the copper piping around the seams. The copper ore the Rris could provide wasn't as pure as it could've been, so it was a great deal more brittle. By further refining the ore could be purified further, but the conventional Rris technique took money and time. Something better would have to be found.

I sat on a cushion at Chaeitch's desk and listened while the Rris mechanic listed options. Not well enough, I guess: My mind kept drifting back to things that happened in the night and I flinched when Chaeitch asked a question and I realised I hadn't heard. "Sir?"

He stopped, studied me intently for a few second while an ear twitched, then he said, "Mikah, you've been very quiet all day. I'd have thought that seeing that engine going would have roused something out of you. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I said, then hesitated. "Chaeitch, can I ask you... I have a problem."

He cocked his head, then laughed. "You're asking me? I thought you were the one everyone went to with problems."

"Chaeitch, please. Can we talk?"

"Sure." He stood and went over to a cabinet, returning with a bottle and a couple of glasses. "Maybe this will help."

He poured and I sipped. It did, a warm path that hit bottom and warmed from the inside out. Then he asked, “What’s this about?”

“I’m sorry... I find this difficult. Ah, last night... a woman came to my room. A Rris.”

“That surprises you?”

“She was sent to have sex with me.”

“Ah.” He rubbed his jaw, glanced down and back to my face again. “Did you enjoy yourself?”

“No. ” I shook my head. “I didn’t do anything. I didn’t know what was happening. I still don’t. Chaeitch, what the fuck’s going on? People... they are saying things I don’t understand. Rris out there,” I waved in the general direction of the workshop, “are acting like... I don’t know what’s the matter with them. And Rraerch has been acting strangely every time she talks to me.” I swirled my drink, watching the ripples. “She thinks it’s funny.”

He stared, looking taken aback. “It’s spring.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

He sat still and I saw his pupils dilate, shock. “You really don’t know?”

“No, I don’t.” I was getting sick of this. Why couldn’t someone give me a straight answer?

He coughed and looked down at his drink, then chittered laughter. “Rot me, Mikah. It’s spring. You don’t have [something]?”

“What’s that word?”

He lounged back in his cushion and laughed again, then told me what that word was and explained other things.

Rut. Estrus. Heat. Rris females came into season during spring, the time of year when they could get pregnant. They didn’t have any choice about it, apparently: when spring rolled around they got very randy. The males responded to this and it was the only time of year when they could become physically aroused. They responded to scents... pheromones... he wasn’t clear exactly what, but spring was a time Rris enjoyed. There were holidays and celebrations and festivals off and on for several weeks. The wine flowed freely, Chaeitch joked.

That time long ago when Chihirae had ask if we could have sex any time we wanted to; that was what she had been talking about. No wonder they were distracted. I glanced at the bottle on the desk. Wine flows freely? Not around here it doesn’t. Do I ever get a holiday? Sometime in the foreseeable future?

Females, he told me, they could feel arousal at other times through the year, but spring was the only time when males could get it up. That was where Chaeitch had been the other day, with a ladyfriend.

“So when is your season?” Chaeitch asked.

“We don’t have one.”

His ears flicked. “I’m not sure I heard that correctly. You said you don’t... “

“Have one,” I finished. “I am... I suppose a bit like your females. My kind are... in season all the time.”

This time his ears went down and he stared in disbelief. “What do you mean? You can mate whenever you want?”

“Uh, yes. Within limits.”

“Rot me,” he chittered. “How can you do anything. As soon as a male and female get together... ” he made a gesture with both hands that was very human in its vulgarity.

“It’s not like that.” I shook my head. “That’s what happens with you?”

“Ah,” he took another sip. “The females... when you smell them, it is like a [something] in your nose.” He tapped the bridge of his muzzle with a fingertip. “Gunpowder in your brain. The erections can become uncomfortable after a while.” He looked at me and chittered laughter again. “That female in your rooms last night, she probably couldn’t understand why she couldn’t get a reaction out of you.”

She’d got a reaction, all right. It just probably wasn’t what she’d been expecting. I took another drink, then thought back over what he’d said. “You can only mate once a year?”

“For a few weeks, usually. There are ways around it... there are drugs that arouse a male out of season, but they’re expensive and it’s not quite the same. ” Then he pursed his muzzle and looked thoughtful. “What’s it like for you? Being able to mate whenever you want, how do you get anything done?”

The conversation continued in the same vein for a while longer. I learned. Things no-one else had told me, questions no-one had answered were explained. Had Chihirae thought I was like Rris males? Was that why she was so confused about some of my behavior? What had she been expecting of me?

And what had I been expecting of her? Human emotions? Deep down, I think I had been.

Chaeitch got up for a refill, then ambled over to the dirty little office window. A peculiar tableau: the Rris standing there sipping at his drink. “I’d never thought about your questions,” he said.

“I don’t understand.”

“Huhn. We ask you questions by the hundreds. I’d never thought you might have some of your own. How much don’t you know?”

I laughed at that and he looked startled, then almost rueful. “That could have been worded better, couldn’t it. I mean: you have been in town two... nearly three months now. How much do you know about us?”

“Not as much as I would like to,” I said and a hope grew that I might finally have a chance to be heard. “I’d like to learn more. I’d like to see some of Shattered Water and Rris. Your town, work, art and your life. I don’t get many chances.”

He was about to answer when a scratching at the door interrupted him. A guard. “Sir. I’m sorry to intrude, we have to take him,” a hand gestured at me, ” back to the palace.”

Chaeitch looked surprised. “Now?”

“Yes sir. Orders from his Highness.”

Chaeitch snorted. “I suppose I can’t argue with that. Mikah, I will see you later then.”

I sighed and got up, stooping to leave my cup on the desk. The guard's ears went down at that. What had he/she been told about me and alcohol? There were more guards waiting downstairs, a carriage out in the forecourt. Again an anonymous pair of guards sat and watched me as the carriage bounced and rattled its way through the streets.

I ignored them, mulling over what I'd learned that morning, over what it meant to me.

—v—

Hirht and Kh'hitch were waiting for me in the king's offices: a smaller room more suited to informal meetings than that huge white marble office. There were windows opening out onto the palace's central atrium garden, walls draped with tapestries and paintings that seemed to exude a feeling of age and the scent of oils and fabrics. Under the elaborate rugs the floor was polished wood. In the sunlight shining in through the windows was a low circular table laid with a few trays of meat and pastries, surrounded by plush embroidered cushions. Kh'hitch had a scribe's kit at his place: a clipboard affair with a few sheaves of paper, a quill holder and an inkwell with a weighted base.

"I hear your little project down at the shipyards is coming along," Hirht said after I'd settled myself on the cushion placed opposite. "Any problems?"

He was sitting with his back to the window, sunlight behind his shoulder haloing his fur in a nimbus of white light, being shattered into a hundred pieces by the facets of the cut crystal goblet in his hand.

“Nothing serious so far,” I said. There was a small ceramic bowl at each place, filled with what seemed to be water. For drinking?

Kh’hitch delicately reached out and speared a morsel with a clawtip. “There was a problem, wasn’t there? It exploded?” He popped the mouthful, chewed a couple of times and swallowed.

“It worked, sir. It didn’t explode. A seam... broke. We were expecting something like that to happen and it is easily fixed. In fact, it worked better than I had thought it would.”

“Much of an improvement over the current engines?” Hirht asked. He was watching me intently.

“I think so.”

“Think so?”

I shrugged, watched Kh’hitch devour another piece of meat. It looked raw: blood stained his fingertip. He dipped them into the bowl at his side, the water turning pink. “Sir, we weren’t trying to see how much strength we could get from it. It was a test to see if it would work at all. We could not try it... not as fast as it can go. We fix part, then try again.”

“I see.” Hirht glanced at Kh’hitch and scratched at his forearm. Still in a thick winter pelt I noticed. That’d be getting hot soon. “When will you know?”

Again I shrugged, a habit I've still not been able to break. "We can fix the joins, then try again. From what I saw I think it is better than your machines."

Hirht steepled his fingers and leaned back. "Rraerch felt the same. What about the new tools and materials? Will they help?"

I hesitated. "Probably not on this one. Later engines, they will be better." Could probably use the current engine to test new valves and so forth.

"Mikah, how many of your kind did you say there are?"

The change in tack was unexpected. "Sir?"

Kh'hitch said, "Your kind: there are a lot of them, aren't there."

Compared with Rris. "Yes."

Hirht reached out and a single clawtip flicked the rim of the fingerbowl on the table before him. "Mikah, there are a lot of skilled craftsmen in Shattered Water. They make everything from our clothes to wagons and tools we use and at the last [something] there were about seven and one-half thousand of them. Even if all of them could stop what they were doing and start working on some of the things you've shown us, it's not nearly enough to sustain an industrial base as your kind have. If the whole population of Shattered Water did that I don't think it would be enough. Do you understand?"

“How many Rris in Shattered Water?”

“Nearly six hundred thousand.”

If they were watching for a reaction, they didn't get it. The numbers weren't that impressive when compared with a city like Chicago or New York or Roanoke. And you couldn't include the farmers and merchants and specialists who already played important roles in the city's infrastructure. Did that count include cubs, those unable to work? They'd hit on something I'd never realised: I could give them all the information they wanted, but their society wasn't physically - let alone mentally - capable of absorbing it. They simple couldn't support a full-scale industrial society yet. Take the Manhattan Project during the second world war: there were probably more skilled people working on that project alone than there are Rris in Shattered Water.

“Can you do anything about that?” Hirht was asking.

“I'm not sure. You have other towns, I think you will have to choose what town suits which work. There are places that have more coal or more metal than others. I think they would be the best places to put foundries.”

He looked interested. “You can tell where coal and ore can be found?”

Again I had to say I wasn't sure. “In my world... I have maps that show where such places are. Here, I don't know.”

Hirht looked thoughtful, probably filing that piece of information away for future reference. “Distributing industry is one idea, but your kind... you say you have flying machines, ways to communicate like that,” he clicked two claws together with a surprisingly loud sound. “We don’t. Most towns are days or weeks apart and the river network is useless in winter. Can you build us a system like your own?”

I stared at him, biting back a surge of irrational anger. Dammit, they expected me to have an answer for everything “No. Not like ours.”

“You sound sure of that.”

“I think I am. Building something like that... it is just too big.” I sighed and rubbed at my chin. I needed a shave, I wanted to get rid of that damned beard. “My kind took hundreds of years to go from where you are now to where we are now. With what you are pulling from me, you will learn a lot faster, but as you said; you just don’t have the... the people to build something like that. You would have to start smaller and grow with time.”

“Why can’t you just show us how to build flying machines like yours?”

“They’re too... complex. The tools we use, the machines of my world, they aren’t simple. They aren’t things you can build with your knowledge and tools. You need machines to build the machines to build the machines. The... knowledges you need to build them are all joined.” I laced my fingers to illustrate. “You learn one simple thing, it teaches you something else. It all joins. It lets you build bigger things. It is hard to explain; do you understand?”

“I think we have to find you another teacher,” Hirht snorted.

“I’m sorry.” I sagged.

“No. I think I understand what you are saying. It is like building a house: you should start at the ground and work up, start with small bricks to make a larger whole.”

“Yes.” Good metaphor. I wished I’d thought of it. “If you miss bricks there are holes in the walls. If you miss too many, the house might fall. I think you should not let your... want-to-be... ambition? Yes? You should not let that get ahead of what you can do.”

“You do,” Kh’hitch murmured. “Why?”

“Sir. The engine you are having built... that is a very old idea among my kind. But to build it you need new forges, new metals and tools and the time to learn to use them properly. If I told you how to build another engine tomorrow, a better one, but one that needs different tools again, you wouldn’t have time to learn how to use what you have properly. You would know HOW to make it, but you wouldn’t know WHY it works.”

“You can tell us.”

“No. I can’t. My machine has a lot of information, but it doesn’t have even a

small part of all that is out there,” I gestured at the world beyond the window and both Rris flinched. “I can’t do everything. There is a lot I don’t know and just aren’t able to tell you. My kind doesn’t know everything; There are things... Rris medicine for example... we know nothing about those. For you to just... believe and follow everything I say without thinking for yourselves, that is just foolish.”

Ears went back and there was a pregnant silence as the two Rris officials stared at me. I wondered if I might have gone a bit far. “You’re right,” Hirht finally said and raked the claws of his right hand through his cheek tufts, combing the fur out. “Rot it. How long would it take? For us to reach your level; How long?”

I shook my head. “I’m not sure. With what I can tell it will be a lot faster than it took my kind to get where we are. But still... it won’t be in the next hundred years.”

“That long?”

“If it takes you that long, that will be a lot sooner than it took us.”

He huffed and glanced at his Advisor. “Your thoughts?”

Kh’hitch growled softly, not a threatening sound; a deep rumbling he did while thinking. “He makes sense,” he said. “A hundred years seems like a long time to us, but think about what’s been done over the past hundred years: it isn’t a scratch on what he’s shown us in four months.”

Hirht's ears flicked. "Mikah, can you write a list of what you think can be done in the meantime?"

"I will need help. My writing is not... "

"You'll get it," Hirht chittered. "Kh'hitch, do something about a teacher for him."

"Sir," the Advisor ducked his head.

Hirht's ears flickered, sending dust particles dancing in the sunlight streaming in through the windows, then he looked at me again. "So, Mikah. You can't change the whole world, but maybe you can start by changing a part of it."

"Sir?"

"Depending on how your engine goes, there are other projects we'd like you to have a look at. I think they would go a long way down the trail to starting some of these news industries you've mentioned. And there are several more Guilds who've taken an interest in you and what you have to offer. They'll be wanting to meet with you sometime soon."

Great. Just what I needed. I tried not to let any trace of that thought show.

“For now,” Hirht continued, “can you tell us how your other work is going? Is it on schedule? Are you getting the help you need?”

That took a while, taking inventory of everything that was going on at the workshops and up at the university. I detailed what progress was being made on the tools and machinery, how refinement of superior metals was coming along, the construction of blast furnaces and prototype pumps for the Bessemer converters. Those were the things I knew about. I was sure they had their own agendas, that there were things going on I didn’t know about, but there really wasn’t much I could do about those. Kh’hitch took notes while I spoke: his quill pen scratched over the paper, laying down Rris cuneiform script in tight, regimented formation. With almost every line he had to stop and carefully dip his quill in the inkwell before continuing. I wondered how long my pens would last: I’d used quills before, and would much rather use a ballpoint or even a modern calligraphic pen.

Two pages were filled with the bird-scratchings of Rris cuneiform by the time I was done. My mouth was dry enough that I was tempted to take a swig from the fingerbowl; I glanced longingly at the dregs in the bottom of Hirht’s goblet. “Thank you, Kh’hitch,” Hirht said to his Advisor by way of dismissal.

Kh’hitch clambered to his feet: not without difficulty. A fat Rris; they aren’t that common. Their digitigrade stance makes it difficult for them to remain standing for any period of time. “Will that be all, sire?”

“Yes. Ah, I would like copies of those,” he gestured at the papers.

“Sir,” Kh’hitch ducked his head, then turned and left us.

Hirht waited until the door had shut, then flicked his ears and looked at me; a calm amber stare, like a satiated cat might give a bird on the lawn outside. “You didn’t like Hych?”

I flinched. “Sir, I just didn’t want to.”

“She displeased you in some way?”

“No. It wasn’t her fault.” I hesitated, trying to gather my thoughts and remembering what Chaeitch had told me. “It wasn’t anything she did. I’m just not... I’m not Ris. I don’t have the same... ah... feelings you do. Spring doesn’t mean the same to me.”

“What do you mean?”

I gave a small laugh, nervously raked my hair back. Damn, I needed a barber. “It’s a conversation I just had with Chaeitch. I don’t understand a lot of it myself. Your females... they don’t effect me they way they do you.”

Just for a split second the facade dropped and there was a look on his face, a realization, a sudden flinching as perhaps it hit that I wasn’t a misshapen Ris, that the differences went a lot deeper. It was a slip hastily masked as he looked away and growled something I didn’t catch.

“Sir?” I asked, a hornet of fear starting to circle my guts.

“Huhn,” he shook his head. “Nothing. Spring... isn’t your season. When is your rut?”

“We don’t have one. Or rather... we are mildly in season all year.”

“You can mate anytime?” He didn’t try to hide his surprise this time.

“Yes.”

“Rot me.” His cushion sighed as he leaned back and studied me, then a black lip twitched back to show a glimpse of white teeth; just a flicker. “Rot me, I knew you were different, but this...” He chittered, his ears flicking. “You don’t even need a female for mating?”

“Sir?”

He just snorted and waved the question off. “Rasa’s been wanting to talk with you about your mating habits, and after last night she’s been quite insistent.” He chittered amusement and eyed me thoughtfully, “I don’t think she’s going to hear quite what she expected. “

—v—

The following days were a mixture of hard grind at the workshops and more humiliation at the university. I suppose it’s justified; I mean, what would human

scientists do given a talking chimpanzee? a talking cat? They'd have questions, at least as many as the Rris did. They'd wanted to know about human mating patterns... all about human mating patterns. They saw the encyclopedia entries, the video clips and illustrations showing human anatomy, reproductive organs, procreation, gestation and birth; the articles on sexuality and mating behavior. Through it I was peppered with embarrassingly detailed questions about everything from genetics to foreplay and the act itself to homosexuality to STDs. I answered as best I could and sometimes left them confused, other times left them amused and a couple of times managed to outright shock them. I didn't have an opportunity to ask why, not at that time.

The Compaq could only tell them so much. They also wanted my opinions on human mating behaviour, wanted to know what my feeling were: how I felt during sex, how I was aroused. It was difficult, especially 'feelings'. I'm still not certain that what I feel and what a Rris feels are the same things. How does a Rris 'feel' anger? Love? Hate? Passion? I've seen all those, and sometimes they seem almost human, while other times they're incomprehensible expressions flitting across inhuman features. Unless I could climb into a Rris skull and look out through their emotions, there's no way I'm ever going to know what really goes on in there.

Then there were more physical examinations, but there were things I drew the limit at: demonstrating I could become physically aroused without a human female present was one. Especially not when there was a Rris with a ruler waiting to measure the results. And I was dreading that they'd ask for a semen sample. I'll do my bit for science, but enough's enough!

Thankfully, that never came about. After the ruler incident I think they guessed what my reaction would be.

My time down in the workshop was more enjoyable. Even if the work was physically harder, it was something I could throw myself into and forget about

everything else. The engine repairs went well, the new lathes were ready and Rris craftsmen had a ball with them. It was just a couple of days before we had cast iron replacements for the steam-line connections. Chaeitch also had the boiler reinforced, this time with iron hoops heated until they glowed red, hammered into place, then left to cool and contract. There was no way they were coming off in a hurry.

I had a new tutor. A male this time, by the name of Chotemri. He wasn't as outright xenophobic as Esseri had been, but then he didn't go out of his way to be friendly. He did his job though: helping me learn the Rris language, their history and life. And he was fair about my pronunciation difficulties, accepting them for what they were and doing what he could to overcome or work around the problems. There wasn't a lot of time for those lessons; most of the time they were slotted into a free day or the precious few free hours I might have in the evenings. No... Not a lot of time, but it all helped.

And day by day I watched from my barred window as spring fought it's way into the world. The last of the ice was falling from the eaves, buds and leaves blossoming from the deciduous trees. There were grass fields down there in the palace grounds: not landscaped, but long, lush grasses and a wilderness of treetops stretching away to the faint mirage shimmer of the lake a couple of kilometers away.

A million miles away.

I still had nightmares. There were shadowy, ill-formed images that came at me in the dark, the times when there were trials and I was in the dock and there was a hanging judge with a lion's head, more dreams of claws and pain. Sometimes the guards would wake me, other times I woke myself. I don't know how many mornings I woke bleary and thick-headed from lack of a decent night's sleep.

With my workload there'd been little time I could call my own. With the tuition, there was even less. It was always late when I returned to my quarters, barely enough time to eat and bathe and then sleep.

"You've been busy lately."

I wasn't expecting the voice when I entered my room that evening. Shyia was hunkered down in front of the fire, wearing a long, light-brown shortsleeved tunic, a poker in hand and the light doing drastic things with the highlights and shadows of his face as he watched me. "I haven't had a chance to talk with you for a while."

"Like you said, I've been busy," I said as I crossed the room, laying the laptop down on the desk before collapsing back onto the bed.

"Huhn, from what I've heard things seem to be going quite well for you."

I blinked up at the ceiling, then propped myself up on my elbows to stare at the Mediator, "What have you been hearing?"

"Well, your work. There's a lot of satisfaction with the way that's going. Some of the new metals you've come up with have caused a stir. I hear the Glassworkers Guild has expressed an interest."

"Great," I muttered and dropped back again. That was news to me.

“And I heard you refused an offer of companionship for spring.”

That again. It was such a big deal to them? “I just... I didn’t want to.”

“You never told me you didn’t have seasons.”

I grinned up at the ceiling. “You never asked.”

There was a low noise, between a growl and grunt. “But you can mate anytime you want?”

I stopped smiling, not sure where this was leading. “Yes.”

“Did Chihirae find this out?”

I hesitated at that question, then abruptly sat upright. Across the room the Mediator was watching me, that oil on water shimmer eclipsed as he blinked slowly at me. “What?” I said.

“Did you have sex with her?”

“No,” I said. “No.”

His ears flickered. “You were often in the same bed together.”

“She was warm.” It sounded lame, even to my ears. He made a sound that could have been a chuckle. “Is there a point to this? Or were you just curious.”

“I was curious,” he admitted. “I was also wondering if she should be watched. Mikah, more than just Guilds know about you. Both the Palace and the Mediators Guild have had inquiries about you. Not outright, hidden in the trees, but other kingdoms have been asking some questions about the sudden... changes Land-of-Water have been making. We’ve also apprehended several [something] from other kingdoms at the foundries and dockyards. Complaints were lodged with the embassies and they were [expelled]; they probably kicked out some of ours in turn, but we can’t find all of them. They know you are here, they probably have some idea of what is going on. Something’s going to happen soon: exactly what, I don’t know, but someone might look for leverage.”

“Chihirae?” I asked. “She in trouble?” stuttering over my Rris in my anxiety.

He looked at the fire, then back at me. “You still do feel... something for her. Don’t you.”

“Something.” I looked inside and smiled slightly at what I found there. “Yes, something.”

In the firelight he looked momentarily puzzled, then that facade fell into place again. “And what would you do if someone threatened to hurt her? To get at

what you know they threaten to hurt her. What would you do?”

I looked at my hands and for a brief second they seemed distorted: furless and clawless. I blinked, clenched fists and relaxed again. “I don’t know,” I said in all honesty. “Whatever I had to.”

He snorted at that. “If any of the highborn had to make a choice between you and Chihirae... well, the teacher is meat.”

I just nodded.

“Don’t get too close to anyone. Someone will try to use it against you. Remember that.”

I stared at the Mediator. “You must have had a sad childhood.”

He bit, and there was an outright flash of anger at that: ears flattening and a glitter of teeth in the firelight. “You’re calling this games again?” he growled.

“Shyia, I’m calling this my life. What do you want me to do? I find it hard enough to be accepted here. I can’t... turn my back on the friends I have.”

“Even if it could mean their lives?”

I sagged; didn't answer.

"Something I've noticed about some of your friends," he continued. "I've noticed some of the people you're working with don't like you as much as they'd have you think. I don't think they'd hurt you, but they certainly have no great fondness for you. They'll be using you for your knowledge, what you can give them. Did you notice?"

"No. I knew there would be Rris like that, but I didn't notice."

"Would you want to risk your life for someone like that?"

I shook my head slightly.

"Rot me. Don't DO that. You know people don't understand..." Shyia broke off, sighing; then shook his own head in a shaggy waving of fur, "Well, you're going to have to learn how to choose your friends better." He cocked his head and eyed me speculatively: "How well can you read us? I mean, our bodies, our feelings?"

"Some of it is easy. Your ears and tails and eyes give a lot away," I pointed at his where the tip was gently twitching. "Other things... I don't know. It is hard, especially when there's not much light. Your fur hides a lot."

The Mediator glanced down, running his left hand absently through the fur of his right forearm. "I've never had any trouble."

“You grew up with it. It is like another language you all speak without knowing it and there are no teachers. It is just something you know. Often, you have an expression or a gesture that is almost human, but means something different for you. That’s quite confusing.”

“Like your smiles.”

I nodded. “Like that.”

“You are still doing that though, aren’t you?”

“I try to be careful, but... it’s the way I smile. It’s like breathing: It’s not something over which I have much control. I can be careful, but that is all.”

He growled something, then said, “That is all we can ask, I suppose. But if you do that to someone who wants to cause trouble, that is all the excuse they would need to hurt you and say they were defending themselves.”

“They would do that?”

“There are those that would. Some of those scholar friends of yours... some of them have got a lot of stake in projects. Some of them have put their lives and their careers into their work. Now you come along and say it is wrong, or it has been done before. They might get the feeling that you’ve shown them up as fools. You can understand how that might upset some of them?”

I nodded, hastily said, “Yes.” I’d run into a couple like that already. A discussion over geology had almost gotten out of hand, but the Rris had calmed down. Hadn’t he?

“You can’t tell, can you,” Shyia rumbled, then he got up from where he was crouched in front of the fire. I heard cloth rustling against fur as he crossed to the window and rubbed some of the condensation off a pane, leaving a clear patch through which he stared out into the darkness. His tail twitched and he rounded on me. “Rot it. You just can’t tell! Mikah, some of those Rris you’re so friendly with would gladly see you dead, but they’re smart enough to know that if they laid a claw on you they’d be skinned! All it takes is one idiot who doesn’t see that. Just one.”

I was silent, quite taken aback by his outburst. “And what can I do about it?” I asked after a while.

The fire cracked and sputtered, sap igniting in a small gaseous jet. The Mediator was an eerie shape over by the window, his ears laid back as he looked out into the blackness outside. “I don’t know, Mikah,” he finally said. “I don’t know. Learn, I think that’s all you can do. Be careful; study people; learn what they really want. Don’t trust anyone; and don’t smile.”

I stared at him, feeling numb inside. “That’s all? You don’t ask much, do you.”

Then he grinned, wide and glittering - all razor points and saliva in the firelight, without humor at all. I flinched and the grin slowly faded. “You understand that expression, don’t you. Remember it. Every Rris can wear it, in

the open or behind a mask. Remember it.” He stared at me for a few seconds longer, then ducked his head. “Goodbye, Mikah Rye.”

I didn’t have anything to say, so I didn’t say it. The door closed behind him and I sat there while the fire crackled. A few minutes later a steward brought a tray in, left it on the desk and hurried out again, all the time trying not to even look at me. I lifted the cover: fish in crumbs and some kind of sauce.

I wasn’t hungry anymore.

—v—

Sounds of Shattered Water found their way into the workshops, slightly muffled by the wooden walls: distant shouting of Rris, wheels on roads, the cacophony of a multitude of animals. From the grimy windows high in the walls, through chinks in the clapboard walls, streams of golden morning sunlight poured, dust motes dancing in their hearts. Metal and wood gleamed in the light: burnished brass on fixtures and valve and linkage rods, lamp-black iron pipes clustered around the recumbent bulk of the boiler, the reflective oiled surface of the milled steel piston shafts. The smokestack now terminated in bronze moldings of leaves, splayed out around the end of the funnel.

From my seat on a stack of lumber I watched as teams of engineers and laborers pushed and pulled the wagon with its heavy load of engine bolted to it toward the shed’s doors. Iron-rimmed wheels clattered loudly against the flagstones, mingled with barks of advice and caution from the Rris. We could have performed the test inside with a chimney run out through the wall to expel exhaust, but Chaeitch wasn’t keen on losing the whole workshop if there’d been any trouble. Good point.

The doors were rolled aside and highlights exploded from polished brass as sunlight swept over the engine. I sighed; If the thing ran half as well as it looked, we'd be home free.

There was a blur of tawny fur in the corner of my eye and I looked around to see Chaeitch sitting beside me, watching the workers as if he'd been there for minutes. Still shakes me to realize how damned fast Rris can be. "Worried?" he asked without looking around at me.

"What gives you that idea?"

He raised his head a bit and seemed to sniff the air. "You smell [something]. It's noticeable."

I looked at him: dressed up for the occasion in green and ochre breeches and a dark brown vest with green trim, his mane and ruff groomed and trimmed. A gold ring was clipped to an ear and a fine gold chain looped from a pocket in his vest, probably his supply of weed for his pipe. Quite a contrast to my mismatched hodgepodge of Rris jacket over my human shirt and blue jeans and my shaggy mop of uncut hair. I couldn't tell what he was feeling: neither by sight or scent.

"Don't be so anxious," he assured me with a flash of a smile. "It's going to work. Have more [faith] in yourself."

I shrugged. He was right. It was essentially a shareholder meeting and the

engine should work. The valves and pipes had been reinforced and triple checked... but there was still Murphy.

A claw hooked my sleeve and gently tugged. "Come on," Chaeitch said. "Their honors will want to see you before the demonstration."

Outside: a fine spring morning, warming as the sun climbed. Light washed the eastern brick walls and tile roofs of building surrounding the court, the others still wrapped in shadow and dew. Benches had been set up there, velvet padded things like elaborate church pews, widely spaced out so the nobility wouldn't be crowded. A carpet, a goddamn carpet had been laid out over the cobbles: an expensive-looking rug as ornate as a tapestry and so big it must've needed its own wagon to get it here. And the engine itself... once the wagon was anchored and the thing checked, it was covered with a heavy red cloth embroidered with the Rris equivalents of heraldic devices. If that was intended to keep it low-key, they couldn't have chosen something to make it more conspicuous.

More guards arrived. Troops with the brown and crimson armor, polished steel breastplates and coalscuttle helmets of Palace guards took up stations around the inside of the courtyard wall, the northern gate, probably outside as well. I found myself with a quad of armed soldiers shadowing me.

"What the hell are they for?" I asked Chaeitch, lapsing into English. My swearing In Rris still needed work.

"Your own protection," he assured me.

"Protection? Against what?"

His ears flickered back for a second. “Just precautions. In case someone takes [something] at you.”

I took a breath and glanced at the soldiers. They stared back, nothing showing on their faces, but their tails were twitching like metronomes. “You really think there’s going to be trouble?”

“No. I don’t. They’re their on his lordships orders. I don’t have any say.” Chaeitch’s eyes were unnaturally wide, his pupils wide and black when he looked at me. “You’re going to be all right?”

The way he said that... Used in Rris syntax I wasn’t sure if he was inquiring after my well-being or asking if I was going to cause waves. “I’ll manage.”

He cast a glance toward the gates. “Just be polite and try not to frighten anyone.”

“That’s not always my decision.”

Chaeitch snorted, then chittered slightly. “Ah, I see your point. Well, do your best.”

It wasn’t much later when the first of the spectators began to arrive, and they did it in style. The carriages that drew up in the courtyard came in varying degrees of ‘fancy’: from simply ‘quite’, up to ‘Rococo’. The sounds of wheels

and animal hooves clattering on the cobblestones vied with the sibilants and spats of Rris voices as carriage after carriage pulled into the courtyard to deposit its passengers before moving off again. The crowd of high-ranking Rris lords and their escorts gathering in the yard swelled. A blaze of colors, fur and clothing and jewelry: gold and bronze and scarlet and sky blue and forest green and sun yellow, a circus of colors and textures. Self-possessed individuals, males and females wearing attire and attitude that said they were important; others following them in the more subdued livery of servants and stewards, others who could have been personal guards.

Chaeitch was supervising the engine now the covers were off and the boiler was lit, stokers working to get the steam pressure up. I waited where he'd told me and tried to be inconspicuous. I didn't do a very good job and almost immediately drew more attention than the engine. Rris stared from a distance, then drew closer, a crowd gathering. As strangers stared at me and more began to drift in my direction I became more and more uneasy.

“What the rot is that?”

A trio approached: an elder one with graying fur in its van-dyke brown mane and the thicker fur of its - his? - chest and a pleated winered kilt around his waist, the other two were younger: a male and female I think, the male wearing bloused pantaloons with a satchel slung at his side and a clipboard under his arm; the female in plain dark-blue breeches, carrying a powder horn and several pouches at her belt. Bodyguard? Not even up to my shoulder, but she was wiry and it was pure muscle shifting under that tan hide.

“You,” the older demanded of a guard, “What is that? Is it supposed to be here?”

“A guest of the Lord,” the Guard answered.

“But what is it?” he demanded.

Another Rris spoke out, “I’ve seen it around the palace. Quite valuable apparently.”

“Valuable?” The elderly male looked up to meet my eye. “It is [something].”

My guards stiffened, looking around at the small crowd that’d gathered to rubberneck. Maybe a dozen high-ranking Rris with their hangers-on gathering in their own individual clusters. There were military officials there as well: I saw a Rris in the decorated leather jacket and kilt of an officer with a conspicuous bracelet glittering on a wrist watching me intently from the back of the crowd, gone the next time I looked. “Is it dangerous?” a Rris was asking, moving a bit closer to stare up at me and I moved back a bit when I saw the hint of claws visible at the fingertips.

“No, ma’am,” the guard replied.

“Ah! I saw something like that in the [something],” another noble spoke up. “An animal brought back from Africa. It was called an Ape. Dangerous beasts.”

“Ape? I heard they...”

“I’m not an ape,” I said and everything stopped, just for a second before the water-on-hot iron noise of excited Rris broke out: questions jabbered at me and the guards. I jumped when a clawed hand locked on my elbow and Rraerch stepped up beside me:

“Good folk, this will all be explained to you shortly. If you would be so kind as to take your seats we can proceed with the [something]. I’m sure you’re all anxious to know what your [something] has [something] you in return. His Highness is due shortly and the demonstration will start when he arrives.”

Most of them slowly moved away, but there were reluctant ones, more questions and assurances before they deigned to return to the seats. Rraerch kept a grip on my arm: not especially hard, but the claws were out. “Mikah, skin you,” she sighed when they were out of earshot, “You have to go and scream in the streets, don’t you.”

“What?”

“Never mind.” She hissed, then quickly smoothed her facial fur and mane down where it’d started to ruffle. “Now, you know what’s happening?”

“Yes.”

“Good. They’re going to want to ask you questions. Please, just answer. Be polite, don’t insult anybody. Saaa, his Highness.”

Another carriage was arriving, a large one drawn by four elk. The windows were louvered, the rest of the carriage paneled with dark wood whose every square inch seemed to be carved with relief engravings. Pennants bearing the intricate white on black geometric devices of the Chihiski lineage fluttered from the roof. An armed escort rode shotgun, palace guards in their glittering polished armor mounted on llamas. They were carrying hardware that ranged from everything from guns that resembled sawn-off shotguns to cut-down pole arms and I wondered if that was SOP or if they were expecting trouble.

“Mikah, I have to go,” Rraerch told me. “Just... be careful.” She released me, patted my arm and stalked off toward the engine. I rubbed my elbow and watched as Hirht stepped out of the carriage, followed by the furry bulk of his Advisor and another Rris in the uniform of Land-of-Water military. She was big for a Rris, that one; half a head above her fellows, graying about the muzzle with shock-white fur in her mane and with an odd dappled pattern to her fur. Arms rippled with the musculature of someone quite used to wielding a sword.

Rraerch greeted the king by ducking her head and crouching slightly, then tipping her head back. He touched her throat lightly, said something, and she stood again to show the high born to their seats. Hirht glanced around, saw me standing in the background and stared for a couple of seconds before flicking his ears and turning his attention to the business at hand.

The rising sun was warming my back as I stood quietly, watching the proceedings. Tails were lashing through the backs of the benches as the nobles watched Rraerch stepped up to the engine, few wisps of steam escaping into the air from the rumbling, hissing machinery behind her.

“Good folk,” she began. “You’ve all been most generous in your support and [something] for this venture. You knew it was a slightly risky [something], yet you’ve shown great [courage] and seeing what’s around the next corner [foresight?] in placing your support behind us. I know you’ve all had doubts

about this project,” There were a few mutters at that, “but I am pleased to be able to inform you all that it has [something] a success.”

Reaction to that. A general stirring and pricking up of ears. Rraerch gave them a second then stepped aside and gestured to the machinery behind her. “You’re all familiar with the current engine and it’s limitations. This [something] a lot of them. It’s as powerful as three of the old engines, it can run longer, uses less fuel, weighs less, and is considerably stronger.”

The engineer on the throttle slowly opened it up and the machine sniffed, then slowly the piston arm came down, up again. Smoke twisted from the jaws of the stack, the big wheel turned, slowly at first, gathering momentum and speed. Without a regulator it was the engineer’s job to monitor the speed of the thing, to keep it steady, also to keep the pressure below that mark on the dial. The new joints would probably hold, but it wasn’t a good time to test them to destruction.

In any case it ran without a hitch. Chaeitch stepped in to give the lords a running commentary; pointing out the modifications and changes, the new materials and techniques being used. From what I could tell, it seemed to be going well. The dignitaries seemed interested: tails weren’t lashing, a few flagging ears had gone up again as they followed the demonstration. They seemed even more interested when Chaeitch mentioned some of the possibilities the new tech offered: faster trade routes, trade goods, productivity, wealth.

Capitalism was alive and well in Shattered Water.

“You see the possibilities,” Rraerch summed up as the engine was wound down, venting steam pressure with a spray of condensing water vapor swirling around her legs, “We have the means for [undreamed of?] achievements within our grasps, for a hunt into new territories. With your continued support and

[foundations?] we can refine and improve these innovations.” She paused for a second to glance back at the engine, now at idle, then looked back to her audience “I can see there are interesting times ahead. Are there any with the courage to [fight? Dance?] with it?”

A hesitation, then a noble spoke up: “New machines, new metals and tools. Very impressive, but just WHERE is this coming from?”

“You met him earlier.”

“I know Ah Ties is quite capable, but I think this is beyond even... “

“No. Not him.” She took a breath, then gestured to me: “Mikah, come here.”

Heads turned and I saw ears go down flat against manes. They stared as I went to her. “That?” one finally said. “You mean that is responsible for... ” The Ris, male or female I couldn’t tell, trailed off.

“You never told us about this,” another said.

“Would it have made a difference?”

“I believe it might have. Shave me, but what is it?”

I caught the movement in the tail of my eye as Rraerch glanced at me. “His name is Mikah. He’s a male H’uan. Where he’s from and what he’s doing here isn’t the issue at the moment, but he’s intelligent, at least as intelligent as a Rris, and he’s the one who gave us these.” She waved an arm toward the engine.

“How could something like that build that?” some skeptic growled.

“It wasn’t easy. I had some help,” I said and there was hesitation before a spattering of chittering. Rraerch looked slightly startled at that, but she recovered quickly. “Huhn, Mikah. Yes, he might be... unusual, but he carries new ideas. A lot of them. This is just an example of what he can do.”

“Not that impressive.” Heads turned to stare at the speaker: A Rris in military uniform. The same one as before? Something was nagging at the back of my mind. “A few improvements? Is that so world-moving?”

Rraerch’s ears twitched back. I saw Hirht’s muzzle wrinkle, just a spasm in the short fur before he resumed his impassive mask. “Just improvements?” Rraerch asked.

“That is what they are, isn’t it?” the other said and kept staring at me. “It couldn’t do something useful? Could it let us fly?”

“How high?” I asked and the officer’s ears went down flat at the chittering from the others.

“Mikah,” Rraerch quietly warned me, but I think her reaction was more relief at their amusement than annoyance toward me. “There are more impressive devices. There are ideas you’ve never dreamed of, possibilities that can reach beyond our grasps. His Highness has already honored us with his pledge of full patronage and support and I urge you to consider your commitments. You have the opportunity to share in the rewards of the hunt; I think it would be a mistake to turn away from it.”

Of course there were questions then, a rising snarl of Rris voices asking, requesting, and demanding answers. Rraerch ducked her head and raised a hand and didn’t say a word until there was silence. “Now, good folk, I know you have questions, but may I suggest we [something] to more comfortable and private quarters to further discuss this. The Green rooms at the Shi’his Halls have been reserved and you are expected. If I can meet you there in an hour, then any questions or problems you have will be answered.”

She ignored the babble that rose behind her as she turned away. “Mikah, come along. “

The guards fell in around me as I followed, an itch developing between my shoulder blades as she led me away from the Rris nobility and their chairs and the carpet out there in the courtyard. In the privacy of Chaeitch’s little second-floor office she stood at the window overlooking the courtyard, then sagged with an exhalation that could have come from her bones. “Rot, I’m glad that’s over. All things considered, I think it went quite well.” She turned to look at me. “You could have shown a little more respect.”

I shrugged. “I thought I was quite restrained.”

“Shave you...” she caught herself and chittered slightly. “Too late for that,

ah? I meant these people are important. Your future will hinge on their decisions. It would help if they had a favorable opinion of you.”

I sat myself down on one of the cushions at Chaeitch’s desk. “If they’re important, did you have to... tease them like that?”

“Tease? Saa, that.” She looked out the grubby little window again. “It works well with them. With some of them, the best way to hold their attention is to dangle something [tantalizing?] and keep it just out of their claws. Fishing for their favors in a way.”

“Ah. And I’m the bait.”

Her tail stopped moving, froze, then just the tip started flicking back and forth. “Mikah, they have to know about you. They’ll have to deal with you sometime and I’d prefer they know about you now than having to try and persuade them you exist later on. You understand that?” She turned, and grime-dimmed sunlight bathed half her face, yellow-amber eyes startling in the darker fur.

“I understand,” I said.

Rraerch almost looked relieved. “Good. That’s good. Now, I’ll be going to the hall to try and settle the rest of this business. They’re going to have questions all right.” Her ears tipped down and she studied me, then snorted, “I hope I have the answers. You... Chaeitch is going to want you around to check over your little toy there so you stay here for a while. You’ll get your chance to meet them soon enough, you can expect that like the sun in morning.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

She gave me another curious look, obviously unable to tell if I was being facetious or not, then snorted and stalked over to the door. “It’d be [something] for you to wait here, at least until things out there have settled down.” A clawtip flicked the simple wooden latch open and she hesitated, a hand on the door; “There’ll be guards outside.”

The door closed behind her.

I sighed, then leaned forward on the desk, held out my right arm and unclenched my fist: My hand was trembling, I was wound tight as a spring.

—v—

It wasn’t a pleasant feeling. The world - a convoluted and complicated place at the best of times - was spinning beyond any control I could exert. My life was no longer my own, with every minute of my day regimented and prescribed and ordained.

The lords had been convinced. Well, most of them. Rraerch told me all but three had agreed to sponsor my introduction of human technology. Already there was another workshop being built alongside the current pair and the old one was being extended. Now Chaeitch’s team was working on fitting the engine and screw into the hull of the test boat in preparation for the first waterborne test while at the same time work on the next incarnation of engine was underway:

similar principals, but more compact and solid.

The Guild Lords were very interested in that engine. Half a dozen different Guilds were vying to be the first to get the new machinery to drive the bellows in the smelters, looms and wheels in the textile mills, water pumps, millstones. They weren't being very patient about it and Rraerch in turn was pressing Chaeitch to get the new engines finished which put more pressure on me.

The Textiles Guild was especially interested. That was the Guild that been among the first to use Chaeitch's original steam engine to drive some looms. Now there were improved devices available, they were willing to invest. And they weren't small players either; Their production was a major part of Shattered Water's economy, with textile, dyes, clothing and fabric being among the most prevalent consumer items and exports. The Guild's members ranged from the herders who managed wool-bearing livestock to the weavers and tailors on up to the big textile plants and merchants who ran them. They owned their own ships, operated their own caravans with extensive trade networks throughout the kingdoms. According to Rraerch they'd pledged substantial support, but had to be persuaded to wait until the improved engines were available. Probably for the best: they wouldn't be impressed if a boiler went up in the middle of a factory floor.

Long hours were spent shut in a room that came to seem too small with Rraerch and Guild and Palace Liaisons. They wanted to know what innovations I could provide to suit their fields of expertise. The Textiles Guild's representatives were very interested in my clothes, as well as the schematics stored on my laptop: improved looms, gins and spinning jennies; new materials; formulas for new dyes and inks. Silk and spidersilk especially intrigued them, but without silkworms and their food supply, silk was out of the question; and Rris industry certainly wasn't up to producing synthetic spidersilk.

The Printers Guild wanted new ways to manufacture better paper and were

interested in a basic three-color process. Metallurgist's Guild kept me busy with the Bessemer converters, especially the ceramic linings. The Physicians didn't have a guild as such, but they were loosely affiliated with the Chemists and Reactions so they had a representative in attendance when those Guilds sent members to interview me.

Those audiences weren't easy for me. Every time a Rris first laid eyes on me, no matter what sort of advance warning they might have had, the reactions were the same. There was the staring, the hesitation. When they spoke to me, it was as if I were an imbecile or child. I know my pronunciation wasn't the best, but surely it wasn't that bad. The worst ones were the overbearing bastards from the Merchants Guild, the ones who just refused to believe I could be intelligent. They addressed all their questions through the Palace Liaisons and treated my answers as though they weren't of much consequence. Every day was a gauntlet where I faced Rris those sorts of reactions, everything ranging from mild startlement up to outright hostility. That, combined with the dawn-to-midnight workload took its toll. It was all I could do to collapse into bed at the end of the day, and those nights when the nightmares came didn't make it any easier.

The Land-of-Water Nobility was also getting edgy about security. Apparently there'd been more and more questions from foreign embassies. I didn't have all the details, just what Chaeitch was able to tell me, but I could guess the other Kingdoms were getting damn curious about what was going on. The new steam engine... well, they already knew about the engine. Land-of-Water had been exporting the technology for several years; they'd had time to reverse-engineer and produce their own. The new engine... I was sure Shattered Water eyes weren't the only ones to have witnessed that test. Other kingdoms might have believed that Chaeitch refined the old engine, but the sudden appearance of all these new concepts was going to raise a few eyebrows... ears... whatever. Already the work on the boat was taking place under much tighter security and the Rris I were meeting were closely screened.

I wasn't being moved out of the Palace as much. The only times were on the

occasions when they needed me down at the workshops and those times there was increased security: more guards, keeping me out of the open as much as possible . The upper echelons were nervous about something and that meant all I saw of the world I was living in was the greenery of the gardens through the bars of my window.

—v—

A cold night wind from straight off the lake blew in through the shed's open river doors. Across the river I could see a few lights burning on the far shore: orange-red fireflies reflected in the still surface of the dark river. Water lapped steadily at the bottom of the slipway, an odd color in the orange-tinged light from Rris lamps that illuminated the interior of the workshop bustling with activity unusual for that time of night. Sounds of Rris voices barking cautions and instructions competed with the rattle of chains and groaning of timbers as the boat and cradle were lowered down the slipway.

It floated. I felt that was a promising start.

Security. That was foremost on the Rris' minds. That was why the test was being held in the middle of the night; that was why the bronze screw and rudder were covered by oilcloths until they were safely submerged and out of sight. Slowly, the boat was eased out of its cradle and tied alongside the wharf while Rris firemen got the engine up to pressure and checked for any troublesome leaks. A couple were found: minor things quickly caulked with tar while the boiler was stoked and a trickle of smoke found its way into the night sky, a silvery-gray mist in the moonlight. It wasn't a very impressive vessel, being little more than a 12 meter hull with the bulk of the engine mounted amidships, the Heath Robinson assembly of the transmission following the keel below and a basic block and tackle system linking rudder to tiller. No decking to speak of, no cabin or other finishing, but then it was never intended to be a luxury liner.

Chaeitch was among those making the final checks and preparations. A few final words to the engineers who'd be operating it and the hull rocked as five Ris figures nimbly leapt over onto the wharf. Chaeitch's claws clattered on the wooden decking as he came back to join me back in the shed, watching from a distance as the steam lines were opened, wreaths of water vapor wrapped around and condensed on metal as the pistons jerked into motion. Ropes were cast off and stevedores moved in with bargepoles to keep the hull clear of the wharf.

"What is that you say?" Chaeitch murmured to me. "'Fingers crossed'?" He held up his hands but wasn't able to quite cross his stubby fingers.

I let vent a small laugh and showed him how. He stared at my fingers and I saw the involuntary flinch in his eyes before he turned back to the boat.

Et tu, Chaeitch?

The engine picked up its pace, a rapid thump, hiss , then the transmission was shifted in and I winced at the grating sound. It'd been smoother in the dry runs, but then the blades hadn't been trying to push water. Still, the gears settled and the boat started to move back out of dock, the tail beginning to lazily swing around downstream as the lazy current took it

There was a silence throughout the workshop, the workers, engineers, guards all watching intently with ears pricked up as the boat moved further out. I couldn't see much now, just the vague shape of the boat in the moonlight and sparkles of water dripping from the line connecting it to the dock. There was a movement in the engineer's compartment.

“That’s it,” Chaeitch explained. “He’s changing direction.”

Again there was a grinding of gears, the engine picked up the pace and the boat stopped moving as an agitation appeared in the dark water under the stern, then the vessel began moving upstream. Slowly at first, picking up speed as it moved back past the wharf and upstream into the darkness.

Jubilant yowls arose from the watching Rris.

“Huhn,” Chaeitch’s muzzle pursed in a pleased smile as he stared after the boat. “Impressive. A sail might make better time with a good wind, but for a first try it’s quite impressive.”

“A Scarab racer it’s not,” I agreed. “I’m surprised it works at all.”

He looked at me and snorted, “You should have more confidence in your work. So far, I’m impressed.”

“Lot of people are.” Rraerch came up to stand beside Chaeitch. “Still, it’s a long throw to the boats Mikah’s your kind have, isn’t it Mikah.”

“Give us some time,” Chaeitch said and the other Rris chittered.

The boat made another chugging pass of the dock before the captain swung the bow around and brought it back in for a less than perfect dock; bouncing it off the buffers along the wharf. Immediately lines were hurled out and secured and workers with the odd gloves they had to wear hauled it back to its cradle. Water sloughed off the hull and the gleaming metal of the prop as the cradle hauled the hull back up the slipway and the doors were closed right behind it.

All in all, the screw had weathered the test pretty well. The mounting pins were secure and didn't seem to have been overstressed; the seal for the driveshaft had leaked a bit of water, but nothing to be concerned about. The transmission was another matter: There were fragments of metal in the gearbox where some of the gears had been chewed up. The damn things weren't meshing properly when the screw was under load.

"Not too much of a problem," Chaeitch mused as his stubby fingers moved in to run across the deformed edge of a gear. "Look. Rot me, the metal is too soft. This should be a one-half hundredth of carbon. And if the edges are beveled that will make the travel easier." He gestured at the nearby Rris with the clipboard. "Get that? I want words with the tail draggers over at the foundry."

"Sir," the scribe jotted a note and sent it off with a runner.

"Rot," Chaeitch hissed again and stood up to rake his mane back with claws. "Ah, well. It's annoying, but not too bad. It'll be a couple of days to produce the new parts."

"Nothing serious?" Rraerch asked him.

I stepped back and let the Rris iron out the kinks in the system. It was what Chaeitch was damn good at: taking ideas I could provide and finding a way to make them work with the materials at hand. Sure, I could say the steam engine was a great idea; I could show him the principal behind the changes I'd put forward, but I didn't have the skill to use the Rris tools. I couldn't forge the metal or work the lathes, even the basic woodworking tools were far enough removed from the convenience of power tools that I had trouble with them. God, tired. I yawned then grimaced at the sensations that awoke around the dead part of my face.

"Mikah?" Chaeitch had chosen that moment to glance up. "Something wrong?"

I shook my head. "Just tired."

He stood up, wiping his hands on his breeches, and a more intent look on his face. Rraerch blinked; glanced from him to me. "You're sure?" he asked, then reached out to touch my jaw and turn my face slightly more toward the light. "Your eyes look... different."

"Just tired," I said and he looked at his boss.

"Rraerch, how much sleep has he been getting?"

She scratched her jowl as she studied me. "I really couldn't say."

Chaeitch blinked at me and wiped his own cheek. “All right,” he snorted. “Mikah, why don’t you finish for the night.”

I didn’t want to argue too much. “If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure. Go on, out of here.” He waved me out of there and yelled across the workshop to order the guards to get me back to the Palace. “Get a decent rest, ah?” he told me.

“Thank you,” I smiled but he was already back to the job at hand.

The guards did their job, bustling me out to the carriage waiting in the poorly-lit courtyard. Despite the jolting and rattling I dozed off as usual, to be woken when a claw jabbed my leg. They’d gotten quite used to waking me up that way.

The gas lamps in my quarters flickered fitfully, bathing the room in a vague twilight. I rubbed my eyes as I crossed to the window alcove to stare out that the blackness, compound reflections of the room behind me visible in the panes. I could hear the wind in the trees outside; from somewhere else came the barely-audible susuruss of Rris voices. Yawning again I turned to bed and hesitated at the desk.

The laptop was open, and I was sure I’d closed it that morning. I just touched a key to power it up. The desktop selection cursor was on the Encyclopedia Britannica. I pressed enter to run that and was greeted with the library screen, then just out of curiosity checked the search history.

For a while I stood and stared at that list before, then deliberately reached down and shut the machine off. The list... it wasn't a search I'd initialized. Someone who wasn't familiar with English characters had been searching, trying to match words with things they'd seen elsewhere, probably copying the shapes of the letters. It wasn't much of a surprise at all, not after the metal shavings in the workshop, the lathes bits they'd wanted built.

Not a surprise. Not a surprise at all I reflected as I fell back into bed. Too tired to think on it: the same thoughts just jumbling and tripping over themselves until that point where consciousness fades into the realm of the subconscious.

I dreamed of farms and snowbound hills again, with inhuman figures hunting me. A snarling muzzle and sun-on-bronze eyes behind the gun that shot me.

—v—

Something was going on.

A guard brought me my breakfast the next morning, but then there was nothing. My usual escort didn't show up to cart me off to the waterfront workshops or some other meeting in a remote corner of the city or Palace. I waited, thinking maybe Chotemri was going to be stopping by, but nobody showed up. So all I could do was keep waiting as the day dragged on and morning turning into afternoon. I passed the time by going over my language notes and replaying phrases Chotemri had dictated to the laptop in an effort to improve my pronunciation. Monotonous, a dull way to spend a day, but I was getting very tired of Rris criticizing the way I mangled their language.

The midday meal arrived and I tried to question the guard, but s/he wasn't very keen to stay and chat; just dumped the tray and left. Water, grilled rabbit, something like sweet potato, and - surprisingly - slices of tomato. I wondered if I might be able to get the cooks to make ketchup. It'd be something to spice up the meals. Anyway, I took my time eating, sitting in the window alcove staring wistfully out at the sunlight and greenery. The first time in a while I was able to relax, but I had to wonder just what was going on.

It was quiet for hours, until the light outside was turning to the suffused gold of evening sunlight. I heard the voices in the hall outside first; muted through the door, but someone sounded mightily agitated. A guard opened the door and held it as Kh'hitch bowed in. "Mikah," the portly Advisor greeted me. "There's been a rather sudden development. His highness asks that you meet with him tonight."

"Development?" I asked.

He growled softly, a deep rumbling as he crossed the room to gaze down at the work on the desk. "It seems that your activities have attracted a great deal of unwanted interest. Immediately following your work last night several [something] from foreign embassies arrived to demand explanations." His ears went back flat against his skull. "They... insist on meeting with you. They are quite [something] about it."

Someone else... quite a few someone elses had seen the trial of the boat last night. They knew I was involved and I was doing more than just improving on what Land-of-Water already had. "If you don't show me?" I asked.

He stiffened and stared at me, as if trying to judge just how much I knew of what was going on; how much I could guess. "They have been quite insistent on seeing you," he said, not really answering my question. "His lordship has

decided you will meet with them this evening. There is to be a [something] and meal and you will be present. This will require you to be properly presentable and to show appropriate respect to their honors. You can understand that?"

"Yes." Contrary to what he might think, I did have a couple of brain cells I could knock together. But if he wanted me presentable, there was a slight problem. My wardrobe didn't offer the most elegant of ensembles.

"That's taken care of," he assured me.

'Taken care of' involved what seemed like a small army of servants, tailors, seamsters and stylists. I put up with poking and prodding and whispered comments I guess they thought I couldn't hear because my damn ears weren't pointing their way. They measured me: arms and legs, waist and chest. Swatches of cloth were brought out, colors compared. They copied the cut of my human clothes and then applied their own flourishes: a velvet and cotton shirt of cobalt blue and green with bloused sleeves trimmed with gold thread and buttons. The trousers were black and overly long, designed to be tucked into the top of my boots so the bottoms bloused out like something a character from 1001 Arabian Nights might wear. Parts of it didn't hang too well: the tailors were accustomed to working to Rris proportions and I guess they reverted to those in a few places. Anyway, the jacket was a bit tight across the shoulders and the pant's crotch was too snug. The whole outfit looked garish and overdone to sensibilities accustomed to austere black tuxes and formal wear, but Rris found it acceptable.

My hair and beard were done while the clothing was being sewn up. A pair of Rris armed with elaborate versions of those familiar roll-up kits of clippers and combs timidly tried to get me to sit so they could work. Rris groomers, barbers, hairdresser... whatever you want to call them. I cooperated and sat where they wanted: on the desk cushion in the sunlight. A male and female pair, they gingerly touched my hair, made surprised noises and ran their fingers through it.

“Is this normal for your kind?” the female asked.

So, they at least knew I talked. “Is what normal?”

There was a sharp intake of air and a hesitation. Perhaps they didn’t believe everything they were told. “This color,” she finally said. “The length. It’s normal?”

“I don’t usually let it grow so long,” I confessed.

Stubby fingers moved toward my face and I flinched as a flash of razored claws replayed behind my eyes. The Rris jerked his hand away, his own eyes wide: “Sir?”

“Sorry,” I said. “Just... be careful with your claws.”

And I saw his eyes flicker to that spot on my jaw where my beard was scraggly and didn’t quite manage to cover the torn skin beneath. “Yes, sir,” he said.

They were careful. Claws and combs pulled through my hair, making some sense out of it, then clippers were working here and there, sending blond locks falling to the catch-cloth. Guards were watching as they worked, watching even more intently when the female came around to touch my face and beard, then gently tilt my head back and the gleaming metal of those little scissors came up.

She touched the bristles with the leathery pads on her fingertips. There was a tiny prickle as claws touched my skin, carefully ran along my jaw, from ear to chin. Her eyes flickered, a twitch of muscles as the iris dilated then contracted again as they met mine. It's hard to describe what it's like to look into a Rris' eyes. They aren't human, but that goes without saying. Unless the Rris is extremely agitated there's no sclera; the pigment of the pupil fills the eye and for so many is predominantly a deep amber, a hot orange with the jade black of the iris that in literally the blink of an eye could go from a slit of night to a black pool. Inhuman, animal eyes. How can an eye convey emotion? For the most part it's the muscles and tissues around the eye that shift, framing it in different contexts to provide emotional cues and reading any of those movements into a Rris is dangerously inaccurate. But there is something there, a glimmer that no animal has... that essence in the depths, that spark of something that's more than just cunning or calculation.

And she'd also frozen, her eyes locked on mine. Then slowly she cocked her head and a cautious little smile pursed her features. How many of my thoughts had also been hers in that split second?

"Sir?" she asked, and I was aware I'd started to raise my arm, as if starting to ward the blades away. I lowered it again.

"Go ahead."

She was careful, as delicate as if she were practicing shaving on a balloon. I tipped my head back and watched the ceiling as the scissors danced around my throat.

Snip

Snip

—v—

The guards' polished steel cuirasses and helmets threw reflections from the gas lamps that burned along the walls of the hall. The light didn't quite reach the high ceiling where carved figures lurked in the shadows of a graceful groin vault. Pennants and tapestries and paintings hung in the shadows, the figures of elegantly attired long-dead Rris nobility gazing down as my escort and I walked the length of the hall toward the doors at the far end. More guards flanked us, squads lined up to either side down the length of the hall. They weren't Land-of-Water soldiery. Offhand, I could count the troops of over eight different kingdoms there, their armor and livery differing wildly. There were soldiers in bronze breastplates; stained and painted leather of all colors; chainmail coifs; quilted things that looked like embroidered flak vests. Heads turned as we passed. I could feel eyes staring at me all the way down that hall, a few incomprehensible murmured comments drifted after us. I glanced down at the carpet under my boots and when I raised my eyes again I was staring at the gold inlaid wood of the doors. The well-oiled hinges didn't make a sound as they were swung open and one of my guards ushered me in.

It was another big room. Dimly lit. A fire was blazing in a huge hearth at the far end and in front of that sprawled an equally oversized table. If the Rris seated at that table had been talking, they were silent now, all heads turned my way. I stayed where I was, any confidence evaporating like liquid nitrogen in a balmy spring breeze as my chest contracted about my heart.

"Honored guests," a voice spoke out, "this is Mikah. Mikah, come here." A

figure beckoned and with no other options I crossed the floor. The table was a hollow rectangle, with three sides occupied and a single empty cushion at the nearest end. There were foodstuffs, drinking vessels and utensils arranged along the table, along with huge candlesticks flickering quietly. Hirht was the one who'd spoken, occupying the center cushion at the far side with his back to the fire, flanked by a pair of Advisors/ scribes. Down the other two sides of the table sat the ambassadors.

If I'd thought my outfit was a bit garish, I needn't have worried. Compared with this lot my attire was as subdued as an Amish's Sunday best. The light wasn't the best for me, but I could see scarlets and blues and yellows and greens, flaunted jewelry, tinted and shaved fur, bloused sleeves and even damned ruffs similar to the things that used to be in vogue in the England of the Victorian era. Individual's fur color differed, from one individual with a white pelt that was almost ghostlike in the gloom to one with a dark coloration that could have been black or dark brown or gray, leaving a pair of shimmering eyes hanging in the darkness where its face mixed with the shadows. Eleven of them, Hirht and his Advisors making fourteen ranked around the table.

"Please be seated," Hirht said and I folded myself down to the cushion, aware of the eyes watching me. For some reason my camping cutlery was laid out, the clunky red plastic handles completely out of place amongst the fine porcelain and crystal.

"This is your mysterious visitor?" a Rris spoke. "The descriptions really don't do it justice."

There were a few snorts. "And something like that is supposed to be responsible for all these developments that have been popping up all over Shattered Water?" Someone said, "Can it really talk?"

“Yes, I talk,” I said.

A brief pause. Then agitation and noise raced around the table as the ambassadors all started up at once: talking, snarling, demands and questions. Some were directed at Hirht, fewer at me. I flinched back from the commotion even as Hirht was appealing for calm and when the last of the guests was quiet - not necessarily happy, but quiet - he sat back. “Gentle folk, I’ve told you all I can. We don’t know where Mikah comes from; we don’t know how he got here. We are helping him as we can and in return he is providing suggestions...”

“Suggestions,” one snorted. “Honored Hirht, from what I have heard of these ‘suggestions’, there is more at stake here than a homeless...animal. Just what IS this thing?! Where is it from? I... “

“Ma’am,” Hirht gently interrupted. “I’ve told you all I can. Perhaps you would like to hear his side of the story.”

There were dubious looks. “Can it do that?”

“He has a surprisingly good hold on proper speech,” Hirht assured them. The ambassadors exchanged looks, then assented. “Mikah,” The King said, “Tell them, as you told me. Gentle folk, it would make things a great deal easier if you could wait until he finishes before asking questions. Mikah, please, proceed.”

I swallowed, glanced around at the feline faces intently watching me, and once again started telling my story. They listened. There were few interruptions, mainly when someone couldn’t understand what I was saying, but for the most part they listened. Perhaps there was a fascination in the faces around the table;

perhaps not just in what I was saying, but in the fact I was speaking at all. I told them what I knew about how I'd come here, which wasn't much. I related my time in Westwater, and there was some agitation when I mentioned the incident in the woods; Rris eyes flicked to the scars across my face, and ears went back. I told them about Shyia, the trip to Lying Scales and the few days I'd spent there. After that there was the river journey downstream from Thief's Lament and then the final trip to Shattered Water.

My throat was aching with that familiar rasping that was a symptom of speaking too much Rris by the time I'd finished. There was hesitation, then the questions started, turning to angry shouting as they tried to outdo one another. I shrank back, anxiously turning from one demanding Rris to another and without a chance to reply until Hirht brought his mug down with a retort like a gunshot. They shut up and heads leveled to glare at Hirht as he nonchalantly laced his fingers.

"Thank you, good folk," he smiled. "I'm afraid you might be overwhelming Mikah. It would be easier if your questions were more ordered, yes?" I saw some flickers or reaction at that. Annoyance? I wasn't sure. "Mikah, if you would take questions from aesh Shahi." He gestured to the Rris directly to my left.

"Ah, sir," I croaked, cleared my throat and tried again. "Sir, could I have water?"

"My apologies. I forgot." At a slight gesture a servant moved in from the shadows around the room's peripheries to fill a mug at my right hand. Her hands were trembling slightly, the crystal pitcher tinkling against the pewter mug. It was clean water though, and the Rris stared openly as I drank. Beyond them Hirht steepled his fingertips as his ears flagged amusement, hastily stifled.

“You are quite done?” the Rris... Shahi... asked.

“Yes, thank you.” I smiled sweetly and she twitched, then clamped her jaws and asked, “Why did you come here?”

“Here?” I set the mug down. “I told you, I don’t know.”

“No, to Shattered Water. Why did you come here? Why are you helping them?”

The question startled me. “I haven’t had any choices. I came here and I didn’t know what had happened to me, I didn’t know anything about Rris or your kingdoms. Since then, I’ve... I’ve gone with the current.”

“But you had choices concerning the decisions you made here,” the next Rris said, extruding a retracting a single claw to make a tiny tic, tic noise on the tabletop. “You are providing Land-of-Water with information on how to build these new devices, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“But... why?”

I glanced at Hirht, then back at the Rris who’d questioned me. “Sir?” I guess I got the gender right; I wasn’t corrected. “Why not? They asked me, and I am a

... guest in their land.”

He was about to say something, then closed his mouth again. The Rris to his immediate left took his turn to speak: “Why did you choose to give them those devices? The engine and ... whatever it is that makes that boat move.”

Again I glanced at Hirht, but he seemed to be letting me field my own questions, and that confused me. “Sir...”

“Ma’am.” The pupils flexed. “You can’t tell?”

“Not very well, ma’am. No. I’m sorry if I offended.”

She tipped her head to stare at me down her muzzle, then flicked her thin black lips back from her teeth. “Huh. Go on.”

Where was I? “Ah, I was asked to demonstrate what I knew. I thought they were small changes that could...”

“Small!” There were snorts from several Rris.

“Rot it all...” the Rris with the neck ruff started to snarl, then deliberately caught him/herself. “Honored Hirht, news of this... discrepancy has already been dispatched. I know my superiors will not be please to hear you’ve been [something] a [resource?/ opportunity] that should be open domain!”

“And now what do you intend to do with him?” a dark-furred Rris with a red pendant earring asked. “He’s given you metals, those engines... How much more does he know?”

Hirht cocked his head. “That is something we aren’t sure of. His kind are... they are more knowledgeable than we are, but what we can learn from that is still to be determined.”

“Who do you mean by ‘we’?” the dark-furred individual growled. “You’re talking about Rris in general or just Land-of-Water.”

Hirht gazed around the table. “Ch’thrit, perhaps your country would be [something] to remove the tax on passage along the Earthy and Meander Rivers? Mrethi’k, would Cover-my-Tail give us access to your coal? Would Serimuthi let us mine their gold fields.”

“I don’t think these are the same things,” Mrethi’k said, a bit stiffly.

“You’re saying you want payment for this?” a clawed hand swept toward me.

“Sir,” a tawny ambassador with gold inlays gleaming in his black and sienna velvet vest spoke up. “For now, we would ask a chance for our various [somethings] to examine your guest.”

Hirht frowned. “You can ask of our scholars. They have ample information on

Mikah.”

“Thank you, sire. But I for one would like to hear [something] opinions.”
Echoes of agreement rose from around the table.

“You are saying any information we provide might be incorrect?” Hirht asked.

“Not at all. Merely that it might be... limited.”

“And does anything in your information answer the question ‘Is this thing’s story true’?” the Rris directly to my right asked. “It is quite incredible, and that little story just raised more questions: Where were you traveling to? Why? Why is it no-one has ever heard of your kind before if you are so numerous. In such a short time you’ve made more changes than any kingdom has seen in the past fifty years.” The Rris - a male, I guessed, due to the lack of visible nipples under the open-fronted tooled leather waistcoat he wore - looked to his fellows.
“Doesn’t this concern anybody else? Because it scares the piss out of me!”

Brash, yet tactless. Agitated chitters escaped a couple of the other ambassadors.

“How much else does it know?” the dark furred Ch’thrit mused.

Hirht’s ears flickered slightly. “That, we’re not sure, your honors. Your staffs will be provided with what information we have. And that will tell you what you need to know.” He looked around then, at a steward who’d materialized from

somewhere and ducked its head, murmured something. “Ah,” Hirht purred and stretched, “Food. Excellent. Yes, we’ll eat now.”

The steward gave another duck of its head and retreated. There were a few irritated looks from various Rris around the table at the change of subject. “Sir,” one leaned forward, “what of the information he has already given you? Do you intend to [something] this information among other lands?”

Eyes flashed cold reflections as Hirht turned and metal rattling in the background startled me until I realised it was only cutlery. “I’m sure something can be worked out,” Hirht was saying as I turned back.

“You are referring to payment?”

“I’m referring to whatever is most acceptable between our realms,” Hirht said as servants came and went from the table, silent as ghosts as they laid out platters and covered dishes of meats, woven baskets holding breads, crystal decanters and pewter mugs, utensils like surgical tongs and chopsticks with tines at the end. “Perhaps some other service.”

“Maybe an easing on tariffs?” an ambassador suggested.

“Maybe,” Hirht smiled.

“Don’t you think that might be a bit extravagant?”

I was startled again as a servant appeared at my right hand to lay a dish before me and be gone before I could ask what it was.

“An engine with twice the strength of your current ones that uses less than half the amount of fuel,” Hirht looked amused. “I think that any asking price would pay for itself.”

My meal was predominantly meat, several types that’d been properly cooked, thank god, as opposed to the dripping gobbets presented to the Rris ambassadors. I had a steak soaked in what looked like a bernaise sauce, smaller chunks of crumbed meat and strips of filleted fish laid along the side. Sprigs of greenery to the other side, circlets of tomatoes and potatoes. My drink was - surprisingly enough - water, but overall the meal actually looked appetizing.

“Mikah? That is how you say your name?” The ambassador halfway down the left side of the table idly brushed at the lace ruff on a bloused sleeve and eyes flashed in the candlelight. “You think that what you know should be [something] by your hosts? You have no desire that it should be [something] to other Rris?”

Putting me on the spot now. I swallowed as Rris stared at me, “I’m not able to say how you manage your own affairs. I did what I was asked to.”

“And if you were asked to make weapons?”

I hesitated, cast a glance to where Hirht sat with the same poker face Shyia used. “Sir,” I said finally, “I cannot support anything like that.”

“Why? You’ve killed Rris. You said as much yourself.”

I looked down at my hands then back at the intent visage, the amber eyes. “I never had a choice. Making weapons... I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

He cocked his head then casually stabbed a piece of raw meat with a fork and popped it in his mouth, chewed a few times and swallowed hard, not taking his eyes off me. “So, what do you WANT to do?”

I shrugged slightly. “Go home,” I said and picked up my own utensils to cut into my meal. The other ambassadors stopped their own meals to watch me raise a morsel of steak and grimace. God! The sauce was bitter, almost metallic so. My tongue wanted to smear itself against the roof of my mouth to rub that taste off. I coughed, swallowed then took a draught from my mug. “Jesus!” I gasped.

“Something wrong?” Hirht inquired.

I blinked at my plate and gestured with my fork. “This sauce. It is quite... ah ... strong.”

“Ah,” he smiled. “That’s the point of it. It gives the tongue something to interest it.”

“Oh.” This was their version of tobasco sauce maybe? I hesitantly tried another piece and it was just as unappetizing the second time around, a bitter sting that was metallic in its unpleasantness. There were a few Rris chitters.

“I suppose it can’t be to everyone’s taste,” Hirht chuckled as he slowly shredded a crust of bread in his hands.

The fish was better, only slightly tainted with the sauce, and the breaded stuff turned out to be veal McNuggets. But the taste of that sauce lingered and I finished my water trying to get the taste out of my mouth. The vegetables weren’t bad at all. I wished I could have had more of them. Those, along with the bread and cheeses, were quickly polished off. The ambassadors still had their questions, asking me if I was prepared to work for another kingdom? Would I work for whoever could pay me the most?

Would I do that? If I did, what then? How would the other kingdoms come to feel about that? Would someone decide that if they couldn’t have me, then nobody would? That thought tightened the knot in my guts and I nursed my cup.

“And your metals?” the Rris female named Irthiasi from Nights-in-Wonder far to the northwest, “I hear you have interesting new amalgams.”

“I’m sure the Guildmasters will be interested to listen to any petitions you might have,” Hirht said.

“And you know nothing about how they might be used?”

“I don’t...” I missed his reply. My cup was empty again and I was till thirsty and now faintly nauseous. The candlelight seemed to glow brighter in a washing glare that hurt my eyes. I tugged at my collar and turned my head away and the

room swam like a tide, existence drifting away then back again.

“Ai? You are all right?” the Rris to my left was asking me.

“All right?” I blinked. “I... yes. Please, more water?”

I drained my glass almost as soon as it was filled. My hand was shaking and I clenched it in a fist, not really hearing the sibilants of Rris language that was beginning to mix with the roaring in my ears. Nausea washed across me again and I clutched at the edge of the low table.

“Mikah...”

“I don’t feel so good,” I mumbled and clambered unsteadily to my feet. “I think I... I am...” I croaked and managed a step before my knees buckled and I stumbled and fell. I tried to get up but my arms didn’t want to cooperate; I half raised myself, fell back and was aware my name was being shouted and hands caught me to roll me over to lay and blink the dazzling blurs above me into the features of Rris. “Food,” I tried to say poison but didn’t know the word. “Medicine...” I choked off, trying to breath through the smothering weight all around me. There was a lot of noise, audible through the dull pattering of my pulse and my limbs felt like they belonged to someone else: dead weight, like trying to move an arm after it’s been asleep. Light and darkness shifted as Rris moved around me, furry faces came and went leaning over and speaking nonsense, hands caught me and lifted me and the world went out of focus.

Blinked, and I was flat on my back watching a groin-vaulted ceiling passing overhead, the nightmare face of a cat in a gleaming metal helmet turned to

glance down at me... .

Blinked and someone else was moving me, laying me down among blankets and I struggled in feeble panic as inhuman features looked down on me and grinned with needle teeth. Claws pricked my skin as stubby hands pressed me back down on soft sheets, my muscles twitching and heart stuttering while damp cloths wiped at bare skin and coolness laid across my burning forehead and it was too much effort to stay awake.

—v—

Distant sounds. Like water on shale, wind in trees, sibilants and susuruss of muffled Rris voices. I took a breath, becoming aware of cool air, the blood warmth of the bed and the feeling in my limbs, opened my eyes to a blackness that was almost solid. Another sound in the room: a hiss of breath, then the unmistakable sound of claws on wood and a wedge of light briefly stretched across a pale frescoed ceiling as a door was opened, then closed again and the sound of voices was abruptly stilled.

I closed my eyes again and took stock: thirsty, washed out and slightly nauseous. My muscles ached and I felt as weak as a kitten, but I could move. Laboriously I levered myself up to sit in darkest amidst a nest of tumbled sheets while shaking wracked my limbs. Cold air, or my skin was hot. The slight scents of alcohol and illness permeated the room. I shuddered, closed my eyes and rolled my head to try and work some of the stiffness out of my neck.

“Rot take it!” a voice snapped and I opened my eyes to faint lamplight shining through the open door, eclipsed by the silhouette of a Rris. “What are you doing?” it demanded as it entered, two more close behind it.

“No...” I tried to protest as they laid hands on me, pressed me back to the sheets. “I am fine.”

“Fine!” The voice from the darkness snorted. “That would be the last word I’d use to describe you.” I flinched away when a leathery pad touched my face. “Calm,” the unseen Rris urged and the hand returned to touch my nose and then my brow and a Rris grunted. “His heat is down a bit.”

“And his heart?”

In the dark, leathery hands touched my chest, the hollow of my neck and the Rris said something I didn’t understand. They weren’t having any difficulties seeing; to me there was nothing but vague shadows while patches of darkness with a bit more solidity than others moved around, occasionally haloed by the feeble glow from the door. When a light was struck I had to gasp at the pain that stabbed into my eyes. Just a candle, but I had to turn my head away from a glare that seemed to go straight through my skull. Not my quarters, I realised. Not a place that was intended to impress anybody. Just a bare, functional room with whitewashed walls, high ceiling, a pair of narrow shuttered windows to my right and a tiled floor. The candle sat on a low desk with its ubiquitous cushion. The Rris doctor touched my face, then told me to hold still while holding my eyes open and peering into them. A hand was waved in front of my eye, alternately shading it and exposing it to candlelight until the doctor huffed and stepped away.

“How is he doing?” I heard someone ask and the doctors offered muted replies. Another Rris approached my bedside and I watched dazedly as the King of Land-of-Water settled himself on a cushion at my bedside. “No, don’t move,” he told me, then his thin black lips twitched back. “Huhn, Mikah. At least you are looking better.”

“I suppose I ruined the meal,” I said.

He chittered at that. “A. I have seen other ways to [something] an evening. None quite so dramatic though.”

“They are still here?” I asked.

He looked taken aback, then leaned toward me. “Mikah, that evening was two days ago.”

Two days? I’d slept two days away? Perhaps he knew enough about me to be able to read my shocked expression for his ears went down. “You haven’t been well. You had a lot of people very worried.”

“What happened to me?” I croaked.

He clicked claws together. “That... we’re not sure. We thought [poison] but there weren’t any traces. The kitchen staff were made to eat from your meal, but they didn’t suffer any ill effects.” Harsh, but practical. “Maybe the culprit had taken an [something]. Maybe it was something that was specific to your kind.”

That sauce. I was convinced it was that foul-tasting stuff. Maybe to the Rris it was their equivalent of a chili sauce but to me it had a far more potent effect.

“I don’t know the details of how to prepare it,” he said in answer. “It will be looked into. Meantime, I suggest you try and recover.”

“Sir.”

He paused, then said. “What you said about weapons; you meant that?”

I had to think back to understand what he meant. Oh. “Yes,” I said softly. “I meant it.”

“You understand that other kingdoms might not understand that. To them, you’ll also be a potential source of new weaponry as well as an industrial advantage. Would you hold to your ideals if someone decided to declare war over you?”

Again there was that sinking feeling. “Would you really try to fight the rest of the world, even I did help you?” I countered.

He smiled then: diluted amusement with just a dash of teeth. “That’s something I hope we don’t have to find out.”

“Sir, that’s not likely is it? I mean... what are they going to do?”

“A.” He settled back, the tip of his tail twitching behind his back. “They were annoyed that I wasn’t willing to release all the information you’ve given us.

They will accept what I have offered, but reactions were... mixed.” That was an oblique an answer as I could possibly get. He stood then and looked toward the door, then back at me. “Why don’t you rest now, a?” he said and left, the physicians standing aside as he passed and I belatedly realised one of them was Rasa. She glanced my way and her ears flattened, then struggled erect again.

—v—

I mended quickly enough. The next day I was on my feet; albeit a bit wobbly and my eyes still ached in bright light. They returned me to my quarters in the late afternoon, the bright sunlight giving me a nagging headache. The squad of guards stationed outside my door at the end of that corridor stiffened to attention as I approached and one met my eyes and I saw his/her own widen in startlement and hastily flicker aside to something of interest down the hall behind me.

My escort saw me inside and I stalled them before they left. “Where is Shyia?” I hadn’t seen him for a while.

“Sir?” The soldier asked.

“The Mediator who brought me here. Where is he?”

“I’m sorry sir. I really don’t know.”

Then they were gone. I sighed, turned and squinted into the light coming in through the window. Dammit. With my hands behind them, the front of my

glasses made an acceptable mirror. I held them up, tilted them, then gaped in shock at the black pools that were staring back at me: my irises were dilated, even in the brilliance of my room, the gray of my pupils gone behind glistening blackness. They were the eyes of a furious Rris, eyes I remembered all too-well. I touched the skin below my eyes and understood why Rris had been so fidgety around me recently.

What the hell had happened to me? An aftereffect of whatever had poisoned me? How long was this going to last?

Later Kh'hitch stopped by to visit as I sat in self-imposed gloom with the drapes pulled. No altruistic motives, just wanted to see how I was doing and explain there were going to be a few changes. The ambassadors weren't entirely satisfied: Accusations hadn't been leveled yet, but they all had their suspicions about who'd been responsible for my poisoning. Apparently, not even Hirht was immune from respectfully-phrased accusations and I had to admit that little scene had been a great way of getting me away from awkward questions. The ambassadors had taken the information Shattered Water had offered, but they weren't happy with it. They'd been demanding access to me, to let their own people talk with me.

Hirht had declined.

"We aren't expecting trouble," Kh'hitch told me. "However, your guard will be increased. You will not go anywhere without an escort and express permission. You understand."

"Yes, mother," I said.

“What?” The portly Advisor cocked his head and his muzzle wrinkled. “Mikah, that is a revolting concept.”

I also tipped my head to the side and looked him up and down. “You know, you’re right.”

He snorted and refused to play along any further. “Understand! This is being done for your own safety. It’s just a precaution. Just in case someone tries something foolish.”

“Such as what? Killing me?” On some level inside I was dully surprised to find how little the idea bothered me. With everything I’d been through, and now the bars of my cage closing in; the idea of an assassin just didn’t scare me.

“Doubtful,” the Advisor said. “A precaution, as I was saying. And there’ll doubtless be more foreign ticks poking their muzzles into business around here. A good escort will ensure they keep a respectful distance.”

For a while longer he went on to explain what was going to be happening. I’d be spending the next few days in the palace where I’d be doing my work while security at the various facilities around the city was reviewed. And when I was moved my bodyguard would escort me everywhere. That irritated me but he didn’t want to listen to my complaints. At least he didn’t propose having them sleep in the same damn bed.

My eyes still ached. For five days I wore my sunglasses whenever I had to go into bright light and still I had to put up with nagging headaches as well as the stares and comments the glasses elicited. My tutor found them quite disconcerting and once a Rris noble approached me to ask where she could get a pair. Five days of that before a doctor noticed my eyes were improving.

At least that was a bit of good news, the one bit I got in a week spent being rushed around the palace with a dozen armed soldiers in tow. Hours upon hours in closed rooms with scholars from the university, Guild representatives, nobility who had vested interests in various enterprises. It was the usual thing: inquiries about new tools, dyes, comparative history between Humans and Rris. The Glassworkers Guild sent a delegation to look into manufacturing new optics for microscopes, telescopes and such.

Several days passed before I was taken out of the Palace again. This time there were two carriages along with a mounted and armed escort riding llamas. I had a crazy impression that we must've looked like some twisted motor cavalcade, with cops carrying blunderbusses and crossbows riding woolly beasts with attitude problems. At least the ride was easier than it'd been in winter when the wheels skidded on ice-slicked cobbles and the inside of the carriage was a refrigerator.

The riverside workshops hadn't changed, but now there were guards everywhere. In the forecourt I could see armed royal guard at the gate and patrolling the yard. I slung the laptop over my shoulder and headed for the workshops with my shadows behind me. Chaeitch was with several other engineers clustered around a gearbox assembly. One saw me and touched his shoulder, muttered something. He glanced over, his ears flicked up and he bounded to his feet to hurry over, then hesitated when he saw the two soldiers hovering at my shoulder.

"Hi Chaeitch," I said, smiled tightly.

He cocked his head. "It's good to see you're up and about again. I'd heard you were quite ill. Feeling better now?"

"Oh, yeah, much better," I assured him. "And I found some new friends," I said wryly, jabbing a thumb back at my shadows.

His ears flagged amusement, then he glanced past me at the guards and his amusement faded. "Come on. There's a lot to catch up on."

And there was. They'd stripped the prototype engine out and were constructing a more refined version. The transmission had been stripped down and new gears had been cast, but Chaeitch was interested in other designs and configurations. Workbenches were littered with wooden mockups of gears and frames, pulleys and chains. I spent that day sorting through schematics of everything from cycle deraileurs to the transmission from a '98 GM Impact. There were also artificers interested in forms of wind power humans were familiar with, so I was digging out files related to eggbeater windmills and sailwings. I'd have to study up on aerodynamics myself before I could relate human technical information to the Rris.

Over at the foundry the foreman's fur was on end over the composition over the lining of the new furnaces: The brick they were using was sublimating, contaminating the metals and throwing off their ratios, so of course they needed a new mix. There were questions about when the new engines for the converter compressors would be ready; clarifications on alloy mixes; news on the latest batch of lathe heads.

Lessons in comparative geography between two worlds at the University.

There were scholars interested in finding out just where our two species branched off so drastically.

Land-of-Water was still receiving irritated petitions from various embassies, but so far they'd deigned to arrange interviews and I couldn't help but wonder just how far this was going to go. No matter what might be going on in the world, it certainly wasn't making a dent in my schedule.

—v—

The furnaces along the far wall were roaring, opened doors throwing skittering shadows across the huge foundry floor. Gouts of sparks flew as Rris with shriveled fur and decked out in heavy leather protective suits tipped crucibles of molten pig iron into clay molds. Steam whistled through vents as the last of the moisture was forcible expelled from the molds. Across the other side of the hall the test models of the converters were still in use, bellows being used to force air through the pig-iron, burning off impurities in a spectacular flare of liquid metal. A trio of Rris metalworkers used long handles to tip the waist-high crucible and pour the steel off into ingots.

As yet the full-scale one was untested; still waiting upon the engine for the compressor. There was no other way to generate enough pressure to pump air through 5 tons of molten metal. After that would come the open-hearth furnaces, but they'd require a better supply of pig iron and a new building in which to build them.

"Later this week, you think." The grizzled Rris with his face fur singed back into a curled stubble growled. "Burn you, Mikah. We heard that last week."

“You’re hearing it again,” I told him. “I can’t make wheels turn any faster.”

Khieschi snorted and scratched at himself under the leather apron. “A. I’ve told them you need more time here.”

“I don’t have more time,” I sighed.

“I’ve noticed,” His tail lashed and he waved a hand at the approaching guards. I glanced wearily at my watch. 10:00, and about time too. “Suppuration! We need longer,” Khieschi appealed.

“My apologies sir,” the guard said stiffly. “But we’ve got our orders.”

The foreman snarled something, then turned away. “Get it out of here then.”

The guards glanced at me and I shrugged, slung my jacket over my shoulder and followed them. As soon as I stepped into the gloom of the street outside the cool night wind blowing in across the city from the lake hit me, feeling like an arctic blast after the metal-tinged heat of the foundry. I took a deep breath, looking up at a solitary wispy cloud doing its best to obscure the full moon. A clear night, with the vault of the dark sky smeared with the glow of the Milky Way, a jagged skyline of steep rooftops and crooked chimneypots silhouetted against the stars. The carriages were waiting with oil lamps mounted in sconces above the cabs casting feeble glows that did little to help illuminate the area. Armed escorts were mounted on their souped-up llamas, weapons cradled across the saddles as their muzzles turned from side to side, scanning the streets and windows like turrets.

The carriage rocked on its springs as I climbed in and the green upholstery sighed when I sat. My two guards took their accustomed places opposite. At least now, aside from a few cursory glances, they no longer stared at me. As the carriage started off with a clatter of hooves and the protests of animals I leaned my head against the padded wall and dozed fitfully. Tired, visions of liquid metal and flame tangling with snow and gentle amber behind my eyes.

I never heard the first explosion. The window to my left bowed inwards, then imploded in a spray of bottle-green glass and the carriage jerked violently to the side under me, slamming me into the upholstered wall. The world spun and I found I was lying on the floor with a dazed guard sprawled across my legs, the whole cab tilting over to the left at a crazy angle. Smoke poured in through the broken window, along with a volley of dull retorts I recognized as gunfire and the vocal-chord tearing yowls of Rris screams. Another explosion sounded and my guards grabbed me and pressed me back down again while the carriage rocked and more shots sounds outside. Flames were licking at the upper window as one of the guards snarled something. I looked up as the other raised its head to look out the window, a double-barreled pistol in its hand. Barely got its head over the sill when it was kicked back with a peculiar yip and a crossbow quarrel buried up to the fletching in his muzzle. The other guard yowled in fury as the spasming body sprawled back and another volley of gunshots sounded; the carriage rocked again while splinters of wood and curls of upholstery stuffing flew from the wall beside the window and reddish firelight streamed through the jagged perforations. I tried to make myself one with the cramped floor, then winced when the guard dug claws in.

“When I say run, you run,” the Rris snarled in my ear over the howls and gunshots and now the sounds of metal clashing from outside. “Understand?”

“Yes,” I choked out, the terror beginning to seep in over the confusion. A few seconds since the routine had been so drastically interrupted.

The guard rolled off me and I caught a glimpse as he... she? Yanked cords from a pair of small globes, one after the other, and hurled them through the window. Explosions like percussion caps in a dumpster and a pattering like hail on a tin roof against the side of the carriage.

“Go!” The guard screamed, forcing the door open, raising pistol and cutting loose with both barrels at something I couldn’t see. “Go!” as claws pulled at my jacket.

I went, out the door and into a confusion of acrid, reeking smoke and shadows turned to dancing blackness by the flaming wreck of the other carriage that was tipped on its side. Lamp oil had spilled, leaving blazing rivulets trickling across the cobbles and woodwork. Smoke billowed, stinking of gunpowder and making my eyes water and roiling around the panicking and downed animals and Ris guards laying in the street amongst rubble and spilled timbers from a shattered wall. Run? Run where? Another series of gunshots crashed, the sound echoing off the walls of the buildings and I ducked into a doorway, just about tripped over the body of a guard and something spanged! Off the stone above my head. High, I realised when I saw a tongue of fire spit from a window, lancing down into the street. Down the street there was a pair of answering gunshots, then a scream as another weapon fired from high up. I knelt and grabbed up the weapon from the dead trooper’s hand: a heavy bulky thing like a sawn-off shotgun with four barrels and a wooden grip enveloping the lower two barrels. I didn’t know how to use it, I didn’t even know if the damn thing was loaded. The hammers were down, so it’d probably been fired. I hefted it by the barrel, finding the weight somewhat reassuring: at least it’d make a satisfactory club. Ris yowled in the darkness and I ran again, ducking into the first alley to find a flimsy gate blocking it. Locked. I stepped back and kicked as hard as I could and something splintered and it slammed open.

A clawed hand grabbed my arm and I spun, bringing the gun up at the face of the panting black powder-streaked Guard. “Sir! Rot it! I thought... !”

Howls rang out and through the swirling murk dark figures moved. The Guard took one look and yanked on my arm. “Run!”

I did, stumbling and tripping in the darkness with claws scrabbling on my jacket and the guard urgently hissing to ‘hurry up’. I couldn’t. Even in armor and near-pitch blackness Ris were faster than me. Another corner into a side street where the moonlight glittered on small barred windows and big wooden doors. My boots thumped against cobbles and breath rasped in my lungs as the guard tried one door, then another. Locked. A cry from behind and a Ris figure appeared in the street. The guard raised his gun and fired: a flare of fire and smoke and the distinctive ssspan! of a musket. Whoever that had been cried out and staggered even as we ran again.

The side street opened onto a view across the river: a dockside on the riverside, the northern side a wall of blank-faced boatsheds and warehouses. A few crates littered the wharf, a couple of frames with tangles of fishing net strung out to dry catching a latticework of moonlight and shadow. Further along the dock to the west a fishing boat was high and dry, its inverted hull resembling a beached sea leviathan. Beyond it lay another street: the only other way out of there.

“Come on!” The guard spat, tail bristling and fired his second barrel back the way we’d come, stuffed the spent pistol into his belt on the run and drew another, then yowled in dismay.

I’d seen them too; the dark and fast shapes that darted out onto the docks fifty meters ahead of us and raised what could only be weapons and those years of television violence paid off: I hit the ground at the same time as the guard while a sputter of gunfire rang out and shots whined past. I didn’t even have time to thank god for the inaccuracy of those guns before the guard’s hands were

clutching at me again, his claws skidding on the puncture-proof synthetics of my jackets as he urged me toward the dubious protection of offered by nets hanging out to dry.

We dropped panting behind the folds of draped hemp, the river on one side and rolls of netting on the other. They reeked of fish and lakebeds, water and wet hemp, the cobbles of the dock were hard under my butt as I tried to find a place where rolled nets offered a bit more protection. To our southern flank the wharf dropped off to the dark lapping water of the river, and there wasn't a damned boat handy. The guard poked his head up and I winced, remembering my guard in the carriage. A shot rang out and he raised his pistol, returned fire with a gout of acrid smoke and ducked down again. "Sir? Are you all right?" Hard to understand him. He was panting hard, gasping air.

"Okay... yes," I said. "I..." another Rris appeared, in a dark outfit I didn't recognize. The gun in the hand was coming around and my arm was up and pulling the trigger before I realised what I was doing.

The gun was loaded, it was cocked.

A hammer snapped back, a split hesitation then a blaze of light and smoke and flame, a recoil that kicked my arm up and back and made the muscle in my shoulder burn in complaint and when the metallic smoke cleared there just wasn't a Rris there at all and my arm felt as if someone had put an electrical jolt through it. A damn shotgun.

"Not bad," the guard was staring at me, then hastily turned attention to where it was needed. "Surprised you didn't break your wrist."

With that recoil... a Rris's wrist wasn't as strong as mine, there was a good chance it would. "Last of our worries," I coughed, tasting sulfur and copper smoke. They were behind us and in front. "Doesn't look too good," I panted, a bit lightheaded, surprised at how calm I was feeling. Shock, I guessed.

The guard's ears flattened. "I can keep them occupied. You can run... "

"I can't outrun Rris," I told him. "Not even close."

"Rot it..." another shot, then a fusillade that knocked wood splinters flying and cracked a wooden spar in half, a net tumbling into a heap. I ducked up and this time held the blunderbuss with both hands when I fired another barrel past the guard who ducked aside with flattened ears and a curse. A weird trigger mechanism and when I fired the hammers jerked back, yanking a thick string that flared into smoke with a sharp hiss, then the gun fired with a booming blast and cloud of smoke and sparks. A Rris along the dock howled in what sounded like pain. Two barrels left.

"How long help come here?" I garbled my Rris, getting panicky. No phone or radio... no fast vehicles. I knew the answer even as I asked the question.

"Too long," the guard grunted, working to reload his pistols. I watched his hands, tipping measured amounts of powder from a pewter horn, tapping in a ball and wad with a short ramrod. Fast, but I took the opportunity to fire another blast in the direction we'd come from. Figures who'd started to work their way around the corner ducked back. One barrel left.

"You're supposed to be the one with ideas," the guard growled. "You have

any now?”

I looked around. No boats in the water, damn it. Okay. “Out...Get out of your armor.”

“What?”

“Not swim with it on.”

The eyes went wide. “I can’t swim with it off. You can’t be... nobody can swim that far.”

The far side of the river... maybe two hundred meters, probably a bit more. “I can.”

“Then get going!”

“Get out of that armor. I can’t manage you with it on.”

“You don’t mean... Rot it! Go!”

I ducked down as more shots whined overhead. The Guard produced one of those grenades, yanked the string violently and threw. There was a sharp bang

and a few yelps. “GO!” the guard barked.

“I’m not leaving you.”

“You have to!”

I sat down, making it quite obvious I wasn’t moving. Two of my other guards were probably dead and I wasn’t leaving this one to die. “Get that armor off.”

Another fusillade of shots clipped nets and thumped into wood. A glass float shattered noisily and sent fragments tinkling across the cobbles. The Ris looked out at the darkness of the river, fired another unaimed shot at our assailants, then snarled something probably obscene and began yanking at the buckles of the armor.

I grinned and fired off the last round without any positive results then dropped the bulky gun and started stripping off my boots and socks, then my jacket and optimistically tucked them under a pile of rope, fervently hoping I’d be able to pick them up later. There was a clatter as armor and equipment hit the cobbles. Huhn, my guard was a he I saw, and he kept throwing glances at the river with ears flat against his skull. “Run and jump,” I told him. “Don’t breathe when your head is underwater, and watch your Damned claws!”

Then I didn’t have time to lose any more clothes. He fired his last round as the dark-armored assailants ran forward, then howled something. I grabbed his arm and propelled him toward the water.

A three meter running drop. I lost my grip on him when we hit and surfaced to find him floundering desperately. There were shouts from above and I grabbed the mass of sodden fur, winced when he grabbed back at me. "Breathe!" I growled and heard him gasp air before dragging him under with me.

A leaden, soaked sack of fur; that's what it felt like I was towing. One that grabbed back with needled claws and struggled desperately as he started to need air. Nowhere near my limit. I surfaced and gunshots raged, the line of the docks enveloped in a moonlit grayish haze speckled with winks of light. White gouts of water kicked up and a few pellets skipped by with burring whines. A breath, a chance for the Ris in my arms to gulp air, then under again.

I could understand why they weren't good swimmers: He was a natural sinker. Like a furry, two-legged brick. I towed him with one arm and swam as best I could, but I had to surface twice more before we were out of range. Again I was grateful their guns were so inaccurate, but we were well out into the blackness of the river and the bank was a darkness against the skyline before I felt safe enough. The breeze blowing up from the lake was cold, but it helped balance the sluggish river current as I hooked one hand under the guard's chin and started kicking steadily for the far shore where lights burned.

"What's your name anyway," I asked when my mouth was clear of the water.

"Blunt, sir" he coughed the words. I could feel his pulse pounding in his throat. His feet were trying to kick, as if he was searching for something solid, but doing damn little to propel him along. It's strange how well designed for swimming humans are: hairless oiled skin and what hair there is is streamlined, eyes can focus underwater, slight webbing on fingers and feet, a nose that wasn't much good for anything else but was angled to keep water out and a reflex that lowered the heart rate whenever the face was submerged. Ris - by comparison - are furry bricks. Maybe their four-legged ancestors had been fair swimmers, but somewhere they traded buoyancy for leg power. Their fur will hold air for a

while, enough for a short dog-paddle, but beyond that their musculature just weighs them down.

“Blunt?” I shut my mouth against a slap of water and tried not to think about what might’ve been dumped into the river further upstream. “Name or nature?”

“Huhn? Huh, nature. Blunt claws.”

“They don’t feel it.”

“When I was a cub,” he sputtered. “How... did you learn this...”

“Water cub,” I said.

“Huhn? What?”

“I was born in water.” I don’t know. Ask my mother: it was a fad at the time.

“That’s... unusual,” he said faintly. Then in a voice that was more of a low moan, “Ai, no. Rot me. No.”

“What?”

“A boat. They’re following.”

I stopped swimming and treaded water, Blunt’s legs butting against mine as he tried to kick at the water. There was a shape back there: a darkness on the water, a rowboat with oars raising glitters of water and a Rris standing upright. “You sure?”

A flash of smoke and sparks under the moonlight and the sound of a gunshot rolled across the water. Yep, pretty sure.

“Swim,” the guard barked, somewhat desperately. “Get out! Go!” He started trying to struggle out of my grasp.

“Hold on,” I gasped. “Wait...”

Could I outswim them? I doubted it. They could get me without guns: just come close enough to whack me with the oars. Another gunshot kicked up a spout of water too close. I couldn’t run... so...

“Here...” It took a couple of seconds to strip off my shirt. Made back home, its weave was a lot tighter than anything Rris made, so it held a bit of air. Hopefully, that bit would be enough. I bundled it into a sort of a float and pushed it into the guard’s hands. “You’ll have to try and keep yourself. Try float. Not long. I come back, yes?”

“I... “his sodden ears wilted. “Go. GO!” He floundered desperately when I let go, thrashing and tipping his head back. The makeshift float wasn’t enough to hold his weight, but it helped: he was able to keep his head above water. There was another gunshot from the boat and I hyperventilated three times, ducked over and dived.

Black down there: a pale wavering disk above where the moonlight broke the surface but the rest was like swimming in cold ink, a bottomless vault of darkness below me. I dove, my jeans restricting my legs as I kicked in the direction of the boat. A muted thump ran through my body: another gunshot I realised as I twisted, rolled, trying to find the darker shape that was eclipsing the glow of the moon, leaving a water-bug trail of ripples as oars dipped in.

My lungs were starting to feel it, my heart racing as I kicked upwards as hard as I could, compensate for the distortion of the transition layer, hit the edge of the hull with my hands and pushed, feeling it yaw away as I surfaced. A slideshow of brief images and sensations: Night air was almost warm on my skin; my hands grabbing the side of the boat; a shocked Rris face turning my way with mouth opening; the Rris with a gun teetering as the boat tipped. The noises were cut like a film edit as I dove again, yanking the side of the boat with all my weight. It rocked back, tipped, hesitated a moment, then came all the way over. Heavy objects splashed into the water around me as I kicked away. A frantic something of metal and leather and fur brushed me and caught at me even as I twisted away: I almost inhaled water as a clawed hand caught my arm and claws raked across my skin, a Rris face flashed briefly in the murk: a horrific mask that was gone as soon as I’d seen it.

There were noises down there; muffled sounds I tried not to hear.

I wasn’t exactly sure where I was when I surfaced. The inverted hull off the rowboat was a dark lump meters away, drifting downstream as it slowly settled beneath the water. Cries sounded out across the water, pleas sounding amid

frantic thrashing and one by one they were cut off. There was a single figure clinging to the boat as it slowly sank and the panicked whimpers were audible from where I trod water.

Oh, god.

“Blunt!” I yelled the name as best I could. And the sinking Rris started crying out, surrendering, begging, anything... and there wasn’t anything I could do. I set my teeth against the pain in my arm and stroked away from the pleading, toward the sounds of distress a short distance in the other direction.

There were a pair of hands and a lot of thrashing and I caught him as he was literally going down for the third time, or he caught me. I cried out as claws sank into my skin and almost went under myself before I got my arm around his neck and hauled him to the surface. “Hey! Calm down! I... got you.”

He coughed and sputtered and sucked air hungrily while I kicked out for shore again, doing my best to keep the two of us afloat. My left arm under his chin was aching badly where claws had gouged me and I knew I was losing blood. There wasn’t a lot I could do about that. It was a minute later when the Blunt had his breath back again, he said. “What happened to them?”

“Hard to swim with armor,” I panted and tried not to think about what I’d done. How many? And none of them could swim. They’d tried to kill me! They’d killed people around me! I tried to hold onto that thought and kindle some anger, but there was that Rris in my arms. In the water they’d been helpless. What I’d done...

I'd done what I had to. I tried to push the thought to the back of my mind and concentrated on swimming, but there was that image of a horrified face vanishing into those black depths. Ahead of us the lights of the far bank edged closer painfully slowly.

—v—

Fishing boats, ferries and runabouts, the larger bulks of traders all docked along the wharves: a forest of masts and rigging silhouetted against the night sky. The sounds of lapping water and gently creaking timbers carried across the river, underlying the hissing and cries of excited Rris voices. Lights burned along the riverside: both the warm glows in windows and doorways as well as the flicker of lanterns and torches out on the quayside. Rris figures moved about there, probably watching the clouds of flickering smoke rising from the fires that burned on the far shore.

Cold, aching, and exhausted I swam in past the unscalable hulls of the ships toward the stone wall of the quay. It was damn hard keeping my own head above water, let alone the weight of the Rris guard. Shouts arose as we neared the dock, startled yowls sounding out and then the light of lanterns shining down as I reached the quay and a series of oddly shaped rusting iron rungs set into the stone. Then I didn't have the strength to do anything but hook my arm through a rung and hold on while I sucked air and my lungs ached. Damn, the water was like a heat-leech: I couldn't feel my feet, my hands, and there was a cold ache through my chest. Rris were shouting down at us. Something heavy splashed into the water nearby and Blunt snarled back, then wet fur nudged my arm, "Come on. Can you climb?"

I shook my head, not entirely sure my arms would hold out. "I... I'm not sure. I think so."

“All right. Hold on, here...” sodden fur brushed against bare skin as he got an arm around me. “Try,” he urged. “I’ll be here.”

I fumbled for the rungs and began hauling myself up. My arm ached abominably: my muscles felt like spaghetti, but the Rris guard was close behind, close enough to take some of my weight and maybe even catch me if I fell.

There were Rris at the top, a semicircle that fell back in shocked silence when I hauled myself up and stood on trembling legs, gasping, dripping and shuddering. Blunt was right behind me, looking like a drowned rat with soaked fur plastered to his body. Damned weird. If I hadn’t been so cold and exhausted I’d have laughed.

“What the rot is that?!” someone blurted and I glared that way but was too tired to make a reply.

“Is there a patrol near?” Blunt was demanding.

“And who’re you?” a bulky Rris snapped back, a hefty black stick in his hand.

“King’s guard,” Blunt replied.

“Huhn? You look more navy to me.” There was laughter and Blunt glared. “Right now, most of the patrols seem to be dealing with whatever’s going on over there,” the stick gestured at glow among the buildings on the far side of the river. “You know anything about that? Has that... whatever it is, got something

to do with it?”

More Rris were gathering to rubberneck and Blunt was getting twitchy. If the situation turned ugly, neither of us were in any shape to do much. The breeze hadn't been that cold an hour or so earlier, but now it felt like an arctic wind straight off the ice. I was shivering violently. “He's King's business.”

“Really? You think we should believe that?”

“It might be a good idea,” another voice broke in and the crowd hastily parted to let a figure in a long leather coat pass through. Shyia? No, it wasn't a face I recognized. The Mediator looked me up and down, then turned to Blunt. “Guard? What command?”

“Blunt ah Chotemith. 3rd section, Royal Guard. Shahani Cove arm under Serit. We need help.”

“Ah. I know them.” The Mediator turned eyes back to me. “And I've heard of this creature of yours. You can talk, can't you? You can understand me?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, trying to concentrate through the giddyness. “Just don't speak too fast.”

Another uproar from the surrounding Rris, but the Mediator's ears just flicked slightly. “All right, the Redmale Bridge Guild house would be safest tonight.”

“I don’t think I can...” I took a step that seemed to stretch out forever and the world slowly tilted. Blunt barely caught me on my way to the cobbles. “Sir?” he cried out.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “Cold...”

“What? You’re freezing...” he broke off and looked at his hand, then at my arm; the blood was almost indistinguishable against the pads and wet fur, but was quite visible against my skin. The cold had numbed it and probably minimised the bleeding, but it was still ugly. “Hai! Rot me, you’re hurt.” Turning to the Mediator. “He’s not going to make it that far. He needs warmth, a doctor.”

“The Thieving [Cormorant] Tavern’s just there.”

“A physician...”

“There’s that Maithris,” another voice suggested. “She’s staying there.”

“What? That [something]?”

“Just get her,” the Mediator snarled as Blunt helped me limp through the gossiping crowd toward the haven of the tavern door with a stuffed cormorant holding a lantern in its claws hung over it.

The brightest light in the room came from the fire crackling to itself in the grate, casting a pool of warmth and light onto the hearth where four solid chairs were set in a semicircle. The wrought-iron rack over the fire was festooned with pots of all shapes and sizes simmering gently, filling the air with the aroma rich stew and other less-definable smells. A few small oil lamps were hung from rafters in strategic spots, casting lonesome pools of illumination to steal the gloom from the darkest corners. At one time the room had been several smaller rooms, then the walls between supporting wooden pillars had been knocked out to make this one larger area. Tables were scattered around that area: heavy things of solid planks with benches intended to be sturdy and utilitarian rather than ornate. Booths set around the peripheries offered their occupants some privacy in the shadows.

And it was busy enough that night, probably more than a few there to see the extra attractions and the pretty lights still flickering across the river. Ris patrons kept their distance from the hearthside, leaving a deserted space around the fireplace and us. The Mediator had sent messengers off to guard stations and the local Mediator Guild Hall to fetch armed help, but that'd take a while to show up. Meantime, the Mediator had taken station off to one side, a hand on his pistol while he watched the room and everyone who entered.

Blunt was a shaggy figure sitting crosslegged and naked on the hearth while his bedraggled fur dried. Alongside, my jeans and shorts - my only clothes to survive the night's escapades - were hanging on a fireguard and steaming slightly in the heat. He seemed pretty sure that our assailants wouldn't try again. He said they'd lost a lot of their force and wouldn't risk a frontal attack when reinforcements could show at any time. He watched carefully while the Ris doctor worked on my arm.

"Hold still," she growled.

I flinched again and she held my arm down to the table while she dabbed the cloth against the deep scratches along my upper left arm. She'd stanching the worst of the bleeding, now was trying to clean them. I'd balked at the use of her limited supply of Rris tinctures, so she'd resorted to sulfur. I awkwardly pulled the itchy woolen blanket around my shoulders and watched her, her head dipped in concentration over her work.

A strange sort, that doctor. I'd been curled up on one of the chairs drawn close to the fire, huddled down into the heavy woolen blanket while a mixture of water and blood dripped onto the floor when the Mediator stiffened and stalked off toward the front door. I looked around as she came in with a couple of locals. A scarred Rris gestured at me and I saw her amber-yellow eyes widen before the Mediator intercepted her, spoke with her for a while then brought her over: a young female with a cowled cloak and a small bag containing the tools of her trade. "She's a physician. She'll tend to your arm."

The Rris glanced at him, then at me and shrugged out of her cowl and slung it over the back of the chair next to me to reveal a dusky-tawny fur peppered with patches of darker grey spots. Younger than I'd thought I realised after a seconds contemplation. Maybe Rris males considered her attractive, maybe she was as ugly as they came, I didn't know. She's a doctor? But she sat herself down. "You can... speak?" she said, somewhat apprehensively.

"Yes," I said, then added, "And I won't hurt you."

She blinked, then chittered. "No. Of course you won't. Let me see your arm."

Now it was my turn to be taken aback, but I held out my arm and she took it

with one hand, pushed the blanket out of the way. “Ah.” A finger ran across my forearm, feeling the skin below the three furrows Rris claws had torn. Her fingerpad was like a cool piece of leather sliding over my skin. “Painful?”

“I’ve had worse,” I grimaced.

She blinked at me again, then let me go and said to the Mediator. “Bring one of those small tables over here.” He looked a bit affronted, but went to get it while she dove into her bag, pulling out odds and ends. “What are you, anyway?”

“Human.”

“Haa? I’ve seen pictures of something similar to you in books.” The Mediator placed the table between us and she laid out an assortment of cloths, small bags and knives. I stared at those dubiously, then at her as she pulled out a small case, unfolded a pair of spectacles and hooked the stems around her ears. “Had a different name though. Put your arm here,” she patted the table.

I did so and she looked at me over the spectacles: “H’an... What is that word?”

“Human.”

“Ah. Odd-sounding word. Where does it come from?”

“My own language.”

She didn't look up from where she was dabbing away at clotting blood with a porous cloth. “Your own language? Huhnn, what's that sound like?”

“A hell of a lot easier to pronounce, doc,” I said in English.

Now she glanced up and cocked her head. “Interesting sounds. Like water flowing.” She turned her attention back to my arm. “Huhn, quite deep. Not bleeding too badly though. They look like claw marks.”

“They are.”

“Who did this to you?”

“I don't know. Didn't seem to like me very much though.”

She chittered and once again glanced up at me over her glasses, right at my face, at the scars there. “Not the only one apparently.”

I winced when she touched a sore spot, not just emotionally. “Sorry,” she said and glanced at my eyes again. “Where are you from?”

I watched her hands, carefully dabbing away the gore. The cloth was a reddened mess. “Difficult to explain. Another... place. Where there are many like myself.”

“Africa?” she asked.

“No. Not like that,” I hesitated. “All I know is I was home... then I was here.” Why was I telling her this? I really wasn’t sure. In this murky little bar with other Rris watching and listening she was asking and I was telling her. But nobody had talked to me this way since... Maybe that was it: She reminded me of Chihirae. Especially with those glasses.

“In the flick of a tail?” she asked.

That about summed it up. “Like that. Yes. I not know for sure for several days. Then I found a Rris town.”

“Ah.” She patted my arm, then stood and crossed to the fireplace where she poked around through the pots on the hearth, found something that obviously satisfied her, and hung the kettle over the flames. “Where was that?”

“Town called Westwater.”

“Haven’t heard of it. Could they tell you what had happened?”

I stiffened a bit, remembering the figure in the doorway, the shots. “They... I couldn’t speak Rris then. I watched. I learned.”

“Why didn’t you try to talk to them?”

I almost smiled. “You have a lot of questions, don’t you. What is your name?”

She sat back a bit and pushed her glasses back up with a bloodied forefinger. “I? Maithris aesh Teremae, at your service.” Her ears flickered. “And do you have a name?”

“Michael. Most Rris find it easier to call me Mikah. At your service.”

Maithris chittered a bit. “Myach... Misak... Mikah. You’re right: It is easier.” She wadded up the soiled cloth and tucked it away, unfolded another. “You know,” she smiled, “you never answered my question.”

I sighed slightly. “Why I didn’t talk to them?”

“A.”

“They saw me. They shot at me. I had to run.”

“Ah.” She glanced up and for a few seconds was quiet. “Then how did you finally meet Rris? Why did you stop running?”

“They caught me,” I said simply.

She must’ve felt the tremble in my arm: when she looked at me again her ears flattened. “Hurt you, didn’t they? Ah. I see why you try to reassure people you’re not dangerous. Sometime I would like to hear the whole story.” Her furry hand laid the cloth aside and picked up a small corked vial

“Hey,” I pulled my arm back. “No. No medicine. Please. Rris drugs are dangerous for me.”

“What, this? It is harmless.”

“No,” I repeated adamantly. I’d had too many close calls with ‘harmless’ Rris products. “No medicine.”

Maithris blinked, then twisted a hand in their equivalent of a shrug. “All right. If you insist. But that is dangerous. Can you understand infection?”

“Yes. I also understand poison. That is what some Rris medicine is to me.”

Startlement. Blunt was sitting up now, watching carefully. “What? All dangerous?”

“I don’t know. What have you got?”

She produced a small apothecary of drugs: vials and tubes and pots, pouches, rolls, twists. Pot, I recognized that. Also the tobacco, but the other stuff was meaningless to me: the painstakingly drawn labels meaning nothing and the various liquids and pastes even less. The simplest she had was the only one I was willing to try: powdered yellow sulfur.

“Hold still,” she growled when I flinched, then bent closer, dabbing at the wounds with boiled water to clear the worst of the clotted blood, then sprinkling sulfur. The stuff stung slightly and my arm twitched.

“How long have you been here?”

Conversation took my mind off what she was doing. “Here? Since autumn the last year.”

“And in Shattered Water?”

“I think... four months? Close to that.”

“You’ve seen cities before?”

“Yes. My kind have some.”

“Hmm?” She glanced up for a second. “Like this?”

“Same in some ways, different in others.”

She chittered. “What do you think of Shattered Water?”

“I really haven’t seen much of it.”

“Huhn? After four months? Where are you staying?”

“At the Palace.”

Now she looked startled. “That high? Sounds like your fortunes are changing. I hear the gardens there are beautiful, the Living Hall especially.”

“I’m sorry. What is that?”

“You’re staying there and you haven’t seen the gardens?”

“I get a view of them from my window,” I offered. “Some of them.”

“The Resound Theater? Gold Row? The Freespan Bridges?” To all of these I had to answer no. “None of them?”

I gave a small shake of my head, a gesture she couldn’t understand, then looked up. “Well, you do have a nice river.”

Blunt snorted and hastily looked away. Maithris glanced at him then and picked up some clean cotton pads. “You haven’t seen anything? Suppuration! Why?”

Breath gusted out of me in a sigh. “I don’t get out much.”

Maithris looked up, obviously confused. “You don’t have any interest in seeing what’s around you?”

I sagged. “It would be a great pleasure,” I said quietly. “I’ve asked. Many times.” I looked at Blunt who blinked back. “I suppose guest is only one word for it.”

She stared at me: a curious look, as if she were trying to read me. Slowly she picked up another bundle of cloth and began unrolling it: strips of cotton. “Mikah... what do you do?”

“I... ” I caught Blunt’s warning glance, “I make suggestions. I can’t really say.”

She also glanced at Blunt. “All right. Now hold your arm out.” I did so and she began bandaging me up. “Sometime, I really would like to hear your whole story.”

“Maybe I could...” started to say and there was a commotion at the front door. Armed troopers pushed in, Royal Guards bulked out in full skirmish armor with flintlock rifles and bayonets held at the ready. There were shouts of alarm as customers were pushed out of the way.

Maithris also looked around in alarm at the clattering of armor and equipage and her ears went back at the sight of a squad of armed infantry making a beeline for us. I reached out and touched her hand lightly, drawing her attention back. “It’s all right.” I sighed then, “As I said... I don’t get out very often.”

She looked from me to the guards and back again. I had a feeling that she understood.

—v—

The Palace was in a worse state than Capitol Hill during a Congressional pay review. It was a small army that delivered me back there and as I stepped from the carriage I could see lights burning everywhere, squads of guards patrolling the grounds. This little incident had obviously put the wind up someone’s back. My guards tried to hurry me along but I was too tired: I just limped my way across the drive, the borrowed cloak covering my arm in its sling. My pants

hadn't had time to dry properly and clung uncomfortably.

Guards were everywhere throughout the Palace corridors. Occasionally I saw terse-looking nobles with their household guard in tow stalking the halls as my own escort rushed me through. The hall to my own quarters had a dozen guards stationed along its length. Feline eyes watched me intently and locks on my door rattled as it was opened, then rattled again as it closed behind me.

My rooms. Quiet. Dim light from that ridiculous lamp; Clean clothes folded on the bed and a faint potpourri scent from the cushion at the desk. I crossed to the drapes and opened them, looking out through glass and bars onto the moonlit gardens.

Living Hall? What was that?

I let the drapes fall back again and sat myself on the edge of the bed. Were my boots still there? I wondered as I looked at my feet. Someone had tried to kill me and I was worried about my boots. I almost laughed at that, but all that came out was a small strangled noise and I ran my good hand through my damp hair. Shit. How often? I'd thought this was behind me, now death followed me even here. How often was this going to happen?

I didn't have those answers.

"Mikah?"

I hadn't heard the door and Kh'hitch's bulk was surprisingly stealthy. "I'm glad to see you're in one piece. They did say you're hurt. Is it serious?"

I shook my head, quietly said, "No. "

"Some good news." He wandered over to the desk, looked down at the dark laptop. "I have to say, we apologize for what happened. The guards will be reprimanded."

That rankled. "There was nothing they could do."

He growled something then asked, "And you risked your life to save one?"

"I was supposed to leave him to die?"

"That was his job, Mikah." Kh'hitch's ears tipped sideways and he sighed, like a gust of wind. "Still, I think there might have been trouble if you'd tried to walk around town by yourself."

There probably would have been. I hadn't thought of that, and now... god, I was tired. Shaken. "Where's Shyia?" I asked.

"Who?"

“The Mediator. The one who brought me here.”

“Huhn, him. He went back to Lying Scales some time ago.”

“He...” I blinked. A second shock that night. When he’d said goodbye, that was for good? “He left?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?” He was looking at me curiously.

“Oh. No reason.” I was feeling numb.

The Advisor studied me thoughtfully. “I think it would be a good idea if a doctor looked at you.”

“I saw a...”

“Yes. I know about that. I think it would be better if someone... qualified did it.”

In my books, there weren’t many Rris doctors who could be called qualified. Certainly not by the standards set back home. However, I kept that thought to myself.

“You’ll cooperate, won’t you,” Kh’hitch said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes,” I sighed.

He ducked his head and padded over to the door, knocking to be let out. I watched him leave. Shyia... I thought he would...

I suppose that was selfish: I couldn’t expect him to stay here, but still... that was one of the only Rris in this world I’d even remotely considered a friend. Now he’d left... I felt as if I’d been cast adrift. I sat there for a long time, staring at the pictures. Who’d they been? Were they still alive?

The doctor stopped by a bit later. A male who gave a perfunctory once-over, hissed at the bandages: “Cheap.” Then replaced them with a gauze and left me alone.

It was a bad night: once again the guards woke me out of a nightmare in the early hours of the morning. A single guard watched me while I lay alone, breathing heavily, my legs tangled in clammy sheets while I stared up into the darkness.

—v—

Who was responsible? Well, there were suspects. Over a dozen of them.

And they were untouchable.

The other kingdoms had been refused access to me. Hirht had provided them with some information, but they were convinced - probably rightly so - that he was still withholding things. He'd been wanting to try and keep me as a Land-of-Water resource and someone hadn't been about to stand for that.

Even if the assassination attempt had failed, the point had been made.

And thinking back on it, maybe it'd been supposed to fail. There'd been chances for the assassins to kill me but they'd never taken them. In the darkness and confusion they might have simply missed me, but somehow... I still have my doubts. Still, the message was clear enough: If the other realms couldn't have me, then nobody was going to have me. There was no way that Hirht could hope to protect me: If someone really wanted me dead it was going to happen.

On top of that night came renewed demands from the ambassadors, along with new promises of sanctions, blockades and increased tariffs on all trade goods. I wasn't party to the discussions. I got most of my news second-hand through various Advisors, but it was enough for me to get a handle on what was going on. It didn't sound as if it was going to turn out to my advantage. Still, a bit of good news: they found my boots and jacket.

—v—

It was Hirht's informal office. He was standing at the window, his back to me as he gazed out across the sunlit gardens outside. A sparrow landed on the windowsill, just on the other side of the glass and his head twitched that way,

ears up.

I closed the door. “Sir?”

He turned and the bird startled off the sill, out of sight. “Mikah. How’s your arm?”

I flexed it. I’d gotten rid of the sling a couple of days ago, but the scabs still pulled when I moved my hand. “It’s fine. Just a few scratches.”

“With a hide like yours that could be enough,” he growled. “Sit.”

The stuffing of the tooled-leather cushion rustled as I settled into it. The king sat himself down at his desk, his fur gleaming in the pool of sunlight flooding in through the windows behind him. His desk was awash in papers: illegible from where I was sitting, but I could see quite a few impressive-looking wax seals adhering to the velum and parchment. He leaned forward and scratched a finger back and forth along a small rectangle of wood: shavings curled away from his claw. “Mikah, you’re aware of the demands other kingdoms have been making in regard to questioning you.”

“Yes.”

“Well, following that... incident, I’ve decided to [something] to their requests.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know that word chaeahsia?”

He sighed. “It means: I agree to it. Understand?”

“Oh. Yes, I understand.” Acquiesce.

“Good,” he clawed gouges out of the bit of wood on his desk. I keep a scratch pad myself, but that was taking things a little too literally. “And you understand it is going to make things difficult. There will be more people wanting to meet with you, and I won’t have authority over these. For the most part they will be foreigners associated with embassies; some specialists brought in to ask you various questions.”

“About what?”

A soft hiss escaped him. “That... I don’t know. Some are dubious about what we’ve told them of you. They want to confirm for themselves that you’re not some hoax we concocted to drive in political wedges.

“Anyway, your schedule will be rewritten. You will need more security and will probably need longer days.”

I felt my heart stumble. “Sir. I don’t know I can...”

“Mikah, I know you’re working quite hard, but any farmer puts in at least as

much time as you.”

But a farmer is in his own home. He’s among his own kind. He isn’t trying to second-guess what might be going on in alien minds, trying to speak a language he was never intended to. He doesn’t have to watch his every gesture, to be careful not to smile. He wouldn’t cause a riot if he walked through town or went to buy a piece of bread. “Sir, it’s not like that. It’s... “

“What?”

How could I explain? The tensions, nightmares... “I get very tired, sir. It is very...” Did they even have a word for stress? The nearest I could come was the term for weight on a rope.

Hirht looked a bit confused, then flicked his ears. “Huhnn. Well, it won’t be for too long. You won’t snap before then?” he smiled.

Looking back on it I can see he thought I’d made a mistake and he was making a pun out of it. I took him at the English translation of the term ‘snap’, not understanding he really didn’t realize what I meant. “I hope not.”

He snorted and tapped at a sheaf of paper: “That’s some good news. Now, these interviews won’t be private. You’ll have guards and an Advisor with you. I have details of what you’ll be free to discuss and what is confidential. You understand?”

“Yes,” I sighed. “Do you know who did it?”

He hesitated. “You mean that attack? No, nobody has claimed responsibility.”

“Is it likely to happen again?”

Hirht raised an extruded claw above his scratch pad, then gently lowered it and studied the sharp little crescent. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. I believe they were trying to make a point and now it’s been made, there won’t be any further use for actions like that.”

“And if they decide they still aren’t being told everything?”

He was still for a fraction of a second, the pupils in his eyes dilating. “That... I doubt anything will happen. Understand: they will learn what you are. They will see just what they can gain from you and when they do... ” He sighed, “All I can say is that anyone who harmed you would [something] the anger of the other kingdoms.”

“You’re sure of that?”

The Rris king laughed: a sound not at all like a human chuckle. A stuttering chitter filled with uncertainty and I knew the answer myself. No, he wasn’t certain.

Changes. Not for the better.

I'd sat with ambassadors and scholars and teachers and artisans. Rris from places I'd only heard occasional mention of in my lessons, from neighboring kingdoms and places on the other side of the known Rris world, they all wanted their time. I'd talked for hours with representatives from some of the most powerful kingdoms, answered questions and shown pictures. I'd even sketched a simple portrait of the Lost-Sun Ambassador when she'd queried my profession.

Rules. There were always Land-of-Water Advisors there to watch, always guards - for both sides. I'd received lectures and instructions from all kinds of officials, from Advisors to upper echelon military.

General Kisti aesh Hostei. She was an imposing figure: tall for a Rris, her muzzle and torso fur peppered with gray and old scar tracks and her cheek tufts a brittle white. Old, yes, but stocky enough to look like she'd been chiseled from granite: muscles shifted under her fur like tectonic plates in motion and she wore her much-used armor like most people might wear a favorite shirt, not seeming to notice its weight. Assertive; she was used to getting what she wanted... in some ways she reminded me of Shyia, in others of a bear. And despite that, there was still a hesitation around me; a movement to keep as much distance between us as possible..

It was the first time I'd been introduced to the military establishment. Why? I'm not sure. Nobody ever told me. I think they'd been trying to find out how cooperative I'd be about military information. And when they learned that I wasn't likely to be very cooperative, they'd decided to see how much they could find out on their own. I'd often returned to my rooms to find the monitor log in

the laptop full of misspelled access and search attempts. I didn't pursue the issue.

The general lectured me at length. Someone had tried to kill me in her city: that was a slight against her and her works that she took an almost personal offense to. She told me what was going to be done to make sure that didn't happen again: more guards and security, careful screening of everyone who was to go near me ... nothing I wasn't expecting. Then she started explaining that other realms would ask about weapons, they would ask about ideas and ways of war.

"You would like it if I didn't tell them anything," I said.

Her left ear was a stub, but it twitched as the right one laid down. "What you feel is right," she said and I knew those weren't her words. The way she acted... she didn't believe I could feel anything.

I smiled - a hollow grimace that didn't mean anything to either of us - and nodded. "All right."

—v—

The Land-of-Water nobility refused to let me be taken to the embassies, so the foreign delegations were escorted to the Palace where the audiences were to be held. Every couple of days I was taken to the conference room to meet with the Rris. The time I wasn't engaged in those meetings was spent at the workshops where the Rris were doing their best to fit two days' work into one. My guard had been increased and it was a small army of a couple of dozen soldiers who

rattled around with me. Inside the palace a squad of four heavily armed troopers followed me everywhere.

Awkward times. Rris kept their distance and I was quite aware of the whispering behind my back. Rraerch was withdrawn, keeping her distance and Chaeitch - who had been openly friendly with me - was nervous around me. They'd heard what happened. They'd asked how I was, expressed their shock, but under that there was the fidgeting, the sidelong glances. They'd heard I'd killed Rris and it really didn't matter what the circumstances had been. Maybe it'd be comparable to a guard dog killing an intruder: it was doing its job, but it was still a man killer.

How many had died? They never told me. Maybe they didn't know.

The meetings with the foreign delegations were another matter. A closed room with Rris who might have been one of the ones who'd tried to kill me; other Rris who'd never seen me before - never conceived of something like me before - and treated me as one might a circus creature: see the tricks it can do. Isn't it remarkable?

The first meeting. It was in another of those meeting rooms the Palace seemed to have a plethora of. A large room on the second floor, three latticed windows looked out over the sweeping front drive and the treelined avenue stretching away. The marbled top of the gatehouse was just visible above the treetops. There wasn't much in the room, nothing in the way of furniture save the seven cushions and low tables on the carpeted floor. One was over by itself in front of the windows, the others arranged in a loose crescent on the side of the room near the door.

"Be seated," Kh'hitch instructed, sweeping his arm toward that single

cushion. “They’ll be here shortly.”

The door closed behind me as I crossed the room and I hesitated, turned when I heard the key turn in the lock. The door was black, constructed of solid pieces of timber that looked like they were damn good at their job. I sighed and let my arm slap despondently against my jeans then turned away and wandered over to the window.

There was activity down on the drive: Three carriages parked in the paved courtyard before the Palace, Rris moving about. I could see a few guards, their armor glittering in the sunlight, others tending the elk harnessed to the carriages. I touched the windows, the organic flow of the crude glass cold under my fingertips as I watched the Rris going about their business and the chill sensation continued on to the pit of my stomach: that emptiness that seemed to drag the world in with it.

The metallic scritch of a key in the lock jolted me out of my funk. I turned as the Advisor entered and hesitated, then gestured at the cushion. The Rris behind him also stalled for a second, her eyes going wide as she watched me take my seat. Shahi, from Hunting-Well. I’d met her... I’d seen her at that rather illfated reception meal a couple of weeks back. She’d seen me before, but even so there was that involuntary flinch; that twitch of eyes and ears when she saw me. The other five Rris didn’t know me and they stared openly.

Five of them, all with an affluent air about them. Red and orange and green velvet, fine cottons, tooled and oiled leather glistening in the sunlight. A hefty Rris wore a torc with enough glittering rocks to start a magpie salivating; a somewhat more trim individual with delicate silver chains looping from its ears in a sharp contrast with the dark fur. Shahi was wearing breeches of supple white leather, something like suede. A light khaki vest blended with her fur while shaved patches traced gray serpentine patterns down her arms. Eyes flickered as the newcomers studied me sitting there in my human manufactured clothing: an

Eldritch ‘Stranger Than You Think’ T-shirt, Swan-dri and bluejeans.

“Ambassador, you’ve met Mikah before,” Kh’hitch said to the female representative from Hunting-Well.

She cocked her head and maybe smiled a bit. “Yes. Although he appears to be feeling a little better today.”

I caught Kh’hitch’s warning glance and caught myself before I said something I’d regret and just sat quietly as they took their seats, joints bending inhumanly as they settled down onto the cushions. Kh’hitch was puffing a bit by the time he’d got himself seated, but he rallied admirably, drawing himself up like a furry Buddha with his paunch hanging into his lap. Again I had to wonder at the Rris aristocrats’ choice of indoor furniture. A pair of guards took up stations against the whitewashed walls inside the door, their polished steel armor gleaming like mirrors in the sunlit room.

I’d been briefed on just who I was going to be meeting, but Kh’hitch ran through introductions anyway. All affiliated in some way with Hunting-Well, a centralized realm whose western borders ran along the Earthy River [Mississippi] and northern tip flirted with the southern shores of Lake Endless [Michigan]. Among their main exports: cattle and related produce, grain and textiles. Nobody had told me why they’d been chosen for the first interview; maybe they’d just drawn names out of a... well, some kind of receptacle, hats not being so popular here.

Shahi was watching me curiously, but without too much concern. More apprehensive were her associates. Alongside, her deputy was Chareth, the dark-furred male with the silver ear-chains busily producing parchments from a satchel. Retikhiasth was the consulate archivist; a twitching young Rris with a

emerald green tunic that matched her green eyes and somewhat russet fur. Ch'isthori and Hatorik were merchants and Hunting-Well's Traders Guild representatives in Shattered Water. The final member was the hefty Rris with the jeweled torc, also a black leather vest and ornate sheath - empty - slung at the belt: Hiskny, their 'security' Advisor. The local military attaché concerned with consulate security and probably a few other more... um... covert departments.

"And how are you this morning?" Shahi asked conversationally.

"I am managing," I answered, trying to ignore the audible intake of breath from the Rris called Hatorik.

"Good," she smiled. "Now, what have they told you not to tell us?"

"Ambassador," Kh'hitch didn't exactly growl. "If this is going to be your attitude, we might as well..."

"Apologies," she smoothed with a single motion of her hand. Kh'hitch subsided, but was still simmering. "Mikah, that story you told the other night, it was very interesting. In fact, we'd all like to hear a little more about the place you came from. You don't know where it is?"

"It's not like that," I tried to explain. "My home is like... all of this. This world. But it's not this world."

“That doesn’t make much sense.”

“Look. All I’ve been able to figure out is this is a might-what-have been. My world is too.”

“A what?” she and the others looked puzzled. Also Kh’hitch. It was the first time I’d aired this theory.

“I’m not sure. You understand time? Say that time is like a tree.” I moved my hands and saw tails start to twitch, placed them back in my lap again. “There is the trunk, then a decision might be made, a choice taken and that trunk branches. In one world one path is taken and at that moment another world is created where the other path is also taken.”

There were looks of confusion.

I sighed. “Look, what happened at that meal: maybe there was world created where I died, another where there was no poison, another where someone else ate it by mistake. All possibilities branching off from the main trunk. In my world the branch led to my kind rising to the top, on this branch it is your kind. Somehow I... jumped from a branch where my kind existed to this branch.”

Shahi’s head was back, her fur was slightly bristled. “And this is an idea you just... had?”

Well, there was that old series Sliders that led me on to do a bit of poking

around quantum physics... “My kind have thought about this for a while,” I finally said.

“Your kind,” she mused. “We’ve done a bit of research and came up with this.” She held out a hand for the roll of parchment her deputy handed her, opened it in a smooth movement. It was a detailed ink line-drawing of an ape perched on a branch, its mouth open in a grin that bared long teeth. “This look familiar?”

I sighed, nodded and belatedly waved an affirmative. “An ape. Not my kind.”

“No? I wouldn’t look at you and say that.”

“I said that in my world Humans are like Rris are here. I think that is what happened to my kind here.”

Rris eyes glanced from the paper to my face. To my eyes there wasn’t much similarity, but what were they seeing?

“Excuse me,” another Rris - Retikhiasth - ventured. “Ah... if that is what his ... sahh... kind looks like. What do Rris look like where you... ah... come from?”

Everyone looked at her, then at me. I smiled slightly: nervous young lady, but sharp. “Different,” I told her without elaborating and saw how that peaked her interest.

“All right,” Shahi gesture with the rolled paper and handed it back to her deputy. “Enough of that for now. We have a few more important matters to cover. Mikah, you have been giving our hosts information, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“About what?”

“Various things. There were improvements to the steam engine they were using, also changes to boats. A more... eco-no-mical way of producing steel. Changes to the textiles mills and looms. There were some changes to maps. Also, new metals for tools...”

“Please, clutch it,” Shahi forestalled me, looking flustered and I stopped, somewhat confused at the command myself before realizing it was a figure of speech I hadn’t heard before. Kh’hitch’s nostrils flared but he said nothing while the ambassador rubbed at the fur on her forearm. “You’re doing all this, by yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Huhnn... You said your kind is more... knowledgeable than we are. How much more so?”

“That’s... difficult to know. We went through a time like yours, I think a

couple of hundred years ago.”

I couldn’t help but notice how the fur of her ruff was lifting, literally getting her hackles up. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Time. It wasn’t something they easily understood, how much things could change in two centuries. “Maybe two hundred years ago my people were like Rris are now. Time went on. We learned. We made more tools, better tools. Our knowledge grew. As a cub learns as it grows.”

Maybe not the best analogy. “You think we’re like cubs?”

“Not like that. You still have a lot to learn. So do we.”

She snorted and rubbed her forearm again, ruffling the sigils shaved there. “Saaa... Did you have a profession?”

“Yes. I was an artist.”

Outright surprise. “You? An artist?”

“Yes.”

There were a few smiles. “That’s not a profession I would’ve expected in something like you. But if that’s so, how do you know about expanded-water engines and metallurgy?”

“I know a bit about it. It was enough to give suggestions that Rris could... build on.”

“Ah. Just suggestions. And from those Land-of-Water has made these changes. I would like to know a little more about what you have done.”

I glanced at Kh’hitch who said nothing. I took that as a sign that he’d no objections and started telling them about some of the work I’d done so far. That took a while, quite a while; about two hours by my count, and all the time the Ambassador’s deputy was scribbling away, taking notes with a quill and inkwell.

“You’ve been quite busy,” Shahi noted when I finally finished.

I nodded, rubbed my throat. Speaking Rris wasn’t getting any easier. “Could I have a drink?”

Kh’hitch made a gesture and a guard exited. Amazingly quiet for someone carrying that much metal.

“You’re all right? Shahi asked.

Nothing like last time, just a sore throat. “I’m fine,” I assured her. “I’m not made to speak like a Rris.”

“Ah,” uncertainty flickered across her features, then she snorted and muttered something to her aide who scratched away at his notes. Her tail flicked and she turned to Kh’hitch. “Advisor, this is... You were intending to keep this to yourselves.”

Kh’hitch’s expression didn’t flicker. “In the beginning we had no reason to suppose there would be any interest from other kingdoms. By the time we were aware of what was happening, so were other lands.”

“You saw no reason to inform us?”

“Would you?”

She growled something that could be translated as: “That’s beside the point,” but didn’t push it.

The guard returned with a pitcher and a glass. If s/he wasn’t happy about being relegated to the status of a servant, the furry face showed no signs. I drank greedily, then looked at the mug and wished they had refrigerators.

Shahi was muttering something with her aide, glancing at the transcripts then leaning over to confer with the two traders. I couldn’t quite make out what they were murmuring about, but they exchanged a few words before she turned back

to me. “You claimed that you had no intention of dealing exclusively with Land-of-Water. You came here by accident?”

“Yes.”

“Would you be willing to offer some proof of this? You’ve given Land-of-Water examples of your knowledge, would you share that with other Ris?”

“I’m not really able to say. I think it depends upon circumstances.”

“Hnn. A very [something] answer,” she mused, tapping her muzzle with a forefinger. Before I had a chance to ask her what that word meant, she continued, “We would be interested in an example.”

“Such as?”

Shahi looked to her left, to the merchanters, where Hatorik squirmed slightly and his ears turned back but he said, “We thought you might have a better idea of that. There were a few uncertainties about just what you knew.”

“I will have think on that a bit,” I said. This had been something I’d been warned about so I’d had time to prepare a few ideas based on Hunting-Wells main products. “Would an improved method for harvesting grain be of interest?”

Shahi’s muzzle wrinkled very slightly. “What sort of improvements?”

“In one hour a single Rris could harvest as much grain as it would usually take five Rris working all day.”

That got them. Even their tails were still, then Shahi said, very slowly, “We... we would be interested.”

I thought they would be. Even Kh’hitch seemed a bit taken aback.

The other merchant raised his hand to point a stubby finger at my legs. “Those coverings... I don’t think I’ve seen their like before. What kind of material is that?”

Slightly surprised at that line of questioning I plucked at my jeans. “This? It’s called Denim.”

“Most unusual.” He murmured something to his associate, then asked, “May I look closer?”

“Mikah...” Kh’hitch started to say.

“It’s all right,” I said, raising my hand and the Advisor subsided but still looked wary. The guards shifted almost imperceptibly when Hatorik stood to approach me. His toe claws were out, I saw, catching on the carpet as he stepped over. Those alien tendons in those peculiar digitigrade feet and ankles flexed as he knelt and his glance flickered from my face to his hands as he touched the

denim at my ankles, then pinched it between thumb and forefinger. “Strong... Very unusual stitching.”

A finger ran along the seam. “I’ve never seen a weave like this before... and [rivets]; I’d expect to see those on a suit of armor.”

I told him a bit about the fabric: how it was derived from cotton spun on mechanical looms, but I didn’t explain the details of the process. The zipper left him intrigued and frustrated: I demonstrated it, but refused a closer examination. Rather Kh’hitch did. They had a sample of what I could show them and he wasn’t going to give away too much. Hatorik had started to complain but Shahi had uttered one word of warning and he’d backed down.

There was one final issue, the delicate reason the military attaché Hiskny was present in the delegation. Shahi’s tail twitched slightly, betraying her agitation when she said, “Advisor, my apologies, but this is a matter of some concern. Mikah, you did say you weren’t willing to provide information on weapons.”

I felt my own muscles twitch and Kh’hitch tensed a bit. “That’s right,” I said slowly.

“Your kind, you said you are more... knowledgeable than we are. This applies to those fields as well?”

So that’s where this was leading. “Yes,” I said. “I’m not dealing in those. I think I have enough problems without making myself a military target.”

“You think you haven’t?”

It was the first time Hiskny had favored us with spoken words. His muzzle twitched slightly when I looked at him and one finger tapped at his belt where the knife sheath hung. “That engine. That alone has applications that are far from peaceful.”

I nodded. “I know. I regret it, but can be used for... ” again, my grip on the Ris language wasn’t strong enough and the words I wanted eluded me. “They can be used for better purposes. I can’t tell you how to run your... business, but I won’t tell you how to build weapons.”

The military Advisor tipped his head and looked somewhat puzzled, either at the attitude or the vehemence. “Why? Your kind have weapons? What do you have against them?”

I took another drink and idly reached up to rub the old wound through my shoulder that was aching again. “You... you carry a knife,” I said, glancing at the scabbard. “You ever had to use it?”

“On occasion.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

His chin came up and I could see tendons flexing under his fur. “I had the

satisfaction of doing my duty and my [honor].”

Honor. That was the best translation I could come up with. Another concept that had no real analogies and in time would just become part of the way I thought as even that changed to click in with the world around me. I nodded. “You’ll learn. I had no choice; I didn’t enjoy it and I have no wish to be responsible for more.”

“And what do your hosts say to that?”

“They know,” I said. I never mentioned the laptop, or the fact my hosts had been doing some research of their own.

Kh’hitch was studying me, unblinking eyes set in a furry face that didn’t have as much fat as the rest of his body. “It hasn’t been a subject we’ve pressed him on.”

“Then you’re not working on developing weapons,” Shahi asked.

“No more than you are,” the Advisor smiled.

The ambassador smiled back. Her face at least; a plastic expression that didn’t entirely reach her ears.

It was early evening by the time affairs were finished up. The light outside

was going, the sky darkening with high, wind-sculpted wisps of cloud burnished to glowing metal by the dying sun. I was hungry, tired, and my throat was raw. The ambassador wanted another meeting, scheduled more talks with specialists. She wanted the designs I'd offered as soon as was possible and discussed bringing in experts from her homeland to carry out further talks. When the time finally came to leave they offered their respects and flowed to their feet, not showing any sign of discomfort after being seated for so long: my own had turned to lumps of wood long ago. The guards stepped aside as they passed, then followed with a hint of noise from oiled leather and metal scraping. When the door closed even I could hear the outburst of voices from the far side, indecipherable noise that faded into the distance.

“Ten more of those?” I said to Kh'hitch.

“At least,” he snorted. “Go on. Get some food and rest.”

It was advice I wasn't about to argue with. My legs wobbled a bit, but they got me back to my quarters. God, another ten days of this. I stripped and sank into a hot bath, just letting the knots in my shoulders and back seep out. The Ris who delivered my meal showed up to put the tray at the side of the tub. I noticed the glances at my wet skin, but I was too tired and too hungry to care.

—v—

Kh'hitch had been right; a fact that didn't make me too happy.

That day had been typical of the days that followed. Some went a bit better, others went a lot worse. All of them wanted some token that I was what I said I

was; some proof that I did have something to offer them, as if what I'd already done for the Land-of-Water Rris wasn't relevant.

I gave them what they asked for. The Hunting-Well delegation were given the diagrams for a basic threshing machine based on the McCormick reaper intended to be drawn and powered by animals, but with provision for addition of a steam engine. Other kingdoms went away with plans for microscopes, seed drills, spinning jennies, barometers, denim fabric, powered shearers, powered trip hammers and saws along with several metallurgy suggestions. Most took their samples, albeit with the air of somebody who's been sold something without quite understanding what the salesman was talking about. A couple of ambassadors, that surly one from Bluebetter for example, weren't as civil. He wasn't convinced I wasn't more than an animal. More of his words were directed at Kh'hitch than myself as he protested that Land-of-Water was producing new weapons and supporting dissidents in their own land. When he did talk to me it was in a respectfully patronizing manner, as if I were less than a fool.

I suffered through it. At the end of the first meeting I found my hands were sore from being clenched into fists for so long. My nights weren't any better: I'd wake in a cold sweat from nightmares. Once I woke to find myself standing in the middle of my room in a pool of silvered moonlight filtering through the windows and clouds outside: naked, heart pounding and shaking violently as the night terrors faded.

And there were more changes outside the diplomatic talks as well. Scholars from two other neighboring kingdoms arrived on the docks: courier ships from other Realms along the lakes routed to Land-of-Water specially. Again, the examinations; the experience of being treated like a piece of machinery, and now that some of the cloak of secrecy covering me had been withdrawn there were more Rris interested in me; more ways of making me feel like a side of meat.

"Come along," Rasa aesh Wilder urged me. "We don't have all day for this."

For what? I wondered as I followed. Another part of the University, this was. The newer buildings on the treelined campus were brick, with high, peaked tiled roofs while the older ones were predominately dark wood. In many places the two styles merged and mixed together and the red, angular faces of the brickwork melded into the more flamboyant and gothic wooden architecture with its weatherboards, slate tiles, turrets and steep roofs. Now, my guards followed me and the trio of Rris teachers through the university halls into one of those older wings. Rasa kept up a steady chatter as the tiled floors turned to squeaking boards under my feet, the black wood scratched and gouged from the passage of countless clawed feet. Her voice was a steady patter: pointing out details of interest through the university, a lot of reassurances; which only served to worry me more.

Through a door, down a half-dozen steps, another short hall with more doors along its dimly lit length. “You won’t have any trouble,” Rasa was saying. “Just do what’s asked of you. Rehichia’s been waiting for an opportunity like this for a long while and I’m sure they’ll have questions. Take them one at a time.”

“Questions...?” I started to ask as she showed me through a door at the far end.

“Go on. He’s waiting.”

I didn’t know what was happening: as was happening so many times there was so much crammed into a day that nobody had time to explain what was planned. I had to take it as it came, and this time it wasn’t what I was expecting.

Not a room, more of a hall: big, circular, with walls of dark polished wood.

High overhead, rafters curved up to support the cone-shaped timber roof where skylights sent shafts of dust-flecked warm light angling down to spotlight a portion of the wooden floor before me, leaving the rest of the big chamber in shadows. There were easels there in that light: a pair of frames as tall as I, the thick papers mounted on them covered by a single blank sheet. A chalkboard stood between them and a tall Rris turned from where it'd been scratching a chart of some kind on the board. "Hai! Not before time. Over here please." A white stick tapped the floor beside the chalk board.

A stubby hand patted my shoulder and I cast a confused look at Rasa. She smiled, ducked her head and quietly closed the door. My guards took up their stations to each side.

"Now," the Rris by the board snapped, its... his voice reverberating from the curved wooden wall behind him. I hesitated, glanced at my guards who gazed back impassively, then started out into that pool of sunlight.

Stopped dead when I saw the tiers of benches in the shadows beyond the light. There were Rris there, not filling the hall by any means, but dozens of feline heads turned slightly to follow me, tufted ears peaked in interest. A dry rustling sounded along with the liquid sibilants of Rris whispers, papers shuffled and quill pens shifted uncertainly. A lecture theater...

"Here," the Rris at the board growled, tapping his pointer at the spot. I sighed, once again glanced around at the guards waiting in the wings: They weren't going to intervene, but they probably wouldn't let me leave. I stepped forward, because it would have been too humiliating to turn around and run the other way.

"Notes," the lecturer called, his voice loud in the hall and just below the

echoes I heard the rustling of papers again. “This is a prime example of the [something] of adaptable growth. He is a primate, most probably of the same stock as African apes.” He threw back the cover sheet on an easel to unveil a black and white drawing of an ape half-crouching on a branch with a dead bird clutched in one hand. Perhaps a chimpanzee? Maybe not, there were a few things that didn’t look quite right. Whatever it was, the lecturer raised his stick and began ticking off features: the shape of the skull and jaw, the teeth, eyes, ears. Pens scratched as the Rris in the seats scribbled notes and I realised why this seemed so familiar.

A lecture hall: those were students.

And I was a glorified teaching aid. As the presentation continued the lecturer flipped the pages back, producing more sketches and close-ups of various portions of the ape’s anatomy. I was the counterpoint, compared to show how elements had changed and refined. Inevitably, I was asked to remove my shirt, then my boots and socks, leaving me in my shorts which was as far as I was prepared to go. Perhaps he’d been warned about that: I wasn’t asked to drop them.

Chitters rose from the audience when I removed my shirt, hastily stilled when the lecturer glared and then began using that pointer to keep a safe distance while he indicated spots of interest:

“You will note his legs are developed for a [bipedal? Upright?] stance. The bones are longer and straighter for supporting weight while muscle development is more [something] around this area. Feet are unusual in that the [something] bone is [grounded?], removing weight from the toes. You will notice the [similarity] with his fingers? In his case they’ve [something], obviously not as capable at grasping as his ancestor. From that we can [something] that at one point his kind might have used all four limbs before they began walking upright, in turn freeing their forehands for other tasks. Something I believe would have

helped their development would be their lack of claws. It would [something] the development of tools for defense and...”

He went on, covering everything, slowly, steadily and thoroughly. Dull too, not only because I still couldn't understand a lot of what he was saying, but because he seemed to be one of those natural cures for insomnia. And when he reached the last illustration the other easel was uncovered. The parchments were filled with depictions and anatomical renderings of Rris and also parts of something I recognized. Rris had found bones, fragments of bones from long-dead creatures that bore disturbing resemblances to modern Rris. A Rris artist had incorporated photorealistic illustrations of the remains into his idea of what the original creature had looked like.

Slightly twisted, but it was a cat's skeleton, of course. The problem was that because of its unsettling similarities with Rris, they'd tried to portray it in a bipedal stance. Now they were toying with the idea that it might have been a quadruped. With my interest piqued I stepped a bit closer, noticing the paper was rag mat: nice stuff too, with tiny flecks of fibers and wood giving it a character and enhancing the slightly bluish ink of the crosshatches...

“Hai,” the lecturer snapped. I looked at him: standing there with arms crossed and tail twitching. If it had been anatomically possible for a Rris to tap his foot, he would have.

There were a few chitters from the gallery as I moved back to where he wanted me to stand and the lecture continued. This time comparing that fragment of the past with my ancestors, comparing modern Rris with their ancient cousin. Evolution, I realised somewhat belatedly. That was what he was discussing. And with me he had a walking, talking ‘after’ sample to prove it was possible for an animal to change over time, to become something more. It didn't surprise me too much that the Rris had taken to the evolution theory so readily. Creationism would have probably been puzzled over, then some very

fundamental and basic questions would have been asked. The standard answers would - understandably - never hold water with Rris.

Evolution however, the seed of that concept was already being bantered around in academic circles before I appeared to add my two cents. Now it had not only acknowledgment that evolution was an accepted theory elsewhere, but something that was evidence species could change.

Still, that didn't do anything to make lecturers like that Rehichia any more interesting. I could see there were a fair number in the gallery with heads resting on their hands as they took notes, a lot of them watching me instead of the lecturer, and more than a few yawns. In fact, that set me off and there were a few muffled chitters before I could stifle it.

He never noticed, kept going on with a diatribe about the differences in Rris finger structure that were so full of physiological references that I couldn't understand. I turned slightly away and made a casually unobtrusive 'yak-yak' gesture with my hand. Apparently it was a universal gesture and drew a few chitters.

The lecturer - pondering on how climatic differences would affect growth of fur - never noticed.

Well, he went on: At length. I amused myself, and not a few of the audience, as best I could. He never saw the little gestures, and his flinching when he turned to find me peering over his shoulder was quite amusing.

“Just what were you doing?” Kh’hitch growled, leaning forward on his desk to brandish the sheaves of paper at me, the parchment a yellowish-orange in the lamplight. “Skin me! I’ve read the guards’ reports. Do you have the faintest idea what kind of trouble would sprout if Rehichia decided to lodge complaints?”

“He never even noticed,” I shrugged.

“That’s not the point. Rot it! You’ve got your [something], you know. There are people who disagree with your ideas, with what you’re doing. They would feast on cub pranks like that!”

“Would they?” I asked.

“You think it doesn’t matter?”

“I think that I haven’t had much of a choice about what I do,” I retorted.

He cocked his head, ears going back slightly, but there was that Rris stone-face lack of expression settling in. “You’re unhappy about something?”

Unhappy... my jaw dropped, then I swallowed and took a breath. “Do you know... do you know what it is like to be a thing? To be on show? To be run around like I was an animal?! To be an exhibit in a goddamn zoo?!” I hissed, lapsing into English and the Advisor twitched back just a bit. I saw that flinch in his eyes, as he glanced past me at the door of his office. There were guards out

there and if he felt threatened...

I unclenched my fists, took a breath and sagged. "I'm sorry. Sir, I'm very tired."

For several seconds he didn't budge, then: "Huhn." He tipped his head, but his expression didn't change. "That would explain a lot, but it doesn't excuse it. Mikah, it's dangerous for you. Can you understand that?"

I sighed quietly. "I understand that. I've been told it often enough, but it... does that mean the rest of my life will be like this?"

A pair of copper bracelets jangled as he moved his hands in a shrug. "That... I doubt anyone could tell you the answer to that. Things change, situations tack in their winds. For the most part, it's what you do that influences your course."

An unencouraging oblique answer. My heart sank a little lower and I didn't reply. I guess that silence reassured him a little; the Advisor settled back in his cushion and laced stubby fingers across his ample stomach. "It's something you should remember. For now, I think you should get some rest. We're anticipating the arrival of several important guests within the next few days. They've all expressed great interest in meeting you."

"Important?"

He made a sound that might have been a cough. "Their majesties from some

neighboring lands. They all found occasion to take the trouble to journey here.”

“Oh.” That was all I said. Inside: oh, god. No more...

—v—

The blades circled about the side of my neck, hesitated, then moved with a purpose. A few locks of hair fell and fingerpads brushed against my cheek as the Rris tipped my head, ran a comb through my hair and clipped away a few more strands. She cocked her head to study the result, flicked an ear, ran fingers through my hair to primp it into a new configuration. I think she was enjoying herself. Another somewhat frustrated attendant used a much finer brush in an attempt to smooth down the hair on my left arm, without much success. My right hand was taken by a Rris who started paring my nails down with a file... a goddamned manicure; or maybe they just wanted my nails at a length that couldn't hurt anyone.

I'd been washed, cleaned, trimmed and brushed, then doused with some liquid that might have been a Rris perfume but certainly wasn't appealing to me: it smelt vaguely like the lion's enclosure at a zoo. Was this how a Cruft's entry felt before the show?

Thankfully, I was allowed to wear my own clothes. I suppose Hirht had a reason for that: some psychological reason, some power-play... whatever it was, I wasn't complaining: Blue jeans and a loose white cotton shirt weren't Savoy Row, but they were still more comfortable than an outfit tailored by someone who wasn't familiar with human proportions. They'd also been scrupulously cleaned and I almost laughed at the thought, I hope they followed the washing instructions...

“Please, sir,” the Rris trimming my beard quickly pulled the scissors away. “If you would be so good as not to move...”

I tried to be still while Rris hands moved sharp metal around my face. The previous night and early morning had been the culmination of three intensive days of cramming. My fatigue-fuzzed brain was packed with the facts and details that’d been drummed into me: kingdoms’ and monarchs’ names, especially the three visiting kings and queens from some of the closest neighboring kingdoms: Overburdened, Cover-my-Tail, and Bluebetter. I hoped that one would be less abrasive than his ambassador had been. There’d been detailed explanations about their staff, geography, populations, ports and cities and areas of production, imports and exports... I don’t know why they wanted to cover so much extraneous stuff: I guess they didn’t want me making any foolish mistakes that might reflect poorly on Land-of-Water.

And later that morning I was taken to meet the nobility.

A herald stalked the hall ahead of me. Nervous, I could see that. In the stiffness of his gait, the way his tail bottled slightly, his ears turned back slightly to catch the sound of my footsteps. Early afternoon sunlight was prised by the crude glass in the windows, enough finding its way through to throw a glare off the marble floors, from the gleaming steel and lacquer carapaces of the royal guard squad pacing us. We followed a route that was familiar to me, through halls and down staircases to the ground floor and the bustling of Rris and the faint of sound of music.

Even in daylight, there were lamps burning everywhere. Gas flames flickered through crystal and glass. Gold and silver gleamed in the airy halls, huge portraits peering down from their perches at the Rris who walked the corridors below them. Gilt threads glittered in the weave of pennants and tapestries and

high overhead gold-trimmed groin vault shouldered off the arches of a marble ceiling. Carved feline figures stretched out along the arches, intertwined with one another. That same hall I'd been ushered down on that disastrous formal dinner those months ago, it looked a lot different in the light of day.

And the Rris there...

Royal guards in their polished cuirasses and helmets stood at their posts along the halls. Not many of them, almost a part of the backdrop as they stood with polearms at port. Palace staff were equally unobtrusive as they lurked on the sidelines, always ready when any of the dignitaries needed a merest whim granted.

Ah, the nobility. Not so many of them, but by sheer dint of presence they seemed to fill the hall, doing best to overshadow one another. As my escort led me down the hall to the huge doors at the far end we passed several knots of these Rris and their entourages. Eyes turned to stare at me, amounts of cloth Rris would never normally wear swirling and shifting. Not as much a human dandy might drape themselves in, but what they wore was gaudy, outfits intended to make the wearer stand out: brilliant hues, colors like scarlet and emerald green, were predominant.

I saw a female with nothing but loose strips of silver-filigreed red satin hanging from her shoulders to her hips and belted at the waist; red streaks painted in the fur of her forehead. A companion decked in a tooled vest of stiff black leather with bloused white sleeves that went to his elbows while a heavily carved leather panel hung from his belt as far as his knees. Another hung down his back, with - I reasoned - a slot in it for his tail. Huhn, try sitting down in that getup.

The music was louder as we neared the closed doors, louder and with an underlying hissing of Rris conversation. The guards posted there had feathers in their polished steel helmets, apparently from some now-denuded bird that had once been very big and a fire-engine shade of red. The cutlery on the end of their polearms flashed as they snapped to attention when the herald approached, then simultaneously opened the doors and I didn't have any choice but to enter.

Conversation faded but the music played on.

The hall was different in the daylight, much lighter and seemingly much larger. The drapes that'd covered the western wall were spread, the ceiling-high French windows behind them open to the world beyond. A cooling breeze meandered under the high ceiling, teasing the fronds of high plant arrangements around the perimeter of the room. Planters overflowing with intricately arranged flora stood to each side of the doorway, arches of fern leaves and foxtails framing a room of Rris nobles who - individually and in groups - turned their eyes my way.

That tension in my guts, my muscles tightening and twitching...

The herald glanced at me, a look that was as nervous and as fleeting as the deer in the gardens. "Sir... this way."

I followed. My feet followed. Rris parted to either side and a muted chatter went up behind my back as the crowd closed behind me. Not a solid mass but small knots and congregations, clusters orbiting and mingling while eyes darted my way. A few hundred individuals, groups scattered around the big room. Color and light, sunlight on fur of all colors: natural and dyed. Red streaks in sienna fur above suspicious eyes; a tie-dyed effect with pastel tones on a dainty female's arms; curlicues shaved into chest fur and lined with russet and gold.

The clothes were costumes, were statements of affluence: silver chain mail so fine it resembled cloth, velvet tunics; filigree wound through pointed ears so the flesh resembled the traceries of a circuit board; a female with a technicolor harness cut to allow her six nipples - painted scarlet for some reason - to protrude.

A masquerade, I thought as the inhuman moved around me. A tiny part of me kept expecting the guests to take the masks off. Music drifted above the sibilants of Rris speech. Over the crowd I could see the musicians on their podium in their corner playing a mixture of strings and soft percussion. No wind instruments. It was the first time I'd heard Rris music: an eerie sound I felt, the time and pitch skewed in odd ways. And the tune was familiar. I realised with a shock dulled by the confusion around me that it was the Blue Danube.

"I'd wondered if you'd notice," said a voice. Hirht was watching me from the edge of that circle of clear floor that seemed to follow me around the room. Other Rris were gathered around him, gazing at me in fascination. "An... unusual sound to say the least," the king mused.

"It is a matter of personal taste, I think," I said carefully. Rris ears pricked up.

"As you said," another noble said to Hirht, "an [uncouth?] accent, but comprehensible. Mikah, was it?"

"A. That's about as close as anyone can get," Hirht smiled. "Khostyia, this is Mikah. Mikah, may I present Khostyia ah Myri."

"Sir," I bowed slightly, the facts ticking over in my head: Khostyia ah Myri,

king of Overburdened, the land to the North of Land-of-Water. Lighter Skies was the capital, an economy based around seaports on the coast and lumber on the lake networks.

“So, this is the one who’s been making the waves,” the Rris mused, staring at me as he stroked a fingerpad down the leather trim of his red velvet tunic. “He’s not quite what I was expecting. A kind of ape, I was told.”

I felt my jaw tighten. “Distantly related,” I said.

“Ah,” he mused and continued to scrutinize me while curious Rris milled around. “Most unusual, Hirht. And some of the other things I’ve heard about him?”

“Can be discussed later,” Hirht smiled.

“Of course.” His head bobbed, sending his cheek tufts and mane swaying. “So, why did you come here, Mikah?”

I shrugged. “I really have no idea. I don’t know why I’m here, I don’t know how I came here. I was... home, then I was here.”

“It was an accident?” Khostyia looked surprised.

“Yes.”

“Huhn. That’s common where you come from?”

“I’ve never heard of it happening before.”

The music changed and turned to something I’d never heard before; probably no human had ever heard it before. I assumed the off-key scales were real Rris music. I also realised it would take me some time to grow used to it, let alone appreciate it. I walked with the kings of Land-of-Water and Overburdened while they talked and asked me questions and a swarm of their aides and hangers-on and sycophants orbited around. I was startled to see a pair of Rris wearing breeches that looked familiar; right down to the stitching, the rivets and the leather patch over the back pocket. The nobles drifted through the crowd, towing me along with them as we talked. I answered the questions and the smalltalk for some time before Hirht told me that we’d talk later and gave me a duck of his head that seemed to say ‘behave’ as he and Khostyia left to circulate.

I stood there as they vanished into the knots of Rris who moved around to stare at me. When I did move there was an island of clear floor that followed me around the room. I wandered for a while, catching the occasional words from conversations going on around me: friendly talk, business talk, promises made and indignation over broken ones. Nothing I really understood. There was food on a table: a spread of all manners of delicacies from small pastries to drumsticks and fragile crystal glasses. I took one up and tried it: wine. I drank and grimaced at the tartness, the tang of spice, but it helped settle my stomach. I took another glass and headed toward the open doors to the outside.

Socializing guests were gathered in the sunshine on a marble verandah, drinking and talking. A sweeping staircase led down to calf-high golden grass rippling gently in the warm breeze under a clear sky, a few scattered guests sitting relaxing in the grass in a way that wouldn’t be seemly in a diplomatic

function back home. And as I was about to step through the doors someone said, “Sir,” and the haft of a halberd came down before me like the arm of a toll-booth.

“Apologies, sir,” the guard told me. “You can’t go out there.”

“What?” I asked stupidly.

The guard ducked its head, but the polearm didn’t waver. “I can’t let you go outside, sir.”

“Why?”

“Orders, sir.”

“Sir, it would be better if you didn’t,” one of my own guards told me. I looked around: all my own guards were a bit closer and I wondered again if they were there for my protection or as my leash. I sighed and flicked the wooden haft of the halberd with a finger. The guard snatched it back and looked annoyed and I just turned my back and headed back into the crowd.

Rris eyes watched me. Nobody I could recognize, not immediately. Eyes ran over me as Rris came close to stare then moved away again. As I headed back toward the food a Rris - female, by her hips - came a bit closer than others and I was startled by her facial fur: completely gone around her eyes, cheeks and nose baring the grayish skin in an unsettling parody of my own face. Shocking green

eyes met mine. She smiled and faded back into the crowd.

I blinked, did a doubletake, but she'd been lost in the swirl of bodies. What was...

"Unusual fashion, isn't it?" Kh'hitch ambled up to my side, a wine glass in his own hand. "Can't see the attraction in it myself."

"I don't think it would suit you," I assured him.

He looked at me, eyes narrowed, then he snorted. "I never had any intention of trying it." He dipped his head and his tongue flickered as he sipped from his glass, then regarded me thoughtfully. "How are you coping?"

Did he think I was going to go berserk? Run amok? "I will manage."

"Huhnn," his eyes flickered, glanced past me. I turned to meet more Rris nobility: the Cover-My-Tail ambassador Mrethi'k, his aides in attendance, and another elegantly attired female watching me with interest.

"Advisor," the Cover-My-Tail ambassador greeted Kh'hitch. Then, "Mikah."

"Ambassador," Kh'hitch greeted him, then turned to bow to the Rris at the ambassador's side. "Ma'am. It is a pleasure to be your host. Everything is to your satisfaction?"

“Quite. It’s been a long time since I’ve been to Shattered Water. I see there’ve been a few changes.” Disquieting amber eyes studied me intently, watching my face, “Not the least of which is this.”

“Mikah, Ma’am,” Kh’hitch provided.

“Huhn... Mikah. You do stand out in a crowd, don’t you. Is half of what I’ve been hearing about you true?”

“That would depend on what you’ve been hearing,” I said.

Her ears flicked back, “Well, that part at least is true. Not a Rris/ person. What was it that you’re called?”

“A human,” I said.

“That noise, yes.” The eyes wandered, unabashedly looking me up and down. Expensive clothes of fine white cotton and olive suede, with expensive metal in the jewelry threaded through her ears, on the circlets through the van-dyke brown fur of her arms. A silver-inlaid knife was sheathed at her left hip. One of the visiting monarchs I wondered? One of the trio of visiting lords was a female, so that was quite probable. The eyes noticed my glass. “You drink wine?” she seemed surprised.

“Only to excess.”

She looked a bit startled. “I think that was a joke, Lady H’risnth,” Kh’hitch provided. “He has an... unusual sense of humor.”

“I hadn’t expected him to have any at all,” she replied. Lady H’risnth... she was a monarch. The Queen of Cover-My-Tail I remembered. She was younger than I’d expected, younger than Hirht, even though I wasn’t sure exactly how old he was. Cover-My-Tail was a nation on friendly terms with Land-of-Water, but even so, Kh’hitch had his poker-face on again as Lady H’risnth studied me and cocked her head: “And I hadn’t expected him to be a [something].”

I blinked and looked to Kh’hitch, but he didn’t provide a translation.

“Is there any [something] you favor,” she was asking me.

“Ma’am? I’m sorry, I didn’t understand that word: chikeae’ch?”

“He hasn’t completely got his grip on our language,” Kh’hitch explained. “Mikah, chikeae’ch: it means someone who appreciates quality for what it is. Someone who enjoys the best of something. You understand that?”

“I think so. Connoisseur.”

“You know that kind of person?” the Lady asked, a touch of surprise widening her eyes.

“Yes. My kind has them too.”

“Ah,” She glanced at her ambassador. “And is there a particular wine you favor?”

It wasn’t what I’d expected: a day discussing Rris wines and vineyards... “I’m afraid I haven’t had much experience with your wines.”

“You like them? the one’s you’ve tried?”

I rolled my glass between my finger, the dregs swilling around. “Oh, yes. My kind don’t usually spice wine though.”

She was interested in that and for a while the conversation centered around wine-making: the methods and differences. No, I’m not a vintner, but I’d done some work - brochures and illustrations - for a vineyard out in the Finger Lake districts once and I’d learned a lot about their techniques. Not gospel for the entire industry, each winery has its own tricks and secrets, but it was enough to give me some insights into how the process worked.

I have to say I was actually beginning to enjoy myself. The Lady asked questions as they all did, but she did it in an easy, conversational sort of way. I found myself liking her as we walked and talked, ambling back to the table for a couple more glasses. Behind us my guards and H’risnth’s entourage tailed along, Kh’hitch engaged in a subdued exchange with the ambassador. We talked about wines, the differences in our tastes. She recommended some of the older

vintages from grape-growing regions of the Swampy River valley areas in Cover-My-Tail, even offered to have a few bottles sent over from the embassy.

“Most generous, but I think you might have to ask my hosts about that,” I said.

“Oh. They wouldn’t approve?”

I lightly dipped my finger in the remains of my wine and ran it around the rim of the glass. Several Rris turned their heads at the clear tone that produced. “I think they’re a bit... over-protective,” I said.

“Huhn...” she breathed, then stood a bit straighter with her ears going up as more Rris nobility materialized out of the throng. It was getting crowded in that crowd: I felt like a target with the arrows that were the nobles’ entourages centering on me. I recognized the Bluebetter ambassador among that pack of newcomers, so the larger Rris at his side would probably be Chita ah Thes’ita, king of Bluebetter.

Big guy for a Rris, probably wasn’t used to looking up at people. The top of his head came up to a bit above my chin, the tufts of his ring-bedecked ears another eight centimeters above that. His clothes were fine purple cotton and velvet, hanging loosely and more for decoration than practical reasons in the warmth. He gave me a once over with his head cocked, then spoke to Lady H’risnth, “Obviously, you’ve already met. Is this guest of the Water Landers everything I’ve heard?”

She smiled, “He seems quite civilized.”

Chita's ears twitched in a gesture that could be loosely construed as a raised eyebrow. "Huhn? Really?"

"Sir, this is Mikah. Mikah, this is his majesty Chita ah Thes'its. I'm sure your hosts have told you everything you ever wanted to know about his kingdom."

Maybe it was the wine, or perhaps just her laid-back manner. I wasn't thinking when I stepped forward and smiled broadly.

I saw the armed guards moving, just as blurs before it felt like I was hit by sandbags, the world spun and knocked the breath out of me and I don't remember the crack when the back of my head hit the floor.

Sprawled on my back on something hard. Noise all around, someone shouting my name. Something was shaking me and with each movement the pain in the back of my head set off surges of nausea. Opened my eyes to a blurred world of light and milling shapes.

"Sir!" Blinked and it was a cat in a tin helmet crouching over me. Blinked again and it was a Rris guard patting my face. The hand was yanked away when I moved my head and winced up at foreshortened circle of Rris hanging over me, Kh'hitch and other nobles staring down at me. The noise wasn't the blood in my head: there were raised voices in the background, arguments. "Sir?!" the Guard said again.

"I'm okay," I mumbled in English. "I'm all right." The world swam when I

sat up and the muttering went up a notch. I touched the back of my head and winced: a lump that felt like it was the size of a goose's egg and a trace of blood on my fingertips. There was shattered glass and spilt wine on the floor. All I'd done was smile...

"Can you walk?" Kh'hitch leaned over me, his face impassive.

"Yeah... Of course I can..."

I got partway up, then my legs decided to turn to jello. Kh'hitch snapped something to the guards, they crouched to catch my arms and helped me to my feet, then hooked my arms around their shoulders and tried to half-carry me out. I saw Hirht, the other monarchs watching me with wide eyes, hundreds of other Rris faces watching intently: whispering and murmuring. It was too humiliating: I shrugged the guards off and made my unsteady way to the doors.

—v—

"Pestilence take you! What were you thinking?!" Kh'hitch snarled in my face. "Showing your teeth to a lord like that... were you trying to get yourself killed? Maybe start a war? Of all the rot-brained things you could do!" He spat, a drop-jawed hissing in my face then spun to stalk off across my quarters, only to round on me again. "You've been warned about that. Many times, yet you still..." He just broke off and snarled again.

"It's not something I can help," I said quietly. My head was still throbbing, but nothing seemed broken. I couldn't feel anger. In fact, I wasn't feeling much of anything: just smiling, just that act could...

“Nothing you can help,” he rumbled, then exploded again: “What were you thinking?!”

“I was trying to be friendly.”

“Friendly!” Was there an echo in there? “By showing your teeth?”

“How else am I supposed to smile?” I asked dully.

“You...” he stopped and I saw his eyes flicker across my face, my ears. No, a Rris smile was impossible for me. “You can keep your teeth politely covered,” he finished.

After the reaming out, after Kh’hitch had stalked out and slammed the door behind him, I sat on the edge of my bed, put my pounding skull in my hands and squeezed my eyes tightly closed. I ached, the pulsing in my head mixed with nervous exhaustion. I sighed and looked around, to where the Rris on my walls were staring back, judging me.

“So, what do I do?” I asked.

They didn’t bother to reply. I rubbed my eyes. A bath; I needed a bath.

I started the water running and just stood there, staring at the broad stream of water as it fell on its journey from the sluice to the bottom of the tub. Swirling water, bubbles and undercurrents... Only when it started slopping into the overflow did I blink back to awareness and shut it off. Back in the other room I stripped off, left my clothes in an untidy pile on the floor and picked up the glass and pitcher of drinking water.

Not wine, but then I wasn't really tasting it much.

I sat in the bath for hours. Afternoon light coming in through the leaded glass of the small bathroom window made a tic-tac-toe pattern of shadows and sunlight on the pale cream wall, the brilliance hurting my eyes. I drank, sat with glass in hand and arm along the rim of the tub.

Just smiling. It almost got me killed. A gesture that my instincts told me meant friend, something I grown up knowing to be an innocent gesture, now it was hostility to souls that'd never known my learning.

A life of that. A life of wearing a mask to hide what I was. The rest of my life. A life of these rooms, this routine; Day in and day out. A life of things that wouldn't see me as a person. A life of those looks and those reactions. A life of guarding my every motion, my every expression and movement. The thoughts ran through my mind but never really hit anything. If the emotions were there they weren't firing, just hid in that empty place deep inside. Jackie? Where were you? What had I done to deserve this? If I could see your smile just once again...

Just a smile...

I never felt the glass when it shattered in my clenched fist. I didn't feel the cuts but when I looked at my hand there were dribbles of blood from the slash on my index finger, the other on my palm.

The sunlight was warm, bright.

The piece of glass was big enough to hold easily between thumb and forefinger, a curved piece with an edge that fuzzed out of vision.

“Chihirae, I'm so sorry...” just a whisper.

Sharp enough that it cut deep when I slashed hard across my left wrist. It hurt, a sudden and brief rage of pain up my arm that slowly faded to a dull pulsing in the warmth of the water. The shard of glass vanished into the depths of the bath: a final glitter spiraling and flipping down into the ribbons of pink, the cloud of red that spread and embraced me.

I watched the sunlight for a long time. So bright it brought tears to my eyes. Moving so slowly...

—v—

Noises. Stabs of pain across my shoulders as I was grabbed and lifted and dragged onto a cold surface turned slick by splashed water. I was muzzily aware of Rris guards frantically moving around me, the tiles of the bathroom floor smeared with red; soaked, as were their hands. I tried a vague movement but

they held me down and I felt a remote amusement at the fear in their eyes.

Something was around my arm, pulling tighter and tighter. The limb hurt for a while, then feeling ebbed to a wooden numbness. Again I tried to move. There were more voices. Bespattered guards, their polished armor no longer immaculate, held me still and I could feel their claws. More Rris, doing something with my arm and all the sensations seemed so remote, then hands sat me up suddenly and the world washed out of my vision.

Blinked...

Up at a ceiling moving past, a lurching motion. I couldn't move.

Another blank in my memories...

Up at a Rris holding me down, wide amber eyes staring into my own. There was pain in my arm, a Rris doing something with sharp metal and I tried to tell them to stop but staying awake was impossible, even with that roaring in my ears.

—v—

Bright light.

Autumn leaves crackled under my feet. Step by step.

The forest thinned, the farmyard opening out before me. Silent, motionless. Buildings loomed to either side, gray and dilapidated, with a dead and washed-out feel about them, the barn ahead of me. The doors were wooden slats, the grain bleached and warped by weather and time, the cracks between boards blacker than they had any right to be.

Another step and they swung open. The figure in the darkness: glaring eyes, jaw dropped in a snarl and the arm with the greenstone bracelet came up, the bore of the gun huge ...

No!

A flash of bright light.

A room I knew. I'd been through high school here. The scratched and peeling cream and white glossy paint on plastered walls. There were the desks in their rows, the high arched windows across the far side of the room, the cords hanging down from the smaller fanlights set above them that'd been painted closed years ago. One of the windows hung open, the sounds of children drifting up from the yard a floor below. Looking out I could see them, but they couldn't hear me, even when I shouted.

"Don't do anything foolish," said a voice. It was English, impossibly English, but I knew the voice.

She was out of place there, sitting at the teacher's desk in front of the

chalkboards. Fur glowed golden in the light, her head cocked slightly to one side. “Chihirae,” I said, not feeling surprise at the anachronisms.

Muscles shifted as she shrugged: a human shrug. “You keep surprising me. What were trying to do?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Want to what, Mikah? You promised.”

“I’m sorry,” said in a small voice.

She cocked her head. “It’s not going to be easy.”

I sat. That the chair and desk were too small for my frame didn’t seem to make any difference. There were words and shapes carved into the formica: things I couldn’t read, but I still knew what they were. “It isn’t fair.”

“That’s what you expect? Fairness?”

“I miss you.”

“Ah,” there was that look, that one I remembered so well. She was wearing

glasses now and her mouth was twisted in a smile impossible for Rris. “The world is there for you to make choices. I know you’ll have to make some hard ones.”

“You don’t have many choices,” Shyia said, his black coat a shadow moving across the room. The old door rattled as it closed behind him.

Jackie was watching me, her short hair hanging in artful disarray over one eye as she regarded me reproachfully. “Michael? Why did you leave?”

I wanted to cry. I tried to tell her, but she also got up and left.

Chihirae was polishing her spectacles, slowly and carefully. The metal and glass flashing as she turned them over in her hands. “It’s all right, Mikah. It’s only a dream.”

“I want to stay here.”

She looked slightly reproachful, as she had when I kept forgetting my grammar. “You know you can’t.”

“Chihirae...”

And the world blurred to a white light. She was still there, a shape moving in the dazzling brilliance.

“Mikah.” I was aware that hands were touching me, sheets bundled underneath me. Something brushed across my face and I cracked my eyes to bright light and silhouettes. A figure leaned over my bed. “I think he’s awake.”

“Mikah?” I recognized the Rris.

“No,” I tried to say.

“What? Can you hear me?” Hirht asked. “Mikah, what happened?”

I was tired, my left arm ached abominably. There were Rris surrounding me, looking down on me as I lay there. The king of Land-of-Water, doctors. Sun was streaming in through the windows, dust motes dancing and spiraling in the light that hurt my eyes. With effort I raised my left arm to see the splint and bandages swaddling my hand and wrist. White strips of gauze, pads of cotton and the faint dusting of sulfur.

I grabbed at them, trying to tear them away, trying to rip the sutures away, trying to escape.

Alien voices howled and hands grabbed me to pin me back to the bed. I screamed and tried to fight, crying in frustration while doctors frantically fussed around me, shouting noises that echoed through my head. Panting sobs, exhausted, my vision spinning and the room lost in the roaring noise and onrushing blackness.

—v—

They wouldn't let me go.

The doctors were always there, watching me every hour of the day. The straps were padded and quite secure; I only fought them for a short time before I learned it wasn't worth it. There wasn't any point: they couldn't stop me going back to that place inside where I didn't have to face this world. I could hide there, ignore the hell that life had become. I could see Jackie again, people I'd lost.

Why go on? Why go back? Something inside me knew what would be waiting and that spark just didn't rekindle. I knew I was dying, and I just didn't care.

I didn't eat, refused all food; fought when they tried to force it into me. I guess they managed enough to keep my body going, but I know I had no wish to continue.

It's that wish that makes life possible. Without it... I lay still while all around the transient Ris came and went, watching the light come and go and waiting for it to fade one last time.

—v—

Opened my eyes and there was something different. Different enough to draw

a flicker of interest.

I lay still for a while, just trying to figure out what it was. The light, the way the shadows were moving.

A breeze blowing through the room, cool against my bare skin and hot sheets.

My neck ached when I lolled my head around. Sunlight was streaming in through the open windows, the curtains dancing and fluttering in the cooling breeze that brought with it the scents of water and trees and dusty grass. I could hear faint sounds of Rris, but louder were the rustlings of wind in branches, cicadas and birdsong.

The windows were open? Where were the bars? My dull confusion was compounded when I realised the straps were gone. I was lying on my bed, a light cotton sheet draped over my hips and legs. I raised the dead weight of my arms, the mitten of gauze and cotton on my left hand and wrist.

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t try that,” a voice said. “I don’t particularly want to die.”

A strange Rris was settled in the sunlight washing over the desk, relaxed in the cushion and watching me with lazy eyes. I stared and lowered my hands: something in the Rris’s words didn’t ring right.

The Rris watched me quietly, calmly.

“You... don’t want to die?” My throat hurt, my voice rasped and my Rris sounded worse than ever.

“Ah,” an ear flickered and the Rris waved a hand: a languid and flowing gesture. “You die, I die. Do you want a drink?”

“Drink,” I blinked in confusion, trying to think things through as the Rris stood and fetched a glass, filled it with water from a pitcher. It... she, I saw when she turned my way, a pair of loose-fitting breeches belted low at her waist. “What... what you mean?”

The mattress shifted when she sat, scooting up beside me. I dully realised I was naked and she was a stranger and I really didn’t care. “Here, can you sit up... ah.” A furry arm went under my head to help hold me up. I gasped at aches and stiff muscles and she stopped, just holding me, then slowly raising the glass. “Here, it’ll help. Just slowly, just a sip.”

I was running on automatic, just doing as she suggested, and the water was good on my parched lips.

“Well, Mikah,” she said when she took the glass away, “If you die, then I will be killed.”

“I don’t understand,” I said in a small voice.

She looked down at me and smiled slightly, then lifted the glass and I drank again. “It was their terms for letting me talk with you.”

“Who... are you?”

“You don’t remember?” Her breath gusted and she started to wave a hand in an aborted gesture, brought it back to tap on the rim of the glass. “You weren’t in such good shape that night, either. You’d just been swimming in the river.”

I remembered, dredging through the murk for the nuggets of memory: the grey and tawny fur, the face sitting across the table from me, those same eyes glancing up from their work to study me. “Maytris?” I ventured.

“Huhn. Close,” her ears twitched. “Maithris.”

And I stared. “Why’re you here?”

She let me lie back and glanced down at the glass cupped in her hands, the fur of her fingers matted down by the condensation beading on the outside, then smiled. “I heard you weren’t so well. I came to see how you’re doing. You’ve got a nice place here, you know.” She looked around. “Just one thing I’ve been wondering about though.”

I bit. “What?”

She gestured at the paintings staring down from the wall, “Who are they?”

Who... I blinked stupidly at her. “I don’t know.”

“Oh,” she cocked her head thoughtfully. “There might be some interesting stories behind them. That fellow, he might be related to the Liaison, you know:” she poked her flat belly and patted it. “Same build, huhn?”

I found myself smiling at that, and her ears twitched, then she reached over and without a qualm gently ruffled my hair. “Might be interesting to find out, huh?”

—v—

What the hell was going on?

I gingerly sat down in the window alcove seat, panting hard and lightheaded from my short journey across the room. The bars had gone, the cool morning breeze coming in through the open windows and brushing across the hairs on my skin made the effort worth it. No sun yet: my room wouldn’t get that until the afternoon, but I settled, let the sheet drop down from my shoulder and leaned back to stared into the crystal blue of a June sky while the stridulation of cicadas in the palace grounds was carried on the wind. My wrist ached distantly as I cradled the bandages and splints on my lap: less than nothing compared with other pain I’d been through.

Maithris. What was she doing here? From what I'd gathered she was a not-too-well-off everyday town doctor who couldn't afford gauze bandages. The king of Land-of-Water had the pick of the cream of the crop; he could choose from the best, so why use her? Had she been responsible for getting rid of the restraints? Getting the bars removed from my windows? How had she got the leverage to arrange that?

A scratching at the door and a polite pause before it opened. Maithris, trying to balance a covered tray on one hand and close the door with the other. "Morning and waking," she greeted me cheerily. I watched quietly, warily, while she set the tray down on the desk, then squatted with her hands dangling between her knees and smiled at me. "Ah, walking around already? A pleasant day, isn't it?"

"Who are you?" I whispered.

She looked a bit taken aback. "Mikah? I'm Maithris. You remember? You asked yesterday..."

"No." I shook my head slowly. "No. They value me too much. They've never let me speak to anyone. I've been kept behind guards and soldiers and walls and bars." I looked back at the open windows. "How can you change it like that? Who are you."

She tipped her head quizzically. "I'm just a doctor. I heard you were ill; I offered to help."

"Why?"

Her ears flickered and she smiled again. "I like you."

My turn to be taken aback. I stared, then said, "Maithris. When Rris see me, they don't like me. I can see the thoughts when they first lay eyes on me, and those thoughts aren't nice ones."

Now she leaned forward a bit. "I didn't just see you, I talked to you. I saw you after you'd saved that guard's life; a life which by all rights he should have given to save YOU. I've heard some of your story, of what's happened to you and I know that somewhere there's a woman who's come to see you for what you really are. You may not be my mind's ideal picture of the handsome male in my life, but that skull of yours harbors something more than an animal's mind. Besides, you have quite beautiful fur. Now, maybe you feel like some food?" With a flourish she lifted the cover from the tray.

I was floundering, not sure what to say now. She came over to sit beside me on the window seat and persuaded me to try a bit of this, some of that: soup, some light meat pastries. I'd eaten them before I knew what I was doing.

"You do have some appetite," she observed, a flicker of amusement touching her face and ears. Then she stood to set the dish with its few remaining crumbs back on the tray. "Pretty good fare you're getting here. It's to your liking?"

"Yes," I said and looked out the window, then glanced back at her. "How did you hear about... me? I mean, I'm sure Hirht didn't spread it all over town."

She snorted. “They came to me. I think they were desperate. I already knew about you, so there wasn’t much to lose, was there?”

I made a small sound of affirmation and she scratched her chin, then smiled. “Well, why don’t you get some rest, ah?”

Probably good advice. While she picked up the remains of the meal I leaned back, just listening to the sounds of the world outside. I only intended to close my eyes for a second.

Someone woke me.

A Rris hand gently touched me, just enough to wake me into muzzy consciousness. The light was low, late-afternoon gold on the trees and washing in through the windows; warm against my skin while the air was cooling. I was aware, made a feeble grab for the sheet and missed, when furry bodies took my arms and half-carried me back to bed.

—v—

Faces surrounding. A glittering of breath in the darkness; rushing of light through trees while masks and masquerades whirled around and around; the dazzling of sun and snow, whiteness and the trees was the glitter and diamond light of a ballroom. Grotequeries whirled, pirouetted, drifting laughter hidden behind masks of silver and platinum. Darker shapes moved behind the scenes: wolf-lean flashes of soul black among pristine brilliance, the terror that kept me moving while figures danced and drifted around me, hemming, herding. Darkness flitted, orbiting at the edges of vision. Laughter rose and the lean

predator shape erupted from the brilliance, gaping maw darker than coal and swallowing the world, ivory fangs raking and biting deep...

Yanking me from sleep screaming and clawing at the ache deep in the muscle of my ruined cheek. Stabs of pain spasming my face up into a rictus of pain and terror while the memories of snarling hatred sank back to the depths and hands caught me, pressing my hands down, protecting the bandages. “Mikah! It was a dream. Mikah? It’s all right... It’s all right...”

A hand stroked my hair and the voice murmured reassurances. In the darkness and confusion I just clutched, feeling fur under my hands. A movement, then arms went around me and held me close, in familiar warmth.

“Chihirae,” I choked.

Sharp claws stroked through my hair and a low voice purred something incomprehensible. I just held on and shook, until there was nothing left and sleep came again to wrap dark wings around me.

—v—

Woke with a start in a tangle of sheets.

Morning light was seeping past the drapes. The still feeling of early morning: a coolness in the air, a taste of green. I was alone in the room, but I distinctly remembered...

A hasty check of the sheets brought up a few tufts of light tawny fur. I held the strands up, then shook my head, sighed and rubbed my eyes. So, there had been someone there last night. Who? The guards had grown accustomed to my nightmares; they didn't always come running when I woke in the night. They certainly didn't climb into bed to hold me until I calmed.

The dizziness wasn't as bad when I stood this time. I still had to briefly lay a hand against the wall to steady myself, but the room didn't reel as badly as it had the last times I'd roused myself. I fumbled for shorts and found them where I usually kept them in the drawer under the bed. Getting into them wasn't easy, but after a couple of teetering attempts I managed it.

Beyond the curtains and the windows it was another crystal morning. A thin curtain of mist was burning from the fields and around the trees in the palace grounds. A V of geese crossed the sky, then another, and another... Thousands of them in an airborne caravan that couldn't have existed back home. I could have joined them, opened the windows and gone.

Gone into a world where I was the only one of my kind. I'd simply be escaping from one cage to a much larger one. But outside there was room to run. There were those hills and forests that stretched as far as the eyes could see; lands where a single person could loose themselves completely and utterly.

A land where the inhabitants would do their utmost to find me again. I remembered and shuddered... flashbacks to the nightmares that still plagued me: being hunted by Rris; it wasn't an experience I wanted to repeat.

I pushed away from the open window, went to use the toilet. The bathroom

had been cleaned up; there was no way to tell what had happened there. I stood for a few seconds, staring at the tub, then went about my business.

When I came out Maithris was sitting on the bed, waiting with a covered breakfast tray on the sheets beside her. The expression on her face flickered and settled into a smile almost immediately, but I was sure there'd been something else there.

"Morning and waking," she cheerfully greeted me. "I didn't expect you to be up and about so early."

"I didn't much feel like sleeping."

"Ah. You had a restless night."

She knew? I stared, then looked away: embarrassed. "That was you? I mean, last night."

"A." She didn't take her eyes off me.

"Oh," I shifted awkwardly, clenched and unclenched my fingers. Grabbing out in the dark like that, desperate for someone to hold to... What had I been thinking? What was she thinking? "I'm sorry. I didn't know... I thought..."

Her ears twitched. "Don't worry. I know. You needed it."

Still, I sagged. She'd held me, comforted me... "Thank you," I whispered.

Maithris raised a hand, "Don't. You needed it." She smiled and hooked a finger under the handle of the silver tray cover. "As you need this. Try the quail pastries: they're excellent."

I carefully sat beside her and she laughed when I awkwardly glanced at her. "Go on. And afterwards, if you're feeling up to it, I've got something to show you. No, I'm not telling you now, just finish that."

Curiosity got the better of me.

Maithris watched while I ate. Sitting there with one leg up, hugging knee to chest. Calm. Relaxed, and as best I could tell it wasn't an act. Her tail was still as a piece of hairy rope, her ears lazily twitching at odd sounds. I couldn't figure her.

Later, she offered to help me dress. I shrugged her off and she just stepped back, took a seat and watched me. When I put my boots on she had to ask, "Why do you need those?"

"I don't have pads like you do."

"Ah. Your kind have always worn things like that? I mean, what do you do if there just aren't any?"

“The bottom of my feet can get tougher. Like your pads. But it takes a while and is quite uncomfortable.”

“Ah.”

I tightened the laces. A wave of giddiness spun the room when I sat up again and when it settled again Maithris was on her feet, “I’m okay,” I held out my hand to ward her off. “I’m fine.”

She stopped, but still looked concerned. “You’re sure? You... your skin is pale.”

“I’m sure. Just sat up too fast. I’m fine.”

For a few seconds she studied my face, then ducked her head. “If you say so. Now, you feel like a walk?”

She held the door open for me. Outside, nothing had changed: there were four guards on duty in the hall, standing at attention with armor and accoutrements polished to a mirror finish. Maithris strolled beside me as we started off, just ambling and we were a few steps down the hall before I realised the guards weren’t following.

“Why should they?” Maithris said offhandedly. ” It’s not as if you were going for a stroll in the Cracks with a sack of gold. The Palace is full of soldiers after

all.”

A doctor? A doctor who could rescind Royal Guards’ orders? I didn’t understand.

But it was a change to be able to walk without a retinue, a change to be able to set my own pace. Maithris didn’t rush anywhere, just strolled at my side and gave me time to look out the windows, have a closer look at some of the furnishings and decorations. Some of the carvings were beautiful, the wooden sculptures done with a finesse and sensitivity toward the wood grain that made figurines of Rris come to life, eagles soar. Others were... odd. Maybe abstract lines that might have been pleasing to Rris eyes, but weren’t very appealing to mine. Or maybe they were meant to come across as harsh and discordant.

Maithris and I took our time, wandering through halls and chambers trimmed with gold leaf, floored with veined marble. Rooms with velvet carpets and drapes, handcarved panelling and scotia. Nobles and legions of servants, the occasional guard went about their business. When a young Rris passed us going the other way, brushing the wall as it detoured widely, I could hear claws spattering on the marble.

“You have places like this where you come from?” Maithris asked me.

“Like this?” I ventured, not quite sure what she meant.

“Here,” her hands closed in a gesture embracing our surroundings: “The Palace.”

“Not palaces. Not in my country. We’ve never had monarchs.”

“What?”

I looked up a wooden bas-relief carving depicting a group of Rris standing in a river with nets in their hands. “My country is quite young compared with others. We use a... different system of government. Older lands have had them; some still have them. They have palaces like this.”

“Ah,” she breathed, as if that explained everything. If she had more questions she kept them to herself.

We were on the second floor in the outer northern wing of the palace when we reached a closed door: a ceiling-high narrow thing of paneled wood with a carved strip across it at what be average eye-height for a Rris: tiny engravings of Rris felling trees, dragging logs, shearing animals, mining, going on to Rris in workshops and at workbenches, grinding and mixing. The final panel was a larger Rris at an easel. Maithris laid her paw on the handle and said, “I just thought this might be of interest to you.”

The door opened on a long hall. Two stories high, with a balustraded gallery overlooking the floor we were on. High above, the ceiling was peaked. Skylights threw wells of illumination down through the still air into the hall, spotlighting the black and white tiled floor. Paintings hung from the walls on both sides of the hall; hundreds of them framing the silence.

My boots were almost inaudible on the tiles when I went in. Maithris followed with the insect-like tik-tik of partially retracted claws on ceramic.

Old pictures, I was sure of that. Maybe not as old as they seemed: the atmosphere in that hall wouldn't have helped their aging any, but they still had a history. I looked up at a dark portrait, a female(?) in a cuirass, helmet held before her. A scar bisected her muzzle, in the background a bloody sun was setting over a city. Shattered Water?

"The Royal Gallery," Maithris said, her voice awakening weird echoes in the hall. "I thought you might be interested."

The brushstrokes were unusual. Again I was reminded of a Degas: a short-sighted artist translating what he saw to the canvas. No... not short sighted, just seeing things another way. There was a small landscape painting: a small white farmhouse among rolling fields while above purple and black stormclouds climbed into the sky. Like the others the focus was sharpest on foreground objects and blurred out on more distant objects. It enhanced the feeling of depth in the picture, but they lacked the detail I might have expected in similar human works. And it wasn't just a particular style an artist might have been experimenting with, they were all like that.

"I am," I murmured. "I am. God! How old are these? Who painted them? This one, what... what is used to paint it, what kind of paints..."

"Hold on, hold on," she hissed, raising a hand. "I don't know that much about these."

No. She wouldn't. She was a doctor. In this culture people probably didn't get much exposure to fields outside their own specialty. I mean, where was she going to see a documentary about local artists? Did they have newspapers? Magazines? I didn't know. So, I just nodded, moved on to a picture of a Rris frozen in the act of leaping. More detailed than others? It seemed to be a bit sharper.

"What do you think?" she asked and there was anxiety in the question.

"I... I don't know." I reached out, almost touched the cracked varnish of the frame. "Maithris, these have been made by Rris for Rris. I find them intriguing. They show me how you see things."

She studied the next painting with me, "You mean, you see things differently? How?"

"I think I see small detail and color better. Also things that are still and further away."

"Huhn," she glanced at me, seeming a bit affronted. "You think so?"

"I think so." I almost smiled. "But your kind has better hearing and compared with you, I have no sense of smell."

Maithris snorted, glanced at me before she chittered a small laugh.

We spent the better part of two hours there. I had inspiration for some pictures I'd like to work on. Sometime, when I had the time and materials. Maybe I could try emulating the Rris style, but shifting the palette further back to human norm. If I abstracted the image a little it would produce an effect quite similar to earlier impressionist works. I didn't put up an argument when Maithris suggested we head back. I would've liked to see more, but I was very tired. I guess I still wasn't in the best shape.

That night I dreamed the sky was red and long-dead Rris from paintings were gathered around me, a crowd in a multitude of clothing styles, fur decorations. Their voices were a low sibilance that carried through the sky. I half woke, turned over and the voices were gone.

—v—

Nobody woke me before the sun was up. I wasn't bounced from place to place around town. I wasn't poked and prodded like something under a magnifying glass. I didn't spend days being questioned about a piece of machinery.

I didn't know what to make of it.

They left me alone, giving me time to think and try and get my life together. Maithris visited a couple of times a day. Other Rris let me be. I didn't see Kh'hitch or Hirht. There weren't any doctors or scholars, just a solitude that I knew was probably enforced, but it was still a welcome oasis. I found the time to pick up a pencil and for the first time in a long while used it to sketch something besides machine parts: the view from my window. Nothing spectacular, but it was therapeutic and gave me something to occupy my hands.

Why were they doing this? Fear, probably. They were scared of me trying to kill myself again.

Why didn't I?

Again, I didn't know. I could try, I guess. Rip out the sutures, hang myself, dive headfirst through the window... They might stop me; then again, I might succeed. But somehow that urge was gone, either the desolation inside had dimmed or something else had taken its place. And now... I started to think about more positive steps I could take.

Perhaps I could bargain my way. Exchange what I knew for... for what? My freedom? It wasn't like I could just walk out onto the street and start up my life again. A home somewhere? And I had to laugh to myself at that thought, picturing a suburban house in the middle of Shattered Water. No, that wouldn't be very practical. Perhaps Maithris would have some ideas. I'd have to ask her.

Meanwhile, she was company. Openly talkative and tolerant and friendly. She brought me food, a variety of safe dishes and delicacies I'd never tasted before. She made jokes and laughed at my bumbling attempts at Rris humor. I wasn't sure if she was amused at the jokes themselves or just my efforts. Friendly, yes, but I knew it wasn't completely sincere. How much of that was an act for my benefit? I wasn't sure, but there were the times I caught that furtive look. A sidelong glance, maybe a flinch when I made a sudden move or grinned too broadly. A quick lapse in her guard, just as quickly masked by bravado and cheer.

But she was trying; she was doing her best. For that I liked her.

“That’s one I haven’t seen. Those are words, aren’t they?” Maithris asked, squinting at my T-shirt as we walked. “What do they say?”

I pulled the bottom of the shirt to tent it out and looked down at the lettering and cartoon, “Ah, ‘Rebonk, Stay Hard’. I don’t think your language can say it.”

She waved a hand as we passed then asked, “What does it mean?”

“It is a... a pun. A joke. It takes a familiar saying and makes it into a sexual joke.”

“A joke about sex?” She looked puzzled, then interested: “What is it?”

I sighed and tucked the shirt in again. “Maithris, it really doesn’t come across into your language.”

“Oh,” and damn me if she didn’t look disappointed. I almost laughed. “Then maybe you could teach me your language?” she said.

“I’m still learning to speak yours’.”

“Ah, there is always later,” she smiled as we stepped into another hall. The doors at the far end were open, beyond them the palace grounds. I hesitated.

“Maithris? Where are we going?”

She smiled, a sort of innocent ‘what, me?’ expression, “Huhn? I thought you might enjoy a walk outside.”

I blinked. “Outside? But... can I... I thought I wasn’t permitted out there.”

A violent snort. “Huhn, that was clutching foolishness. The palace is fenced and there are guards. Come on.”

The guards at the door watched as we passed but didn’t make any move to stop us. Outside, there were a few unimpressive clouds seeming lost in the vault of the sky. The wind stirring the treetops and rippling the grass in the fields around the Palace was warm, not doing much to take the heat out of the afternoon. Small birds darted and swooped over the meadows, picking tiny insects out of the air. I could taste dust and greenery as we stepped out onto a path of neatly trimmed grass, crossed that to the calf-high unrestrained glory of the meadow. Dirt crunched under my boots, grass brushed against my legs.

Maithris walked beside me, her fur rippling in the wind like the grass of the field we were walking through. Her breeches were knee-long, green, trimmed with bands of decorated leather around the cuffs, waist, and seams and a small leather pouch bounced at her belt. I could hear her panting slightly and stalks rustled against her legs as she moved in that fluid, stalking gait. I noticed burrs sticking into her fur.

“What?” She asked me curiously and I realised I’d been staring.

“Strange legs,” I said.

“You think so?” She glanced pointedly down at my own legs. First time I’d worn shorts in a while and the differences were - so to speak - glaringly obvious.

I grinned. Point taken. “So, do you have a destination in mind, or is this just a walk?”

“Ah, keep a grip on that patience,” she smiled. “We have a destination.”

“In here?” I raised an eyebrow as we entered the edge of the forest. Cooler after that walk across the Palace garden, the sunlight diffused by the canopy overhead. And it was beautiful there under the trees: Thousands of shifting points of light worked their way through, motes and insects flickering in the beams.

There was a path, of sorts. A track of packed earth, moss and smooth stone cut through the undergrowth, following a winding path through the trees and bracken. Leaves crackled under my boots: Maithris’ pads were almost silent as we climbed a low knoll. At the top I hesitated to look back: the green-copper roof of the palace was just visible through the trees, not so unlike so many buildings back home. Everywhere else was trees. Last time I’d gone wandering off had been with the cubs back in Westwater and I’d been...

I shuddered and behind me Maithris asked, “Mikah? Something wrong?”

I sighed and shook my head. “No. Nothing. Come on, where are we going?”

She fleered black lips back from sharp teeth and I flinched before I realised she was trying to copy one of my smiles. “Ah. Not yet. It’s not far, just down here I think.”

She set off again and I followed her. The moss-covered stones on the downslope were a bit slippery, making me watch where I put my feet. “You don’t know?”

“Hai, they don’t let commoners just walk around the Palace grounds you know,” she said, brushing a fern frond aside as she rounded the trunk of a gnarled old tree. “This is first time for me also.”

“Great,” I said as I followed her. “The inexperienced leading the incapable, a?”

And she chattered outright at that, a real laugh. “Now, where did you hear that?”

“It’s similar to a saying my kind have. Doesn’t quite sound the same in your words though. What exactly is ‘it’?”

“The Living Hall,” she said, climbing a convoluted root growing across the path. “This.”

I’d been expecting a building. I didn’t see one.

It wasn’t bright in the clearing. Branches from trees on either side laced in the center, the canopy fracturing the sunlight into a shifting myriad of sunbeams. An oddly geometric clearing that reminded me of a church knave. The ground was covered with short, verdant grass. Among that, moss-covered rock sprouted: weather-rounded granite bedrock, flat prominences of it producing terraces and steps and a feeling like I was looking at something grown. Twisted roots the size of my arm curled and spread like a natural net, tendrils poking down through split stone. A stream bisected the clearing, the sound of running water drawing my attention to the sparkle of sunlight on water. Maithris stepped up upon a natural stone dais, then raised her arms and turned a full circle. “Well?”

I blinked as my eyes adjusted. “Jesus,” I whispered.

The trees around the clearing hadn’t been left to grow by themselves. Branches and trunks were bent and twisted, entwining with their neighbors, lacing and looping and wrapping around one another. Above my head, branches were growing together to produce the unmistakable outline of a Rris torso, branches replacing the legs. All around the clearing they started to stand out from the background, like Escher pictures where you focus on a pattern of birds then realize the negative spaces are fish. The clearing was a hall, a living hall. Sculptured trees for walls, for columns and arches, loosely knitted thatches admitting light like windows.

Even more impressive were the sculptures. I saw stylized Rris, birds and animals. An eagle with skeletal wings of bare twigs, a stag's head and rack staring back down without eyes, a pair of Rris locked in an embrace... Not carved, but made by persuading the trees to grow the way the artists wanted.

I say artists, because... that's what it was; Art.

"Your kind has this?" she asked.

"This..." I shook my head. "This kind of art is... known. But nothing like this."

"A? Why are you whispering?"

Would you yodel in a cathedral? I mean, it was that kind of feeling. "Sorry," I said at a more reasonable volume and grinned sheepishly. "Is there a purpose to this place? Or is it just art?"

She gave me a curious look, then waved a shrug. "It's art, I think. The place is old, very old. I think some of these trees have been [trained] for nearly five hundred years."

"The palace isn't that old?"

"No. You'd have to ask an historian how old the palace is, but this goes back

to times before the palace, when Shattered Water was a walled port. The tale says that Kathrik was a craftsman out here. He and his mate Chita had stayed together for over ten years. She was sterile, unable to bear cubs, but he still stayed with her. So of course both of them were considered quite odd. It's said that when she was killed by a bear he changed, withdrawing to his homestead. When he died the land was parceled and the townsfolk found this." She wagged a hand and smiled.

"Smaller of course, but those," she pointed at a grove of old trees down the far end of the glade, "are the original pieces. Kathrik and Chita."

The trees had grown, distorting the figures somewhat, but the shapes were still there: a pair of Rris standing, limbs entwined, bodies merging where the branches of the tree were melding. Maithris cocked her head, then chittered, "Those old ones would be shocked to see they're still together. They left their mark, no matter what some [somethings] might think." She sat herself down on a mossy rock and leaned back.

"Since then the Hall has become something of a landmark. The Palace [something] and sculptors do their work, so it grows, changes."

"It's beautiful," I said softly, quite truthfully as I sat myself down beside her. I glanced at her. "Maithris? Why is a couple living together considered strange?"

"Huhn? Why, it's just not... usual. I mean, people might stay for a while, to have cubs or somesuch, but why should they stay? There's no..." she trailed off and turned to me. "Ah, your kind does?"

I nodded.

“That means ‘yes’, doesn’t it. You mean you choose one mate and stay with them? Like swans?”

“Mostly.”

“Mostly?”

I sighed. “Maithris, one thing you can certainly say for my kind is that there are no certainties. If one thing is true, then the opposite can also be true. We are quite... what is the word? Spread-out... varied?”

”[diverse]?”

“Diverse. A. Thank you. In my country it’s considered normal to have one mate for life. It’s also considered normal to have different mates over a lifetime. It’s against the law to be officially mated to more than one at any time. In other countries it’s a sign of... wealth for a male to have many females.”

And she gave me a look, confusion etched across her face. “Laws can change in countries here also, but that... how can anybody live in peace in a world like that.”

“Who says we live in peace?” I shrugged. “We fight and squabble.”

“A lot like Rris,” she said. “You’re not so different.”

“That is news to me.”

She chittered and rocked back, tilting her face to the light filtering through the canopy: it dappled her fur with bright speckles, a sunspot flicking across her eyes pushed her pupils down to narrow black slits in amber. I settled back as well. The moss wasn’t damp, was soft enough to lie back on while watching branches overhead swaying and a few wisps of high cloud passing beyond them. Quiet. Just the wind and water, a few birds and insects. Warm enough, even under the boughs woven into shapes and patterns that caught the eyes and led them into deeper and deeper geometries, into shadows where odd silhouettes played. A squirrel dashed across a branch, leapt to another limb and scrambled up a tree: a blurred stop-and-start spiral up the trunk with the sound of claws scritch on bark. I just closed my eyes...

... and a hand was shaking my shoulder. I woke with a start, my heart racing as I sat bolt upright and the Rris standing over me fell back a step. “Huh? What?”

“Mikah?” Maithris cocked her head. “It’s all right. It’s just time we started heading back.”

“What?” I looked around. The light had changed, the shadows longer and the air cooler. My back was damp from the moss and my watch said four hours had passed.

“I didn’t want to wake you,” Maithris told me. “I think the rest is doing you good. But you must be hungry?” My stomach answered for me and she glanced at my belly, an amused expression on her face. “I thought so. Come on.”

She offered her hand and I stared at it for a second before taking it. Not something I’d done very often and the appendage felt weird in my hand, the bones in the wrong place, not a very strong grip. “Huhn,” she coughed as she helped me to my feet, “Heavier than you look. A good sign, a?”

She stayed by my side as we left that strange grotto. At the treeline she paused by a leaning bole, raised her hands with fingers splayed and slowly, almost luxuriously dragged her claws down the bark. Pale scratches appeared in the bark, fresh among a multitude of older ones.

“Mai? Should you be doing that?”

She brushed her hands off as she rejoined me, “Don’t worry. It’s traditional for visitors to do that.”

Ah. A sort of guest book. I looked back at the tree: the trunk was so scored with scratches around its circumference that it was a wonder the thing was still alive.

Maithris suddenly frowned, her muzzled wrinkled as if she were mulling something over. “What did you call me?” she asked.

“Hmmm? Oh, sorry,” I gave her a small smile. “Maithris.”

“Ah,” she chittered. “You have trouble saying my name?”

“No. I just... I’m sorry. I offended you?”

“No, I was just curious why you called me that.”

“I suppose my kind has a habit of shortening names. It is a term of... of familiarity.”

“Ah,” she looked gravely serious. “Then we are in a state of familiarity?”

I didn’t know how to answer that and her expression fractured into laughter, chittering at the sky.

—v—

Maithris sat in the window niche, her feet tucked up in a tailor’s squat up as she watched me eat my breakfast. She was wearing a kilt that morning, a wrap of heavy pleated material belted at her waist and colored in a green and brown tie-dyed pattern. It bared her chest and the lighter fur peppered with black running down her front. I noticed her tail protruding down alongside her right leg, the tip flicking back and forth. She had something on her mind.

I finished my piece of smoked turkey, and toyed with another slice before asking, “You’re worried about something?” When she gave me a questioning look I nodded pointedly at her tail.

“Ah,” she whipped the appendage around and caught it in her hands, then began preening the white tuft at the tip. “In some ways you’re fortunate not to have a thing like this chasing you. Seems to do what it wants most of the time.”

I smiled slightly. “That’s what you’re worried about?”

Maithris cocked her head. “No. It’s nothing, really. I... ” The scratching at the door interrupted her. She glanced at the door behind me, then at me. “You’re going to let him in?” she asked.

Him? I hesitated before twisting around and calling, “Come in.”

Hirht hadn’t changed. Was I expecting him to have? It’d been three weeks, not such a long time really. The king was alone when he stepped into the room, then almost as an afterthought closed the door behind him and approached me. Stopped. Standing a few meters away, just watching me. That poker face again, restrained courtesy as he ducked his head. “Mikah,” he rumbled.

And I couldn’t meet his eyes. “Sir. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he sighed and seemed to sag a little. “Please. I didn’t come

hunting after your apologies. I just wanted to know if you're all right."

I realised I was clutching at the edge of the desk, my knuckles white. I took a breath, forced myself to relax, but the knot in my guts persisted. "I... I am fine. Thank you, Sir."

"Good to hear." Hirht shifted, glanced past me at Maithris and back to me again. "Mikah... Hai. We haven't been very thoughtful hosts. If there are any apologies to be made, they are ours. You have them."

"Sir, that's not necessary..."

"I think it is. Nobody wants to hurt you, but we had no idea what was happening. If you need anything..." he broke off, his eyes flickered to something beyond me and he sighed and made a small gesture with his hand. "Mikah, just so you know. This time is yours. Anything you want, please ask."

I closed my eyes and swallowed. "Thank you, Sir."

The Rris king ducked his head to me, "Mikah." He turned at Maithris and there was a flicker of an emotion there when he bade her, "Until later, Doctor."

"Sire," she inclined her head slightly, but her ears were trembling. As if she were keeping them up with an effort. And when he'd left she did lay them back, then shook her head violently and raked her mane back into shape with her claws.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she said. “He’s just a very stubborn person.”

“What does that mean?”

Maithris screwed up her muzzle. “It means he doesn’t like doing what other people want him to do. It can make things awkward.”

“You mean like persuading him to give you free run around the Palace?”

She smiled: “Among other things, a.”

I also flashed a lopsided smile and picked a pastry off the silver platter, examined it carefully. I’d already learned my lesson about biting into unfamiliar Rris food: not only do they prefer a lot of their meats raw, but they consider a great deal more of the animals edible than we do. A Rris might be capable of ripping off and swallowing chunks of muscle, but if I tried something like that I’d probably choke. This pasty seemed to be safe, some kind of fish pate inside. Strong flavor, but quite palatable. I took a bite, then looked at Maithris and raised my eyebrows. “He was serious about anything I want?”

“I believe so. You have something in mind?”

I had wondered how far I could push it this first time. Not too much, I decided. “I’d like to see more of the gardens.”

“I think that can be arranged,” she said.

—v—

I suppose one could have been forgiven for thinking it was an untouched wilderness. Acre upon acre of rolling verdant forest and woodland; centuries-old pines and oaks, birches and elms towering and spreading their canopies over a lush undergrowth of bracken and ferns. The clearings were naturally rugged, filled with uncropped grasses and scattered rocks, the summer air filled with specks of sunwarmed dust and insects, the smells of hay and greenery. But under those trees were paths, occasional shelters where users of the park could find refuge from the weather, sculptures and other signs that this area was inhabited. I saw a lodge nestled in amongst the trees: a wood and stone building with slate roof and glazed windows. A place where high-ranking Rris nobility could rough it Maithris told me as we wandered west through the Palace grounds.

We talked as we walked, just idle chatter. I asked her a few questions about herself. She’d been born the daughter of the mayor of a small town along the southern borders, months away ride from Shattered Water. She’d studied under the town physician, then her father paid for her to study under a master in Shattered Water. She’d been apprenticed to a physician in the south-eastern quarter for seven years and now...

“Not like this,” she smiled - ruefully, if I was judging correctly. “Poorer. Crowded. Cold and hungry a lot. I wanted to get out of there quickly. I didn’t have much money; I had some ideas but...” she trailed off and waved a shrug.

“What?” I pressed.

“Oh, they weren’t taken very seriously.” She hissed slightly, then raked fingers through her mane and smiled: “What about you? You were an artist, weren’t you? How did you choose that?”

Changing the subject. I glanced at her, then shrugged myself. “I always enjoyed drawing, and I was good at it. I wanted a job in which I could enjoy myself and make a living.”

“Did you apprentice?”

“No. We’ve got schools that teach art. I went to one of those.”

“A school just for that?” She skittered over a root laying across the path. “How long?”

“Four years.”

“Four years? Shave me! Ah, well, I suppose some artists spend their lives on their work.” She brushed a frond aside and glanced at me. “That’s not such a long time for you though, is it. How long does you kind live?”

“About eighty-five, ninety years. It varies.

Now she looked startled. “Ninety... they said you had a longer [lifespan] than Rris, but that... that is more than I’d expected.”

They’d asked me about it before, but my questions had never been answered. “How long do Rris live?” I asked.

“Mikah, I suppose most would live about forty five years. Sixty is very rare but it’s not unheard of.” Maithris gave me a sidelong glance, up and down. “You didn’t know?”

“They never told me.”

She hissed slightly. “They expect you to live among us and they don’t tell you things like that. What else haven’t they told you.” Then she forestalled my interjection, “Perhaps I should rephrase that, a? Is there anything you’d like to know more about?”

I laughed a bit. “Just about everything, I think. Is there any chance I could see more of Shattered Water?”

“I’ll have to see about that, but I’m sure something can be arranged.” The path turned to cross a small stone bridge spanning a stream. Down below, in still eddies and the calm offered by the lee of stones, boatmen skated across the water’s surface, raising ripples as they darted about like miniature dodgems. I

stopped to watch them for a second while Maithris continued for a step, then turned to watch me.

“You’ve heard that before, haven’t you,” she said after a while.

I shrugged.

“Ah,” she sighed, then stooped to pick up a pebble. Her wrist moved strangely when she tossed it and downstream a kingfisher dove at the ripples, pulling out at the last instant in an affronted flutter of wings. “I’m sorry, Mikah. I should say I’ll do my best. I can’t make any promises that you’ll be allowed to walk by yourself through the square on market day, but I will try to arrange something. You have my word on that.”

“Thank you,” it was all I could say. Like that kingfisher: too many bits of bait dangled in front of me.

The gardens were quiet but not quite deserted. The pair of armed guards a few dozen meters down the track dispelled the illusion of solitude. They didn’t do anything, just stood aside and watched us pass with wary eyes and helmets tucked under their arms before stalking away in the opposite direction. A warm day, I was quite comfortable in the shade in my only pair of shorts and Eldritch T-shirt. Maithris was only wearing her kilt, her tail protruding from a slit at the back, her ears flickering when an occasional midge buzzed them.

It was further than I’d expected, about half an hour of walking before the trees thinned, opening onto broad sky. A narrow strip of grass separated the rocky shore from the treeline and beyond that Lake Erie was a vast expanse of

glittering blue stretching away to the horizon. Sunlight tracked a path of sparkling white highlights toward the skyline, a light as harsh as if it were reflecting off burnished metal. To the north there was a darker haze of land in the distance: that'd be Canada... no, still Land-of-Water. Small waves lapped against the shore, a quick and steady pulse carrying pieces of driftwood and a few leaves. Out along the skyline there was a flash of red and white: the billowing sails of a ship under way tacking into the wind. The wind: a breeze cooled by the lake, bringing with it the scent of water and greenery.

“Your world looks like this?” Maithris asked as we walked along the lakeshore on that glorious day.

“My world,” I smiled a bit. “I think this is part of a city. This would be docks or roads.”

A tree at the lakeshore. An old, gnarled spruce with the soil under its roots eroded to leave an exposed tangle of wood, leaving the trunk tipped out toward the lake. Maithris touched a hand to the trunk and looked up to the sun shining through the branches, “I think I prefer it like this.”

“So do I.”

She chittered, then turned and leaned back against the trunk. “So we do have a few good thing to offer.”

I nodded and looked around. Down along the beach a single crenellated gray stone tower was perched on a rocky lakeside prominence. I squinted and shaded my eyes, able to see the figures of Rris on the ramparts. A Guardtower. I guess

they'd need some kind of security along the beach. "That must be a dull job," I observed.

"Ah?" she squinted. "Oh, the guardhouse? I suppose someone has to do it."

I sat down on the grass and dangled my legs over the small bank where storm-blown waters had nibbled at the earth. Now the lake was placid in the heat of the afternoon, the tiny wavelets lapping the shore like a hurried metronome. Maithris dropped down beside me, staying in the shade offered by the tree. She was panting a bit I noticed, her jaw hanging and tongue protruding. "Warm for you?" I asked, grinning a bit.

"All right for some," she growled. "You're not carrying this." She pinched a fingerful of fur on her arm.

"Hey, get me some scissors and a razor and I can fix that."

She affected a shocked expression, "But then I would look like you!"

"That's a bad thing?"

She chattered and leaned back against the tree, the light filtering through the leaves and branches dappling her fur in gold and shadow. "Ai, I suppose your hairlessness does have its advantages. It's hot in Africa, isn't it?"

“Hotter than this,” I smiled, then gestured at the water. “Why don’t you just go for a swim? That’ll cool you down.”

“There?” she looked at the lake and her ears went down a bit. “It’s... big. I mean, how deep is it? I don’t know if it’s safe...”

“You can’t swim, can you,” I smiled a bit. “Hey, come on. It’s a great day for it. I’ll make sure you don’t sink out of sight, all right?”

“I don’t know,” she looked dubious.

“Okay. I’m going in,” I said as I started pulling off my boots and socks.

“Mikah!” she protested. “Your hand?”

“It’s healed enough. It won’t get infected.”

“But...”

“Are there... dangerous animals in there? Large waves?” I asked and she waved a hesitant ‘no’. “Then what’s the problem?” I asked and stripped off my shirt, leaving it beside my boots. The stones on the beach were almost hot under my feet, even where they were water-slicked they were warm. I whooped, splashed through water up to my knees then dove under and surfaced with a strangled gasp. It wasn’t that cold, but after the heat of the day it was stimulating

contrast. I shook water from my eyes and floated on my back, “Come on!” I called to Maithris, “The water’s fine.”

Inside, I wondered how far she was willing to go to humor me. I didn’t want to push her over the edge or get her in trouble. Hell, I liked her, I just wanted to try my leash a bit. Now she was pacing on the shore, stepping awkwardly on the rocks while her tail lashed furiously. “Come on,” I called, teasing her. “It doesn’t bite.”

Her muzzle twisted and she took a few hesitant steps forward, just up to her ankles, then hastily moved back again and stood there, shifting her weight uncertainly. Where the water had plastered her fur down she looked like she was wearing dark socks. Then she slashed her hand at the air and said, “Ah, shave you,” and stripped off her kilt, throwing it back onto the beach where it fell in a crumpled, multicolored lump. Even without clothing it’s difficult to call a Rris naked; that fur covers everything. Her’s was a mottled tawny hue, with darker almost coffee-colored patches across her flanks, the lighter, dark-speckled fur of her front running down to the longer fur around her crotch. She had a scar on her outer left thigh, a narrow strip maybe as long as my hand where the fur grew ragged. I saw her take a breath as she walked out toward me, determination in the set of her face and the cool water climbed, up to her waist, chest.

“Careful,” I said, “It drops off a bit about...”

She gave a yelp and vanished.

”... there.”

I caught her as she bounced up again, coughing and sputtering with water streaming from her fur. I pulled her back to her depth where she coughed a bit more, wiped water from her eyes and shook her head violently, sending a glittering spray of water flying. “You...” she growled and spat water, more screaming from the sodden tufts on her cheeks, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You took it a bit quickly,” I tried not to smile at her appearance: thick fur turned slick and almost black clinging to her frame. “I tried to tell you. If you’re careful, it’s fun.”

“Fun? I feel like a beaver.”

“Cooler though, a?”

She narrowed her eyes, then very deliberately splashed me in the face. “Hey!” I snorted water.

“Cooler, a?” she smiled.

I splashed back and she ducked, chittering. Things escalated from there and for a few glorious minutes it didn’t matter what she looked like, it could have been anybody I was splashing around in the lakeside with. She was fast, I could scoop more water, but her energy seemed boundless while I was still a bit below par. I ran out of puff before she did and held up a hand while I sat down in surf shallow enough to be warmed by the sun. Hah! And I didn’t even have to worry about a thinning ozone layer. “You cooled off enough now?” I asked the dripping Rris.

Maithris shook again and a rainbow flashed in the spray surrounding her before it settled and she raked her facial fur back into shape. “Huhn, I haven’t done anything like that for a long time.”

“Then you must be naturally good at it.”

She chittered. “And you must be part otter. Does all of your kind enjoy the water so much?”

“A lot do.”

She cocked her head and regarded me, up and down, a curious expression on her face. I looked down and touched my chest; still wet, with the tracks of not-so-old scars quite obvious. “What?” I asked.

“Your hide,” she gestured and smiled. “It could be made for water. It even looks better wet. Well, better than this.” Her face twisted in a Rris expression that could be construed as a wry grimace as she held up an arm, her fur slicked down. All over. I tried not to laugh as a sodden tail slapped the water. “And it must be easier to dry. Huhn... do you think you could teach me to swim?”

“Hmm? I thought you weren’t keen on the idea.”

The Rris hissed a bit and sloshed water at me. “I think I was being overly cautious. I still remember you half-drowned after your last swim.”

A twinge went through my shoulder, even though that was a wound that had healed cleanly. “That was... different.”

“I know. I know,” she said. “When you consider the situation, you did the extraordinary. It’s just something I overlooked. Now, I can’t think of anyone better qualified. Ah?” it was a question.

“All right. You’ve got yourself a deal.”

So, that afternoon was one of the more unusual ones. It’s not often I’ve given swimming lessons to a felid doctor and I realised I was enjoying myself when several hours passed without me noticing. I was able to teach her a bit: She learned that trying to breath underwater was not a good thing; she got pretty good at a dog paddle, but she still had to expend a lot more energy to stay afloat than I did. It was a bit unsettling to see her panting head raising a wake as she paddled in circles. If I hadn’t known, I’d never have taken her for an intelligent being.

I wonder what the occupants of the watchtower made of it. Maybe Maithris didn’t see it, but I saw the guard up there with the telescope trained on us. Maybe they got a few laughs out of it, but it was a reminder that I was still being watched.

—v—

“You’re expected, sir,” the left-hand guard said. Their were a pair of them at

their stations on each side of the door, the long steel blades of their pole-axes reflecting the blue of the sky visible through the windows down the hall behind me. They watched me closely as I knocked on the piece of wood guests would normally scratch on to announce themselves, then entered Hirht's private office.

The windows behind his desk were opened onto the atrium, letting a breeze circulate through the room, stirring papers and taperstries, ruffling the fur of the three Rris waiting for me. Hirht was sitting at his desk, a couple of papers and an inkwell arranged on the blotter before him. Opposite, Kh'hitch and Maithris turned on their cushions to see me: she smiled, the Advisor flicked an ear but otherwise remained impassive.

"Come in," Hirht said, waved me toward a cushion beside Maithris. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, thank you sir." The way they were watching me... They were worried. Did they think I'd try again? Would I? It was something I couldn't answer.

"That's good to hear." The Rris king glanced down at the papers on his desk, then cocked his head at me. "Mikah, I realise this is an awkward time. For everyone. After that little... incident, other Kingdoms have been expressing their concern that perhaps you're not very happy in our care. There have been several offers to take you out of our hands."

I didn't know if I was expected to have an answer to that. Offers. I wondered if that was a euphamism. Perhaps some of the other kingdoms had been a little more insistent in their demands than Hirht was letting on. A claw extruded from a fingertip and snagged a sheet of paper, drawing it toward him and those amber eyes flicked up to meet mine. "Would you like to? If you wish to leave..."

Nobody would stop you.”

I hesitated. Unable to help myself I looked around at Maithris, at the other two Ris in the room. They were alien, in thought and deed. It wasn't my home; it was a place I doubted I'd ever be able to fit into. But... it was all I knew. I couldn't trade that for another unknown. I couldn't. I knew that would push me over the edge and beyond.

“Mikah?”

I shook my head, very slightly. “No sir.”

“A.” For a split second his attention flickered toward Maithris, then back to me. “Are you willing to continue the work you've been doing?”

Now my stomach knotted as I wondered what I'd gotten myself into. Maithris reached over to lay a hand on my knee. “Hai, don't worry so much.”

And Hirht smiled a bit. “The doctor pushes her deals. We would like you to continue. We would also like to offer you [something].”

Maybe Maithris saw my confusion at the word. “Pay you,” she offered. “Also time when you can do what you want.”

“Pay?” I asked, somewhat confused about the turn of events.

“We thought fourteen days free every month,” Kh’hitch said. “The pay would be ten golds a month. There is also the [something] that would be [something] from the sale of ideas as well as... ” He went on for a while using terminology that was completely beyond me. I guessed they were economic terms, but that was something my lessons had never covered in much depth. “You would be guaranteed a share of this, if that is acceptable to you.”

I blinked, then ventured in a small voice, “Is that much?”

They all stared. Mai almost laughed and ducked her head as she composed herself. “Yes, Mikah,” she said. “It is much.”

“Oh.”

Hirht’s extended claw was tapping slowly at the paper. “Is this agreeable to you?”

“Please. Much of what Kh’hitch said, I didn’t understand. I am getting a share? Of what? I didn’t understand those words.”

The Advisor frowned. “Your ideas can be sold to others: other Kingdoms, Guild, merchants. From the money made from that, you will be given a share. Also, if the people who brought those ideas make money - a [profit] - from their use they will pay a fraction of that to Land-of-Water. You will also receive a share of that. You understand?”

“Yes.” Yeah, I understood royalties and profits. “I’m sorry. I just wanted to understand...” I let that trail off with a tight smile.

“And now you do? Is this all right with you? There is nothing binding... if you want to change later, you have that right.”

How was I to know how much ten golds was worth? Would it buy a house? Or a hot dog? Was the information I could offer worth that much? I looked to my left, “Mai... Maithris? Is this good?”

She smiled back and waved a hand in gesture: as if she were tipping out a palmful of sand. “It’s good, Mikah. But it’s your decision to make.”

A step into the unknown.

Inhuman eyes watching me intently. I swallowed, then nodded. “I agree. You have a deal.”

Hirht smiled, then gestured at the paper before him. “Would you be willing to put your mark here? It will make things official.”

The creamy paper was filled with close-packed cuneiform script. At the top left was an elaborate seal featuring a Rris profile surrounded by branches and Rris words. Below that, line after line after line, so the page seemed to have more ink than bare paper. I could only read one word in ten; maybe not even

that.

“I will have to trust you, I think,” I said.

“You have my word there is nothing there that we haven’t already told you about,” Hirht said and even so I found myself glancing at Maithris. She actually nodded. I awkwardly took the proffered quill, dipped it, then and carefully signed my name. I saw Hirht blink at the looping script, then he took a pinch of sand from the box beside the inkwell and sprinkled it on the document. I passed the quill back, then impulsively left my hand extended. The king looked confused.

“It’s a custom of my people,” I explained, “We finish an agreement by shaking hands.”

His eyes flickered from my hand to my eyes, then he visibly braced himself and extended his own hand: tan fur with a darker palm, dark brown fur among the leathery pads of his palm and fingerpads. A coppery bracelet hung loosely on his wrist, sliding up his arm when I carefully took his hand and shook just once. There was a look on his face when I touched him, his pupils flinched before he squeezed once in return and withdrew his hand with a decorous grace.

—v—

“How did you do that?”

“Hai?” Maithris looked up at the question, then back to trailing a finger along the slender cast iron columns fronting the cloister as we walked. “Mikah, they’re afraid.”

“What?” That was news. “Of me?”

“Of you. For you.” She raised a hand to lean against one of the fluted columns and looked out over the garden in the central courtyard.

I stepped up beside her. “I don’t understand.” In contrast to the outer Palace gardens, these were elegant and constrained. Trees, shrubs and long grass with a symmetrical spiderweb of cobblestone paths wending through them.

Mai sighed, a long, drawn-out hiss and started strolling again. Not a human skeleton under that hide; movements and muscles that flowed and shifted in an inhuman gait, a female gait as she led the way through an archway and out into that garden. I realised what I was staring at and flinched away, blinked as she looked at me, “It’s...it’s your unpredictability. I really don’t think anybody knows just what you’re going to do next.”

“I don’t want to hurt anybody.”

“Not just that. They don’t know how you’ll react to anything. You might not hurt others, but you might hurt yourself. After... after you... after what happened...” she trailed off with ears drooping.

“Mai,” I said simply, “I tried to kill myself.” I was mildly surprised I could say it without feeling what that had meant, like it had happened to someone else.

Now her ears went down. Not anger, but still distress of a kind. “I... know.”

“What is your word for it?”

“Word?” She turned to stare at me. “For trying to kill yourself? Mikah. There is no word for it! It’s not... normal.”

“No word?” I blinked.

“No. Your kind has one? It’s that common?”

Suicide? “It’s common enough.”

She hissed softly and I saw her tail lash furiously. They didn’t even have a word? Then what I’d done would have been so incomprehensible... was that what they’d meant when they asked me what’d happened? They didn’t believe I’d done it myself? “Why?” Mai asked. “What could be so terrible that life would be thrown away?”

Was this about my people or about me? I just shook my head, feeling the twinge in my scarred face. “Fear. Loneliness. Anger, hatred. Need for attention.

Helplessness. Insanity.” I stopped talking and shrugged. To our right a statue stood nestled in among the trees: a Rris with a snake wound around the body. Fighting? I couldn’t tell. Water sprinkled from the reptile’s mouth, coating the entangled figures with a damp sheen.

“And for that you would die?” she said. “You would just end life?”

“Sometimes... it’s preferable.”

She hissed again, softly, and asked, “Do you think you’re insane?”

That struck me as amusing. I laughed, a sound that came out like a kick in the stomach. “Compared with? How would I know?”

“And a lot of Rris are feeling the same way. I know people aren’t sure if you’re in control of your mind. You might decide to hurt someone; you might decide to hurt yourself. Do you think you would?”

I swung my arm and plucked a leaf off a bush, folded it over and over, watching it fragment. “I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“You’ve said often enough. But yourself?”

I touched that place inside, searched my feelings. “Once, I would have been afraid to... to do anything like that. Now,” I sighed, “the thought doesn’t scare

me.”

“It scares them,” she said, then hung her head and glanced sidelong at me. “It scares me.”

I knew what she meant. If something happened to me, it would be taken out on her.

“Not just that,” Maithris said. “I like you. I really don’t want to see anything happen to you.”

I stopped and so did she, looking up at me with those amber eyes. A memory of what Shyia had told me drifted by, people would say things they didn’t mean; people would lie to me to try and gain my trust. I reached up, slowly, moving my hand closer toward her and those eyes stayed focused on mine, not flinching when I touched her cheek and stroked the fur on the side of her muzzle: like silk under my fingertips with the grain, velvet against. An unusual sensation.

She smiled at me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, withdrew my hand. “I didn’t mean to...” Even Chihirae had flinched sometimes.

“Don’t worry,” she assured me. “Why did you do that?”

“Most Rris... move when I get too close.”

“Ah,” she said knowingly, then stepped right up to me, reached up and looped her arms around my neck, looking up into my face from just a few centimetres. I felt her harsh breath, her heart beating where she was pressed against me. “And you don’t?” she grinned, feeling my own tension with nowhere to retreat to. She cocked her head, then abruptly jumped up to lick my nose. Her arms released me and as she stepped back one finger traced the ruined part of my face. “Still, I think you’ve got more reason to fear us.”

I flinched away from that hand. She waited, then gently touched my arm, leading me on again. We walked in silence for maybe a minute. At the center of the Palace courtyard was a pond: an irregular pool dark enough that I couldn’t see the bottom. Were there fish in there? Aside from a few leaves drifting amidst the reflections of overhanging trees, there was no sign of movement in the darkness.

On all sides the Palace rose above the trees and landscaping: the cloister ran the circumference of the courtyard, interrupted in places by french doors, verandahs and high windows. Above the green cooper of the cloister roof were the windows of the second floor. Hundreds of white-framed arched mullioned windows, balconies with carved balustrades spaced along the face of the building. The third floor sported smaller windows and again there were hundreds of them. How many rooms in this place?

And how many Rris in those rooms watching us?

I felt uneasy in this place. Beautiful to look at, but in the same way the statues were: lifeless, cut off from the outside. And I felt like the bullseye waiting for the arrow, unable to see who might be watching from any of those thousand

windows.

“That’s why they listen to you?” I asked the silence. “They’re afraid of what I might do I they don’t keep me happy?”

“Not as simple as that,” Maithris said, then frowned. “Or maybe it is. They don’t want you hurt, and they don’t want you hurting others.”

“So why do they listen to you?”

She didn’t look at me. “I told them... things about you. Ideas I had. I was close enough that they decided to listen to me.”

“Ideas? About what?”

“How to keep you happy.” Was she telling me everything? I didn’t think so.

“You think you know?” I asked softly.

“Mikah, it didn’t take a genius to see that the way they were treating you wasn’t right. I don’t know anybody who could be happy living like that, and to see that their future didn’t offer anything better, it...” she was going to say something, then changed her mind. “I asked them how they would feel. They gave me a chance.”

“Will what they’ve offered now be better?”

She looked up at me, “And you said I have a lot of questions, hah? Well, they’ve given you pay and time you can do what you will with and they’ve begun to realize you aren’t a bucket they can drink what they want from then discard. As to whether it’s better, I think it’ll be what you can make of it.”

“All I can do is try, a?” I tried that noise she so often used in her interrogatives and she chittered a bit.

—v—

Two days after that meeting I started working again. They weren’t wasting any time.

The weather had changed: that morning a mass of gray cloud had blown in across the lake, bringing cooler air and a heavy, short-lived shower that was finished and gone with as quickly as it’d come. It cleared the dust from the air and left water droplets hanging from eaves and leaves. Sunlight broke through the clouds, islands of light scudding across the countryside.

I sat on the cushion at the conference table, watching the last fat raindrops racing each other down the windows. It was another room I’d never seen before, although with over 800 rooms in the Palace, there were a lot of those. The French doors looked out over the northern Palace grounds: the trees and the gray mountains of the sky beyond. The walls were hung with pale velvet wall

covering that showed different textures depending on the light striking it. There were paintings: more of those big old things. I have to say Rris've got a better taste in frames than humans: instead of those revolting rococo gold-plated things our classic art seems to come packaged in, the Rris use more tasteful wood and metal. Some decorated, some plain.

I took a sip of water from the glass on the table in front of me and glanced at my watch. 9:47. My damn leg was going to sleep. I was almost glad when the door finally opened to admit Kh'hitch with the ambassador from Wandering and his assistant following.

"You'll understand if time is short today," Kh'hitch was telling the ambassador and his staff. "Mikah is still recovering after his incident. I trust you understand you're fortunate to be granted this interview."

"And it is greatly appreciated," Ch'thrith said and ducked his head toward me. "I trust you are feeling better."

"I am," I said, not missing his glance at the bandages around my wrist: just a wrapping to cover the healing scar. He was... flamboyant. His attire seemed to be chosen with an eye to hues that lived as far away from each other on the color chart as was possible: a blue jacket with bloused sleeves as far as the elbow, orange trim, calf-length red breeches with yellow brocade. There was gold filigree around the end of his tail, gaudy jewels on bracelets on his wrists and his chest fur was shaved and dyed in geometric patterns that seemed to center around his six almost nonexistent nipples. I didn't know if Rris had homosexuals, but every time I saw him I felt as if I might be looking at some stereotypical rendition of one.

"Pleased to hear it." He flipped the tails of his jacket back as he sat himself

down with his secretary beside him. Further down the table Kh'hitch settled himself with a sigh, the furry folds of his stomach spilling onto his lap. "I have to say we were most distraught to hear of your accident. And just so you know, Wandering's hospitality is always available if you ever find yourself in need of a change of scenery."

"Most appreciated." I glanced at Kh'hitch but was disappointed: he hadn't flinched. "But I think I will stay here a while."

He'd probably expected as much. He didn't press it. "As you wish. Now, perhaps we could discuss business. There was some question of what you could offer us? I have prepared a list of some areas in which we think your ideas might be of some help."

Kh'hitch took the envelope the ambassador handed over and inspected the blue seal before running a claw under it, breaking it. He spent a minute poring over the letter, occasionally twitching his muzzle or ears or uttering a small noise as he read. Ch'thrit watched him for a short time, then studied me, my clothes, the laptop on the table. I stared back, counting the tiny gold rings he had threaded through the edges of his pointed ears.

The paper landed on the table and Kh'hitch tapped at it with a claw, then slid it across to me and leaned back. I turned the sheet around for all the good that did: I still wasn't able to read it. I was able to recognize the occasional term, such as the marks for steam-engines and boats, but most of the others Kh'hitch had to translate.

Wandering was a wealthy kingdom. It controlled several hundred kilometers of both the Meander and Earthy rivers as well as some of the southern lake districts. Roads networked the country which drew its revenue from the markets

and trade as well as the tolls and tariffs on traffic passing through. And they seemed keen to keep the monopoly on that transportation empire. Most of the list was geared toward meeting that end.

Steam engines, the designs and specs along with the equipment for manufacturing them. Also details on the hulls and propulsion systems we were using, along with improved pumps, goods-handling equipment, storage facilities and communication systems. The first items were available but the rest of it would involve work. A lot of work and a lot of resources.

“Of course, that is quite within your abilities?” Ch’thrit inquired.

Kh’hitch looked at me.

I nodded. “That’s possible. The pumps and engines are no trouble. Some of the other items though, they will need more time.”

“You don’t foresee any problems?”

“If I could do that, then they wouldn’t be problems.” The Rris didn’t smile and I shrugged. “There will always be problems. The communication system would be the trickiest. Are you going to be wanting just information on how to build a new system, or will you want the... parts to be made for you?”

“We would want the plans along with some working samples. If we’re pleased with the result, more orders will be forthcoming.”

Kh'hitch ducked his head. "Very good. And within the next two days you will receive a [something] of what you can expect to pay."

I was watching Ch'thrit's face but I still didn't see a twitch. Not bad. Steam engines, machinery, new technology, upgrading their entire transportation system: he must have had some idea just how much that was going to cost.

—v—

The other Rris kingdoms hadn't been idle while I'd been recuperating. I was only just beginning to get some idea of what kind of uproar my near-death had caused, the rumors of assassinations and hoarded technology, that I'd been seriously injured while creating a weapon. I found out some of the consulates came to the Palace with accusations that the whole affair was a hoax perpetrated by the Land-of-Water so they could claim I was dead then hide me away for their exclusive use. All that time more Rris savants, scholars, philosopher, physicians, crackpots and even nobility with interests or pretensions to the sciences had been arriving in Shattered Water. There would doubtless be more arriving as savants sent by Kingdoms further afield arrived.

In the meantime the Palace was inundated with questions and demands from increasingly impatient embassies. Their experts wanted to talk with me, to study me, as if they still weren't convinced I wasn't something more than a hoax. And eventually Hirht bowed to the pressure.

I was taken to the university once again. Under armed escort. At least this time they were good enough to tell me what I could expect, so I wasn't walking into that auditorium blind. Maithris had seen me off that morning, laughing as

she patted my arm and told me not to frighten too many of the poor fluff-heads. But there was still concern in her expression. I told her not to worry.

As I tried to do as I walked down that dark little wooden corridor toward the sound of a multitude of Rris voices. I took a breath as I passed through the doorway and out onto the auditorium's floor. Wood creaked under my boots. From high above the skylights threw down shafts of light, spotlighting isolated parts of the stage. Around the rim of the stage gas lamps did their best to compete, without much success. There were chairs out there on the stage, eight of them lined up through patches of light and shadow. Rris were waiting in those, looking around as I entered. I recognized Achir in the center, also Rasa and Chotemri. Other facial markings were familiar but I couldn't put names to them; maybe they'd been present at... examinations.

There was one more chair, set in front of the others in the rectangle of light cast by a sunbeam. Why? As time passed that light would move on and leave the chair in darkness. Still, that was incidental. It was quite obvious who that chair was intended for and for a second I flashed back to that dark room in Westwater and similar circumstances.

This time there were more Rris in the gallery. More eyes watching me. That sibilant noise like dry leaves blowing in the wind surged as I entered and the shadows of the gallery stirred. More Rris... it was a full house. Okay, so the place wasn't the Superbowl, maybe a few hundred of them, but for me that was quite enough. I stalled for a second, then kept walking because it was too humiliating to turn and run back the other way.

Rasa met my eyes and actually acknowledge me with a nod. Chotemri, I hadn't seen him since the... incident, stared at me. I could see a muscle on his neck twitching under the fur and guessed he didn't like this any more than I did. It helped, a bit. And when I took my place on a chair that'd never been designed for my anatomy, they were behind me, out of sight but not out of mind. And that

damned sunlight made it difficult for me to see the audience while pinning me like a bug on a board.

Two hundred pairs of eyes watching. There'd been more than that in the Palace during that disasterous ball but I hadn't been set out for them to stare at then. Eyes flashed as they caught the lights, metal and jewlery glittered, fur of all colors and styles. Although the place was full, they weren't packed in. Individuals kept their distance from one another, and the gallery itself was split up with token dividing walls along the isles, quartering it into sections. Constructed like their homes, like their towns and cities: designed to give an impression, an illusion of privacy. Maybe for Rris, this was packing them in. There was a group of Rris who might have been students from the university; other groups would be visitors from other kingdoms, maybe ambassadors... I wondered if Maithris was up there. I couldn't tell. It helped to think that maybe she was.

That day was predictable. It reminded me of show and tell back in grade school. Rasa stood to carry the introductions and then was gone. If they had a system to handle the questions, I couldn't pick it out. There'd be a roar of noise and an individual would be picked out to shout a query. There were the usual ones, there were the unusual ones, and then there were the downright weird: how would I know how the harvest in the midwest would turn out? Or the best place for a fleet to fish? And a couple of questions about my sex life were quite unnecessary. Anyway, I did my best to answer them, but there were always those I didn't understand or couldn't explain. The Rris behind me helped a bit on those and handled the questions that were directed at them, and there were more than a few. I think there were a fair number of Rris in the audience who asked them questions just to avoid having to talk to me, and others tried to make it difficult.

The acoustics in the auditorium were good enough that the voices of speakers on the stage carried, but sounds from the gallery were somewhat muffled. Maybe the Rris didn't have so much of a problem with that, but I did. If people asking questions didn't speak up, I had to ask them to repeat themselves. A waste of

everyone's time.

The sunbeams drifted across the floor as the morning passed into afternoon. I talked, while the light described its slow passage across the floor I talked, until my voice was hoarse and my throat felt raw from its fight with the Ris gutturals. There wasn't any water available, a lamentable oversight on someone's part. It was only when my voice gave out completely that the day had to draw to a close. I just opened my mouth to try and speak and all that I could manage was a rasping croak.

That scared them. The presentation came to an impromptu end as I was rushed out in a congregation of panicked physicians and specialists, bodies bumping against me in that dark corridor off in the wings. I flinched wildly as hands touched me in the dimness, turning from one to another in confusion as they gabbled questions and I couldn't see properly or answer, I could hardly swallow: my throat felt like it was lined with sun-dried cactus. And more shouting snarled out:

"Move it, shave you! Out of my way!"

"Who..." Someone else barked. "Rot it! Guards!"

"Rot you, clothead! I'm [something]! Hai! Mikah?" Someone caught my hand: furry fingers wound around mine. "It's me, Maithris. Come along, we'll get you out of this."

She led me, pushing through the crowd that was growing as some of the audience found their way backstage. We met a contingent of guards coming the

other way and Mai growled a few word to their commander and left them to crowd control duties as she ushered me away down the corridor until the noises were lost behind us.

In the solitude of a quiet side-corridor Maithris stopped. I leaned back against a wooden wall and closed my eyes while I took rasping breaths. “You really don’t look so good,” maithris said, studying me. “What happened there?”

I shook my head. Somewhere, there were running footsteps: the sound of claws pattering on wood. A pair of guards in lightweight armour turned the corner and drew up short at the sight of us. Maithris ignored them.

“Ah?” she asked, drawing my attention back to her when she squeezed my arm, letting her claws press against my skin. “Too much talking?”

I nodded.

“Of all the clotheaded...” Maithris snorted. “I warned them. Can you talk?”

“Not well,” I croaked, the Rris words cracking into incomprehensibility. I felt a stab of fear at the thought of laryngitis, remembering the helplessness of not being able to make myself understood. Dammit, I didn’t want to go through that again! Even if it was only for a few days.

“Oh, supuration take it,” she sighed and raked at her mane with claws extruded. “What can I do?”

I mimed raising a cup to my lips and she brightened. “A! Wait there,” Mai told me and turned to the guards, snapped something and held out her hand. The guards exchanged looks, then one of them fiddled with a belt canteen, detached it and handed it over. Maithris pulled the stopper to sniff it before she passed it to me. “They’ve been known to fill them with stuff besides water,” she explained when I gave her a questioning glance.

The canteen was a hard leather flask with straps to tie it to a belt. The spout had a flattened mouthpiece. God only knew where the water had come from or if it’d been boiled. I tasted it: warm, tasting of leather. I chugged half of it.

“Better?” Maithris asked.

I nodded.

“Mikah,” she said gently. “I know what that means, but most people don’t. It might be a good habit to break. Ah?”

This time I held out my hand, palm up, and curled my fingers in.

“That’s better,” Maithris smiled and took my hand in hers. I pulled away, but not before she’d felt the trembling. She drew back a bit, lowered her muzzle to look at me, then reached out again to touch my arm, “We’ll get you back home now, all right? Come on.”

After that initial fuss and confusion things calmed down a bit. I spent the evening half-expecting a horde of physicians to descend on me, but Mai was the only one who visited me. She brought my dinner - a meat broth in a mug and warm bread - and also a small roll of red leather so battered it seemed brown, tied with black laces. I hadn't seen it before, but the form was familiar enough. "I thought you mightn't feel like talking," she explained as I picked at my meal. "And your fur needs some attention. You're [something] around the mane and your cheeks. You don't mind?"

After today... Even after today, I didn't really want to be alone. I shook my head, then tipped my hand in the Rris gesture. She chittered and while I finished my dinner, laid a cloth on the floor beside the desk and unlaced the kit, unrolled it on the desktop. The worn leather was a richer red inside, the tools tucked into slots cut into the leather gleamed, rivulets of orange lamplight running along polished metal. Similar to other kits I'd seen in some ways: there were wooden combs missing a few teeth, a couple of brushes, a small pair of scissors, some tweezers and other small implements. Much-used, with wooden handles polished smooth. "It was my sire's," she was wearing her spectacles, sitting tailor-fashion on the low desk as she watched my hand touch the metal on the scissors and stroke the leather before drawing back. "His before him. I don't know how old it is, but it's been handed down for generations. Tradition." She stared at the kit, thoughts almost visible behind her eyes. Then she shook herself, fluffing fur over her whole body: "Ah, well why don't we do something about that haystack on your head now. Take your tunic off and sit, here."

I did as she asked, making myself comfortable on the cloth. She moved, the cloth of her breeches brushing against my arms as she placed a foot on either side and then fingers were touching and running through my hair, the gentle touch of claws was unmistakeable: hard in contrast to the pliant leather of her fingertips. A comb started tugging and I winced when it caught a knot. Fingers and claws worked again, easing it out.

There'd been other Rris who'd done this. A teacher in a small backwater town who showed me something that went beyond kindness; a constable in a lakeside trading town who was willing to trust... Mai was as good as they had been. Her fingers knew what they were doing and worked with an adeptness I'd seldom encountered in human barbers. Rris learned how to take care of their fur early in life. And now I found myself relaxing under Maithris's ministrations as she combed and brushed and then the scissors started their work. I felt my shoulders loosen, a tension I hadn't been aware of leeching out of my limbs as I sagged and leaned back into the attention, letting her hand tilt my head as she needed. I was half-asleep when she touched my neck and brushed away bits of hair: "Mikah?"

"Uhn?" I complained.

"Enjoying it, huhn?" She rumbled in my ear. "Your face now."

"Hmm?" I blinked, more awake now and Mai chattered and stroked my shoulder. "Your face? Your fur there needs some work. I might as well do that now. Lie down."

I hesitated, flashing on Chihirae asking the same thing. Maybe it was just the way they preferred to work. Whatever, it was comfortable, especially with the carpet. Maithris shifted to kneel at my head and I blinked up at the shadowy and foreshortened figure that loomed over me, the upside-down face with that ridiculous ceiling lamp a clumsy halo in the background. Her muzzle pursed in a smile, before she touched my beard, curled fingers underneath to fluff it out. Claws touched my throat and I flinched involuntarily.

Immediately her hands pulled away. “Sorry,” she said and her fingers moved more carefully. Especially when she took up the scissors again: the sharp metal moved steadily while I laid back and watched her amber eyes behind the spectacles, intent on their work. The spark that burned in there was that same undefinable glimmer that separated humans from beasts, but those eyes were so different.

I reached up and she froze when I touched her lower jaw, just stroked the fur there. It was like velvet in places: short and soft, a vein pulsing, a faint tremble...

She caught my hand and for a few seconds studied my fingertips before meeting my eyes. “Feels different, a?”

I closed my captured hand in a ‘yes’, and she flashed me a small grin, then let me go. The scissors worked again, trimming it down to an inch or so: a length that could be mistaken for a Rris’s facial fur. I wasn’t a Rris, but nevertheless they still did all they could to change me into something that might make me a bit more acceptable in their eyes. And when she was done I caught her hand before she could put the tools away.

“Mikah?” Something that could have been worry flickered behind her glasses. I gestured at the cloth where I’d been sitting, now littered with clippings of hair.

Reluctantly she sat, then tried to twist when I perched on the edge of the desk behind her and gently tugged at her linen vest. She hesitated before shrugging out of it. Not quite as relaxed as she pretended to be, but she was trying. I touched her shoulder and her hide twitched. I stroked the fur, tawny and sienna and grey, feeling the coarse hair on the outside and the softer insulating layers further in before I picked up a comb: very short, closely-spaced teeth that

seemed ideal for this.

Maithris said, “Ah?” when it touched her back, then a guttural, “Huhn,” as it raked through and that tension eased a bit. After a few strokes she grunted when the comb caught on a burr. “Go with the [flow? current?] of the fur.”

It took quite a while: her arms, her back down to her breeches. Her mane and the longer, lighter fur down her stomach were thicker, the fur was tougher than it looked. She gave me advice: what tools to use, how to twist the comb to get to the underlying layers. It took a while to work out tangles and twice I caught small scurrying specks and crushed them between my fingernails.

“They’re good for something after all,” Mai rumbled sleepily, now laying sprawled on her back while I groomed her front. Apart from those six nipples her torso was as androgynous as a tree trunk. Did they become tumescent during pregnancy? Another piece missing from my knowledge of Rris.

“What?” she asked and roused herself enough to touch her chest, where I was staring. “Ah, I’m not the female you were thinking of? Ai! Careful!”

I spent longer yanking that knot in her fur out than I needed to.

—v—

Thankfully, that laryngitis was short lived. By the next morning it’d cleared up enough to just leave me with an annoying itch in my throat. It wasn’t a very

pleasant way to learn what my limits were, but from then on the Rris paid more attention when I asked for a break for a drink. They just hadn't realised that for me, speaking their language was a task that didn't come as naturally.

The following days held more meetings and another grilling in front of the assembly in the University auditorium. Private meetings... well that depended upon the Rris I was talking with. Some were easier to get along with than others: there were those who settled down readily enough, while others were simply in-your-face abusive in their insistence on treating me like a clever animal. Three times I just walked out of an interview, much to the clients' fury and my hosts' annoyance.

I'd forgotten about the time off I was due.

—v—

I woke suddenly and sat bolt-upright in bed, the sheets rucked up around me and my heart pounding. The room was warm with a musty heat. Midmorning sunlight was glowing through the drapes, a sliver finding its way through a chink and splitting a bright line across the ceiling. Midmorning? I wasn't supposed to still be in bed. Why hadn't someone woken me? I was supposed to be...

I wasn't supposed to be anywhere. The memory rose like a cool spring to drown the surge of panic. Slowly, I heaved a sigh, then flopped back onto the sheets, naked in the warmth of the room. God, I wasn't supposed to be anywhere. A day off, some time I could call my own. After that week it was a welcome thought.

A scratch sounded at the door across the room.

“Uhn? Who’s there?” I didn’t feel like raising my voice. Needn’t have worried, with Rris hearing being what it is.

“Mikah?” the muffled reply came. “It’s me.”

Me? Maithris. She breezed into the room with a breakfast tray and an open smile. “Why aren’t you up?” she asked as she set the tray down and went to throw the drapes open. I winced and turned away from the glare. “You don’t want to miss the best of the day.”

I squinted into the light that lit Maithris’s fur with a halo of white. “What time is it anyway?”

“Time you got out of that bed.”

“Hnn. Give me a good reason.”

“Saaa. That’s a tricky one.” She sat in the window alcove and stretched out, seemingly unconcerned as she brushed at an invisible speck on her emerald green breeches. “I thought you wanted to see more of the town, but if you’d rather lie there like a hairless accident victim... “

I blinked: “You know, that’s a good reason.” The bed creaked as I sat up,

crosslegged among the sheets, “You’re serious? I’m allowed to go into the town?”

She smiled, looking for all the world like the proverbial cat with the proverbial yellow feathers hanging out of her mouth. “I’m serious.”

There was a catch. Somewhere, there was a catch. “How many guards?”

“Ah. A couple. A few. Not too many though.”

“How many?”

“Four,” she said, then waved an apologetic shrug. “Sorry. They insisted.”

I sighed and scratched at an itch on my leg. “Only four? Why am I not surprised?”

She leaned her head back and her jaw spasmed as she chattered laughter. “Then you don’t want to go?”

“Hey, I never said that.”

“Then you might want to get some clothes on. I think people would laugh

their jaws off if you show yourself like that.”

“At least I don’t have to worry about getting my tail caught in a door,” I retorted lightly.

“Saa. You can only dream of having a tail like this,” she said smugly and flicked her’s around to preen the white tip.

“I’m happy as I am, thank you, you walking rug,” I smiled as I got up and stretched, my joints and tendons crackling audibly. Maithris cocked her head as she regarded me with an expression that might have carried a pinch of amusement while I dressed.

Later, we walked through the corridors of power, following halls through the heart of the Palace. Windows to my right looked out into the central courtyard where Maithris and I’d walked and talked those weeks ago. The geometric layout of the paths was more obvious from up here, the carefully-restrained wilderness of the greenery less so. Down a staircase to the ground floor, then through panelled halls to the northern trade entrance. A squad of mounted guards were waiting in the courtyard there, along with a carriage that could only be for us.

It wasn’t as ornate as some of the others I’d been in, probably for a good reason. This carriage was panelled, the dark wood glowing with a rich gloss. The trimmings were brass, sunlight throwing molten highlights from polished lamp-brackets, handles, rivet and bolt heads. A guard was holding the door open, standing at attention as we approached. When the penny dropped I grinned, hastily smothered the expression: “Hi, Blunt. How are the swimming lessons going?”

“Sir,” he ducked his head, “I really don’t want to see that much water ever again.”

I chuckled and offered Maithris my hand to help her step up. She looked a bit puzzled, then lightly bounced up into the cab as if her legs were spring steel. I shrugged and clambered in after her, setting the carriage rocking on its suspension. While I sat myself down on the upholstered bench opposite Mai, Blunt closed the door behind us. I was surprised to note this carriage didn’t have those warped windows that the Rris used for privacy. Instead of glass panes the windows were covered with intricate wooden screens: delicate patterns of curlicues, plant blossoms and leaves. A lot of them, providing an excellent view of the world. I touched the screen to my right, feeling the breeze blowing straight through, able so see out easily enough, but anyone outside would have trouble seeing just who was riding in the cab.

“You know him?” Maithris asked, nodding her head toward the door.

“We went swimming together,” I said. “You remember?”

“Ah, yes. That one.” She flicked her ears and craned across to look out after him. “Huhn, good-looking,” she said, falling back into her seat as outside a Rris barked something and the carriage moved off with a jolt.

“Is he?” I raised an eyebrow, wondering what she found attractive in a man.

And she looked at me, amusement flickering her ears. “Yes, very. And don’t

worry. You're still... unique."

"Ah. 'Unique'," I nodded. "That 's very diplomatic."

She smiled then reach over to pat my knee, "But you've got beautiful fur."

"Oh, that's all right then," I said and heard her chitter out loud as I turned to watch what was happening outside.

It took a couple of minutes to travel the length of the Palace drive. The light and dark flickering of tree trunks passing by outside paused, then we passed under the gatehouse and for a few seconds there was darkness and the echoing of hooves and wheels clattering on cobbles sounding off marble walls. Then sunlight flashed back into the cab and I could see guards, beyond them the wrought-iron fences of the Palace stretching away.

"This is the Swamp Way," Maithris told me. "It runs right to the gut of the city, through the Pinnacle Square and Smither Square. This area's the more expensive part of the city. Some of the manors along here are ancestral Clan homes. Very affluent lines."

I'd seen that on the way in. Most of the places were fronted with brick walls or spike-topped iron fences. Invariably, beyond those were abundant hedgerows and trees, hiding all but the distant peaked roofs from eyes on the road. How many times had I made this same journey and never seen any of these things? All those times I'd been bottled up behind that murky glass, seeing shapes and forms, but never what was actually there. Now, I could see the weather vanes on roofs, different shapes riding the arrows: a crouching Rris pointing, an albatross

or some other seabird, a bear... I saw the wrought-iron gates on one place being opened to let a carriage and its entourage exit.

“Sometimes this area is called the Rocks,” Mai said, “sometimes the Nipple.”

“Nipple?” I wondered if I’d heard that right.

“A,” she chuckled and gestured to one of her lower ones. “As in the people living here suckling off the milk of the city.”

Ah, a sort of derogatory term.

We were driving on the left-hand side of the road, I noticed. Past the last of the estates the carriage passed between the old towers. “Part of the old wall,” Mai said as I craned to see the top. “Before my time. Hundreds of years before.”

“Is there a lot of use for city walls?”

“Well... before these were built, I know there were several battles fought around Shattered Water and the city was invaded twice, I think. Afterwards... Land-of-Water kept their fighting on the borders, or did the fighting in the marketplaces and conference tables.” She grinned, “But for the hundred years they stood, those walls never fell.”

The birches along the boulevard were in full leaf, greenery and shade waving

in the wind. Other traffic passed us: wagons and carts, buggies and carriages; Rris mounted on llamas and elk, others out on foot. The buildings here were the large, spreading types so prevalent in Rris construction. The facades were decorated, but what windows there were were small. Glazed though.

“Guild buildings, most of them,” Mai had scooted over and was sitting directly opposite so our knees were barely touching. “That’s the...”

“Printing Guild?” I provided, noticing the plaque fixed to the front of the building as we passed.

“Right,” she looked surprised, then squinted at a passing building. “You can read them?”

“Uh, some. It’s easier to see the pictures,” I said, referring to the little icon of what was unmistakably a printing press that’d been stamped above the text.

“But from here?” she blinked at me, then gave an abrupt little shake of her head and turned to look out the window again. The screen threw a paisley texture of light and shadow across the profile of her muzzle, glimmering on her eyes. “Anyway, the more prominent Guilds have their halls around Pinnacle Square.”

“The Mediators?” I asked out of curiosity.

Her ears flicked. “Ah, they do tend to keep to themselves. Their hall is further

over toward the river.” She gestured to the south.

Pinnacle Square wasn’t a square. Instead it was circle that for some reason reminded me a little of a Trivial Pursuit board. A large circular plaza with roads radiating from a ring-road like rays from the sun: four large thoroughfares leading to the cardinal points of the compass and a host of smaller streets branching off in all directions. The pie-slice shaped wedges they divided the plaza into were used as parkland, planted with the preferred unkempt grass and trees, separated by broad malls. I could see cubs frolicking among the greenery, chasing a brightly colored ball. One caught it, then was brought to the ground in a tumbling cloud of dust when a playmate caught its tail and yanked hard. I winced, they played rough.

The monument in the centre of the plaza was... interesting. Atop a square dias about three meters high was a statue: a small group of five Rris, three facing outwards towards some unseen threat with claws bared and muscles visible beneath the stone fur, guarding their companions. One of those was tending to its comrade, obviously grievously wounded, with bones actually visible through gashes in arms and across the chest. Not a touch they’d allow on a public monument back home.

“The death of Ch’rothiyah aesh Tyi,” Mai told me, “A queen some time ago. She died in a battle on the Bluebetter borders and the Chihiski dynasty succeeded her.”

I stared at the statue, at the agonised face of a dying, long-dead Rris. I shuddered.

It took a while to follow the ring-road around the plaza. I was still used to cars, and while the carriage was better than walking, it wasn’t what you could

call speedy. Maybe fifteen kilometres an hour. I kept getting the feeling we should have gone further in the time we'd been travelling.

From Pinnacle Square we continued south, to Smither Square. Again, it was circular, the birch and oak trees lining the shady avenues and around the square the fountains were filling the air with mist and rainbows.

Fountains. Dozens of them. Jets of water arching ten meters into the air where wind caught them and tore them to droplets and mist that refracted light into fans of spectral color. Marble took on a sheen like dolphin skin in the amalgam of sunlight and moisture, the statues of Rris in various poses around more abstract shapes.

“Have you seen this before?” Mai asked. “What do you think?”

I leaned back in my seat, swaying in time to the movement of the carriage. “I’m impressed. Last time I saw this it was a lot of icicles. This is... quite beautiful. Where does the water come from.”

She waved a shrug. “The river, I suppose.”

Then how did they get the water pressure that high? Was there a pumping station just for these fountains. “Smither,” I mused. “Is that related to Rraerch?”

“A Smither designed this,” she gestured at the window. “I don’t know if they’re related. It’s possible.”

The carriage was turning off the square, still southbound. I guess they must have worked out a route beforehand, but now the road had changed to narrower streets. The cobbles were rougher and the buildings closer together: large buildings of brick, whitewashed plaster, even wood. There were a few small windows, the archways leading to the heart of the buildings usually open. I caught glimpses of the atriums those passageways opened onto, often with gardens, maybe statues, washing hanging out to dry. Once I saw a bedraggled and skinny Rris tucked away in the shadows of one of those tunnels, a ragged cloth pulled around its shoulders. It was rapidly rocking back and forth, not looking up as the carriage passed by. Elsewhere, Rris filled the streets, the sibilants of their conversation were a low backdrop to the clatterings of wheels and hooves on cobblestones.

“Is your home around here?” I asked Maithris.

“Here? No. I have a room across the river.”

“Oh.” The carriage hit a drain or some other rut in the road and we both caught at handgrips to keep from sliding across the upholstery. “Isn’t that a long way to travel each day?”

Calm eyes blinked at me, not quite laughing. “I’ve been staying at the palace. Not quite as far to go.”

“That does make more sense,” I said, feeling a little foolish.

Outside, a congregation of Rris were gathered around a stall where a pair were bickering, their animated snarls carrying over the street sounds. Cubs ducked and darted around legs, dodging through traffic and pedestrians. There wasn't so much road traffic here, certainly not as much as back home. There were carts and wagons, but when they weren't present, the pedestrians used the roads as they willed. No sidewalks here; when there was traffic they just kept out of the way. The breeze blew in through the screens, bringing with it the smells of the Rris city: the scents of food cooking, fish frying, smells of animals and dung and sewers that perhaps weren't as good as they could have been.

The carriage paused, then turned left, and I saw we were travelling east along the riverside, the breeze carrying the smell of water and mud and fishing nets hanging out to dry. Not too far ahead was the first (last?) of the bridges across the river. Behind us... somewhere there'd be that isolated quayside from where I'd swum for my life.

"Is that the market?" I asked Mai, pointing at the jumble of colors and movement across the river.

"There?" her pupils dilated as she looked. "A. One of them. Fellwood Square market. We're bound that way."

A boat was setting out from the wharves, a small fishing vessel. Crewmembers pushed off with poles until the current caught the prow, swinging it downstream. Sideboards were dropped, stained and patched sails were run up the mast and the boom swung around, the small vessel listing slightly as it tacked further out into the main channel. Then the carriage swung onto the bridge and the boat was lost from sight.

"Redmale Bridge," Mai told me. "It's the newest of the four bridges. Built

about twelve years ago.”

The candence of wheels on cobbles changed to a hollower sound as we hit the flagstones. Wide enough for two lanes with sidewalks and stone balustrade. Gas lamps hung from ornate iron lamp posts, one about every twenty five meters. A pair of Rris were working on one: a Rris up a the ladder passing the glass cover down to an associate on the ground.

How many Rris does it take to change a lightbulb?

I smiled slightly and shook my head at the thought.

“Something wrong?” Mai asked.

“No, ” I said. “No... it’s just that... Sometimes I see things that’re almost familiar. I just find it... out of place.”

“You don’t expect to see them?”

“There’s that. But also, they seem so human. Seeing a Rris doing it...”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I know it’s what you always do, but it just feels odd.”

She looked out the window on her side, eastward toward the heart of the town.
“You’re still not used to us, are you?”

“I’m not sure I ever will be.”

The sound of the wheels changed again as the coach left the bridge. Off to the right was Fellwood Square market. Tents and stalls and awnings were everywhere, a garish circus of brightly colored cloth, patched cloth, patterns faded by sunlight. A lot of the stalls had signs painted on them, a few of which I was able to read : fish , wood , dairy products , tools ... Rris moved among the stalls, Rris of all colors and shapes and sizes, talking, shouting, wheeling and dealing. Animals added their noises to the din, poultry screeching and draft animals lowing as they were displayed and examined. A peddler approached the carriage, waving pieces of cloth from a tray around his neck. A guard on llamaback appeared from where they’d been following and headed the merchant off.

I watched all this, glimpsing Rris life through a window. As the carriage moved these things were being lost out of sight again. I was barely scratching the surface, there were depths to that market I’d never know.

I hesitated, then touched Maithris’ leg. “Can we stop here? I’d like to see this.”

She looked taken aback. “You want to get out?”

“Yes.”

“Mikah,” she looked out the window at the Ris there, then at me again. “That would be dangerous.”

“Do you think it would cause a riot?”

“I don’t know. I...”

“Neither do I,” I told her. “I would like to. I’d like to know if I’ll ever be able to walk down a street without causing a riot. I’d like to know if I can at least show my face in a public place, if I can lead something approaching a normal life.”

She stared at me.

“Please,” I asked. I didn’t know what else to say.

For a second she didn’t move, then reached up to tap on a small hatch. It flipped open and she said something to the coachman. The carriage rattled to a halt and a mounted guard rode up to Mai’s window. Not Blunt. “Ma’am? There a problem?”

“We’re getting out,” she said.

I saw the guard glance toward the market. Already passerbys were glancing our way. “Ma’am? That’s... “

Mai hissed something: low and fast. The guard’s ears flattened, then it ducked its head in acknowledgement and reigned the llama around.

“Thank you,” I told her.

The Rris doctor turned to me, her eyes trying to read my face. I’d asked, but I still felt fear, something I tried to hide and I don’t know if I was altogether successful. “You’re sure about this?” she asked.

“I think so.”

“Think so,” she sighed. “Mikah, I know you’ve been through this before, but you’ll have to be careful.”

“I know,” I said and ticked off the points on my fingers: “Stay calm, move slowly, be polite, and don’t smile.”

She patted my knee, “I couldn’t have put it better myself. You ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Maithris opened the door and looked around before stepping out. She hardly touched the step on her way to the ground, touching down as lightly as if she’d just stepped off a staircase instead of a half-metre drop. I followed, more slowly and the four guards closed in around us. I saw the squad leader give Mai a meaningful look that she shrugged off by simply turning her back. “Come on, Mikah.”

I walked beside her as we crossed the street. A wagon rattled by on the other side of the road, heading back toward the bridge. The driver gave us a passing glance, then did a doubletake that under other conditions would have been hilarious. As it was his team veered and he had to haul them back on course or run into the market.

The reaction of the Rris wasn’t too different from what I’d expected, from what I’d received before in Westwater and Lying Scales and numerous small settlements. Rris saw me, gawped, hissed urgently to their companions, and the turning heads spread through the crowd like ripples from stones dropped into water. I felt a touch on my arm and looked down; Mai smiled and gave me a reassuring squeeze.

Rris melted aside like ice from hot water as we entered the outskirts of the market. I couldn’t be sure if it was the sight of me that did it or the quad of armed guards around us. I stared as much as the Rris did, trying to take in as much as I could. The sounds, the colors, scents... everything richer than I’d imagined: a living tapestry of infinite depth, infinite variety.

But for the Rris at my side, I’d never have seen this.

A Ris at one of the larger stalls stepped back as we approached, staring at me with wide eyes but not willing to desert the stand. I stopped to look at the wares on display. Cutlery laid out in rows: bowls and utensils, lathed plates, wooden spoons shaped for Ris mouths. Hanging from the awning were more elaborate products: spoon handles embraced by carved Ris and animal shapes, pointillation patterns on pewter bowls. The owner didn't make any move to try and sell me anything.

We moved on and the crowd kept shifting, new Ris moving to stare while other shifted away. There were a few calls of, "Hai! What's that?"

"Where'd you get the pet?"

Things like that. We ignored them and if anyone got too excited, a hard look from a heavily armed guard usually calmed them down.

Elsewhere there were stalls selling meats, grains products, tools and utensils, pots and pans, and odds and ends that I could rightly identify. Vendors displayed samples of their crafts to advertise their services, everything from furniture to roof tiles. Enclosures held animals of various kinds, adding their noise and smells to the crowd. Ris dickered over wagons piled with stacks of milled lumber or quarried rocks. I noticed a small stall displaying grooming equipment and curiously headed in that direction. Mai looked around and hurried to join me.

Two Ris were behind the counter: a youth gaped at me and hurriedly whispered to the older - much older - Ris in a dark brown tunic and seated in a rickety looking chair. The younger one broke off and took several steps

backward as I approached, looking absolutely terrified with eyes wide and fur bottling. I ignored the youth and looked over the stuff on display. A selection of leather kits without tools in them, they were laid out seperately: scissors, combs, brushes, knives and tweezers. Simple and functional wood and metal.

“I hear you’ve got an unusual pet,” the elder Rris said. I looked up, startled. It... she? Seemed to be addressing me. Then I saw her eyes: milky white. Blind, her ears twitching.

In afterthought, I probably shouldn’t have, but before Mai could say anything I offered, “Yes. Quite unusual.”

Mai stopped with her mouth open and gaped up at me, then her ears flickered and she had to turn away to smother a chitter.

“A. My eyes here said it seems quite fearsome.”

“Oh, he knows how to behave,” I said. Behind us the sound of the crowd had changed subtly as Rris stopped to witness this exchange.

“Good to hear,” the old one said, then cocked her head slightly, those white eyes tracking across me. “If I may be so bold, you sound very... unusual. Are you ill?”

“Ah. A condition I’ve had from birth,” I said. Well, it wasn’t a lie.

“Huhn.” She opened her mouth and licked a whitened muzzle. “Forgive me for mentioning it. I have a similar [affliction].” A bony arm with threadbare fur gestured at her eyes. “You are interested in my wares?”

“You made these?”

A dry chitter. “Myself? I can’t tell night from day. No, I just sell to discriminating people such as yourself.”

Mai looked like she was choking. The youngling watched wide-eyed.

“How much for brush and three combs? Those, near the back.”

“Ah, good choice,” she said. “Those... eight heads. Each.”

I looked at Maithris. “Is that a lot?”

Still smiling, she glanced at the brushes. “I’d pay four. Each.”

The blind Rris frowned and turned towards Mai’s voice. “What’s that? Who’s that? Eyes! You said there was a lady and her pet.”

“There are,” the youth squeaked.

“He takes exception to that word,” Mai said. “Three heads.”

“How much is a head?” I asked.

“Fifty heads to a gold,” she said.

“Good lady,” the blind Rris appealed, “what is going on?”

“Okay,” I said. That gave me some idea of just how much I was being paid now. Ten golds was... quite a lot by their standards. “Thank you for your time,” I told the stall owner.

She gaped, then bared teeth that were still quite white. “What are you?”

“Curious,” I said and walked off. Arguing voices rose from behind me.

Mai was at my side. “I thought you wanted to buy that.”

I shrugged. “I don’t have any money.”

Now she looked surprised. “But you’re being paid...”

“Yes, I just haven’t been given any. I haven’t really needed it.”

She glanced around, watching a Rris who’d passed by quite close to us, then flicked her ears. “Rot it, they’ve set up a [something] for you. I should’ve thought they wouldn’t give you [something] cash.”

I turned that over, then had to say, “I didn’t understand that.”

A savings account, she explained. Or something close to that. My pay was most likely handled by the treasury. Unlike back home where my money probably wouldn’t exist anywhere but in a computer, my pay would be in cash stored in the treasury strongboxes. Fair enough, but it’d be handy if some of that could be handed on to me.

“I’ll see to it,” she assured me.

“Maithris!”

We both looked around. A Rris hurried toward us, then hastily backpedalled when two guards stepped between us. “Maithris?” the Rris called eyeing the guards uncertainly.

“Hai! It’s all right,” she called and the guards reluctantly stepped aside. The stranger returned their wary stares and sidled past. “Eser♦t! Good meeting!”

“Good meeting indeed. Maithris, nobody’s heard anything from you for weeks. Now... Where’ve you been? What’s all this? And what is that?”

She chittered, “Ah, I’ve been busy.”

“So busy you couldn’t at least have let people know you were alive?” the newcomer asked, still staring at me. Male, it was a fairly safe bet; With fur the color of straw, white chest fur with a peppering of black vanishing into the waistband of a pair of somewhat stained brown leather breeches. His left ear was also black, the gold ring threaded through the edge a startling contrast.

“A job,” Mai replied. “It came up quite unexpectedly. I didn’t have time for farewells.”

“Huhn. People were worried. But what were you doing? It has something to do with... this?” he looked me up and down. His eyes were a cutting green: not so common amongst Rris.

“Something, yes,” she said. “Oh, and this has a name. Mikah, this is Eser[◆]t. He’s an old friend.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said.

His ears sagged like limp dishcloths. “It talks,” he said in a small voice.

I thought I saw Blunt snigger.

“A,” Maithris gave me a resigned little smile, “he talks. His name’s Mikah: my charge for the time.”

“Charge?” he echoed. “You mean patient? That?”

“Don’t be like that,” Mai said, then looked thoughtfully at me. “He does take a little getting used to.”

“Who?” I asked. “He or I?”

She chittered and slapped my arm in mock-reproach, then she glanced around at the growing crowd, frowned, then said to Eser♦t, “Come on, walk with us.”

He hadn’t taken his eyes off of me, even while we started walking.
“Maithris... what is... he?”

“A friend,” she said, and those words twanged a string inside me. “He’s a h’an, something like that.”

“So you’re a vet now?”

Her ears laid back a bit and she waved a 'no'. "It's not like that. He's not an animal. Just... different."

Eser♦t cocked his head. "This has something to do with those ideas you were trying to [something]?"

"A bit," she said, and the expression her face was almost smugness.

"Hai, so you're going to collect from Chesai? That's not going to please him any."

Mai's face pursed up in a smile. "I'd forgotten about that."

"He'll certainly be trying to."

She smiled again, "I'll make sure he doesn't."

"I'd like to see that," Eser♦t said glanced at me again, then at the guards. "Does this has something to do with the Palace?"

"He's a guest there."

“And all their lordships who’ve been pouring in?”

“Not unrelated,” she said. “There’re a lot of people who want to talk with Mikah.”

“Talk? About what?”

She waved a shrug. “Ideas,” she said.

Confusion tipped his head. “He has a lot of those?”

A low rumble sounded from her, and she flashed me a quick sidelong glance, a small smile, “A, yes. He does. He hasn’t seen much of the city though, so I thought he needed a guide for our trails.”

“Ah. Anyplace in mind?”

“I don’t know. Hai, Mikah, have you tried a roast tail before?”

“Roast tail?” I echoed somewhat dubiously, glancing at her own limb. “Uhm, I don’t believe so.”

She chittered amusement at my misunderstanding. “No, not that. It’s just a

name. Come on, I'll show you."

I smelt the stall before I saw it. One of those scents that reaches in through your nostrils and grabs your tastebuds. I wasn't the only one: I saw Eser♦t lick his chops as we approached. It was a wagon with a green fabric awning and three metal grills set over glowing coals on the cobbles outside. Whole haunches of animal meat were hanging from the wagon, more lay in sizzling rows on those grills. A pair of Rris were working with knives at a cutting block, cubing meat. The finished products were kept on stone warming slabs near the fires.

"Kebabs," I blinked.

"What?" Mai and Eser♦t said at the same time.

"You call them tail roast? My kind calls them something else."

Mai forestalled Eser♦t's obvious questions, "You like them? Yes? Come on."

The cooks gaped at me and I saw fingers flexing on the knives. I was very careful to look as unthreatening as I possibly could. Mai had to attract their attention then repeat her request twice before one of them backed over to place a stick back on the burner, then provided her and Eser♦t with a stick of diced meat. Two heads apiece. She fished in a small pouch at her belt and came up with some thin coppery-hued coins, counted them over carefully into a black palm-pad. The Rris clenched a fist around them and tucked them away into his own belt pouch, then pulled back to take the cooking stick off the grill. Mai accepted it from him, then handed it on to me.

A bit charred on the outside; pink on the inside. Sweet meat, with a slight tang and some pieces were tough to chew. I wondered just how long the meats had been hanging there without refrigeration and was doubly glad of the extra cooking. The sanitation didn't seem to concern Mai who was ripping into her's with gusto, champing away openmouthed on chunks of meat. Eser♦t was just as voracious in his consumption of the kebab, but he watched me while I worked at mine.

"You like that?" he asked after a while, speaking directly to me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Mai's head come up, ears alert.

"It's good," I said, held up the kebab: the stick was a splinter, looked like it'd been hewn off a larger piece of wood. "What is it?"

"Ah... venison, I believe." He glanced around, as if thinking, I can't believe I'm having this conversation... "Do you know what that is?"

"I know," I said.

He ducked his head, worked on another mouthful, then looked at Mai, "I can owe you for this?"

"Why not?" She said. "You always have."

He looked a bit surprised. "So agreeable? You must be being well

[something].”

Again she was faintly evasive. “I can feed myself.”

I took another mouthful, looked around again at the gawping Rris. Somewhere along the way we’d picked up an entourage of cubs: a half-dozen animate bundles of fur with outsized hands and feet scurrying after us, high-pitched yips and snarls ringing above the other noises of the market as they shouted and laughed, skittering around and staring at me. I restrained an urge to throw them pieces of meat. A cub who didn’t look any older than Feher or Chine had been darted past my legs and away between the guards. Mai aimed a swat that never came anywhere close and the cub ducked away, chittering while its friends shouted encouragement. I turned to look at them and beyond them the crowd shifted and I saw a Rris staring at me.

Tan clothing and brown, fawn fur, wide copper eyes. Something fell into place. Not so much the features but the stance, the expression, a flash of green stone before the crowd shifted again and closed around the individual. I kept staring. I felt I knew that Rris, and that knowledge stirred something else inside: a nervousness... no, something more than that; something that sent a cold chill right through me. I dropped my kebab.

“Mikah!” Mai hissed, then looked up at me and abruptly sobered. “Mikah? What is it?”

“Did you see...” I started to say but the Rris was gone.

“What?” Mai pressed.

“I saw... I thought I saw...” Other Rris shifted around, more hot amber eyes staring at me, the noises around me not sounding like any language I knew.

“Mikah?”

I shook myself, looked into another inhuman face and it I heard the blood pulse in my ears several times before something clicked and it was Maithris there, not just an alien.

And something in her face shifted also. “I think maybe we should go back now. Mikah?” The guards were watching me doubtfully.

I nodded faintly. “I... ” I took a deep breath that helped a little. “Yes.”

Her face set: “You’ve had enough. Eser♦t, it’s been good seeing you.”

He looked a little affronted, “Something I did?”

“No. No. Not you. Give my best to the pack, a?”

“I’ll do that,” he said and Mai handed him her food then took my arm, leaving Eser♦t staring after us with a kebab in each hand as the crowd slowly filled in around him again. Her sense of direction was good, better than mine; I was lost

as she led the way through the maze of stalls and merchandise, cutting around and between stands. The market thinned, the press of Rris ebbing until we rounded a corner and saw the carriage waiting on the street alongside a cast iron lamp post.

Rris voices were shouting outside as I sat back on the upholstered seat, leaned my head back and closed my eyes. Presently the carriage rocked, the door closed and we started off. A couple of minutes and the only sounds were the wheels on cobblestones, the sounds of the city outside. Then a hand touched my knee: “Mikah?”

I didn’t look, just said to the blackness behind my eyes, “I’m sorry.”

A snort. “There’s nothing to be sorry about.” Then there was another silence before she asked, “What happened out there?”

I sighed, rolled my head around to look at her: huddled up into her corner of the carriage, hugging her knees with feet on the upholstery. “I thought I saw... I saw a Rris I thought I recognised.”

“From where?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You might have seen them around the Palace.”

Again: “I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

She studied me again. “It frightened you, didn’t it.”

I remembered what those feelings were, looking at Mai and seeing nothing but an animal for that split second, and I felt ashamed. “It was... It was a reminder of where I am.”

Her ears flickered. “You forgot?”

I gave her a small smile. “Sometimes you seem almost human.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, thank you,” her features pursed in a slight smile in return. Outside, the wheels rang hollowly on the bridge flagstones. Maithris caught my glance at the window. “I thought it might be better if we started back.”

I almost started to protest, then nodded resignedly.

“It’s not going anywhere,” she assured me. “There’ll be time enough.”

Through the window grills behind her ornate street lamps kept time, passing by outside as the carriage progressed. Away on the horizon a boat unfurled sails: white sheets billowing into a stiff breeze.

Through the window I saw the helmeted head of the guard at the shipyard gates turning to follow the carriage as we passed by. Animal hooves and wheels clattered on stone as we drew to a halt and then guards were there to open the door. I stepped down, blinking in the morning light as I looked around. The shipyard hadn't really changed much: there were still the brick walls and the wooden sheds, a few boats in docks and more under construction on the quayside. The sound of hammering rang out across the courtyard from one of the cradles where Rris were working on the superstructure; another was smearing something thick and tarry on hull planks. I set off along that familiar walk toward the workshops, the guards falling in behind me.

Smoke hazed the air inside the buildings. Sunbeams from the high windows transfixed it as phantom wisps wound in the draughts. As soon as I stepped inside I could smell burning charcoal, wood, hot metal. A few Rris workers moved around inside the shop, shadows through smoke and twilight: bent over workbenches, a steady ringing of metal on metal rising from where one was laboring at a small forge. The boat was nestled at the head of the slipway, the boards of the hull polished far more than I'd remembered and now with twin fluted smokestacks rising from the stern. They'd been doing some work.

“Mikah!”

A Rris figure vaulted out of the boat onto the scaffold, then down to the ground in a fluid movement like quicksilver on marble. “Suppuration take it, Mikah! It's been too long, ” Chaeitch called as he came over. “Where've you been hiding yourself?”

I stared: the fur covering the left side of his face, chest and left arm was crisped to short curls. Black grease covered his hands. “What happened to you?”

“Ah?” he looked down at himself. “Oh, a bit of trouble with one of those furnaces you were talking about.”

“Just about lit yourself up like a candle, you mean. ” Rraerch appeared around the boat’s prow. “A bit longer and you’d end up looking like Mikah.”

“Then it wasn’t all bad,” I said and Chaeitch flicked a mock-glower at me.

A time of greeting and catching up. They hadn’t been told exactly what had happened to me. They’d heard there’d been another attempt on my life, but that was the all of it. I didn’t enlighten them, but Chaeitch still noticed the scars on my wrist and gave me a faintly puzzled look.

Then it was their turn to show me around the workshop and the boat. I was surprised at what they’d achieved while I was gone. There was a centrifugal governor on the steam line now. The finishing on pipes and joints was of a much higher quality than the prototype I’d last seen; polished brass fittings, varnished wood, a cast-iron boilerplate with a Ris head moulded around the door. No less than eight props were stacked round against walls and on the benches: all slightly different designs and sizes. Different models they’d been trialing. One thing I noticed that they didn’t explain were the steam lines running to the foredeck. They weren’t connected to anything but had sockets where something could be plugged in, along with reinforcing on the deck. I asked.

“A [something],” Chaeitch told me, then saw I didn’t understand. “For lifting

heavy loads. Nets.” He made winding motions with his hands. Ah, a winch or a crane. Interesting idea.

Improved alloys and tools meant that just about every piece of the boat and engine had been refitted at least twice. Stacks of old pipes were waiting to be carted back to the forges and melted down; bits of plating littered the workbenches; I recognised what had once been hoops securing the old boiler hanging from the walls.

Chaeitch had been working down inside the open hull. The top was off the gearbox, the planks alongside littered with papers covered with sketches and notes. The mechanism was a sliding-gear transmission, more complex than it’d been the last I’d seen it. “We tried stepping up the [ratios],” Chaeitch said. “The mills didn’t seem to work as well at high speed.”

Mills? That’s what they were calling them. As in ‘windmill’. And cavitation would be a problem, especially at high speed with propellers that were doubtless of less than optimal design. Nevertheless, what they’d done was still impressive.

Later, I joined the Rris up in Chaeitch’s little office. The grimy window still hadn’t been cleaned, giving a sepia-tinge to the light filtering through. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling and not for the first time I wondered if Chaeitch had ever even thought about getting a cleaning service in.

Still, the desk and cushions were clean enough. Rraerch settled bonelessly to her cushion beside mine, hooking a leg across the other while on the other side of the low desk, Chaeitch produced a bottle from a drawer and laid it on the blotter. A trio of glasses followed.

I frowned. "I'm not supposed to..."

"I know what they said," Chaeitch said as glass clinked on glass. "They can go piss into the wind. Have a drink."

Rraerch lifted her glass and readily did as he suggested. I sipped mine, then took a longer pull. "I thought this would be a good for those rare occasions," Chaeitch said. "And this seems as appropriate as any."

"Where've you been, anyway?" Rraerch asked. "It's been difficult getting an answer out of anyone. I heard there was a disturbance during a banquet. A foreigner attacked you? Something like that?"

"No," I shook my head and looked down into my wine: swirling ruby liquid. I shuddered. "No. Not that. I... I was ill."

"I see they got you your own personal physician," Rraerch smiled.

"Ah," Chaeitch chittered then. "And a nice thing she is too."

"Hnn? You found yourself a lover, Mikah?" Rraerch smiled and twitched her ears. Teasing: I felt a hot flush prickling around the back of my neck and hastily took another drink.

"Is that all you can ever think about?" Chaeitch berated her.

“You know, I do believe it is,” she responded cheerfully, raising her cup again.

He snorted and made a gesture toward her, a mock slashing movement without claws extruded, then asked me, “Who is she anyway?”

“Her name’s Maithris. I met her a while back; after that attack on the carriages.”

“Hnn?” He looked surprised. “That one? How did she come to be looking after you? I’d have thought the Palace would have all the physicians it needs.”

I shrugged. “I’m not entirely sure myself. She requested it.”

Ears went up. “She likes you?” Chaeitch asked, then caught Rraerch’s look. “Ah, sorry. I didn’t mean it to sound like that.”

“I know,” I smiled slightly. “I felt the same way. It’s not... usual.”

“A, you do take some getting used to,” he said and Rraerch chittered and asked, “So, you like her?”

Again I glanced for answers in my drink and looked up to questioning faces:

“Yes. I do. I think I’ve been alone too long.”

“Helps to have friends,” Rraerch murmured, then reached out and a clawed hand gently patted my knee. “Hai, you may look different, but inside there, you’re a good person.” She lapped a sip from her glass then cocked her head and studied me thoughtfully. “There are a lot of Rris I couldn’t say as much for.”

I had to smile. “Thank’s.”

“Careful,” Chaeitch warned me, “I think she’s getting warm for you.”

And Rraerch snorted into her drink. “And you say my mind’s on the mattress. Beside, he’s got himself female companionship for the moment.”

“Hey, We’re just good friends,” I said.

“That’s one name for it, I suppose,” Rraerch smiled at me over the lip of her glass.

Not serious. I’d realised that quicky enough; just an exchange of banter and some innuendo. The drink probably did its bit, but I found myself relaxing with the Rris and it didn’t matter what they looked like, I was just sitting back enjoying a good drop with some friends. Eventually, the conversation meandered around to more serious matters: the current work and ideas for the near future.

The boat would be making its maiden voyage in a few months, after a few more trials. Not too far: along the lake network to an as-yet undisclosed destination. Chaeitch was also interested in converting the engine for use on a railroad. I learned that the idea had already been tried by the Rris. Already there were over a dozen miles of line running out of Blizzard's Coat over on lake Taitied along with some old-model engines. The project had met with limited success, as the engines couldn't handle gradients of even .25, so they were only used for ferrying heavy goods to and from the docks and along the Blizzard [Niagara] river. Now Rraerch was petitioning for government subsidies in expanding that line along the Blizzard river toward Shattered Water.

Still, the pair had their reigns. Both Chaeitch and Rraerch were working to an agenda dictated by higher powers: the Palace, their shareholders and sponsors. Steam engines were high on that list, as were other power supplies. Chaeitch was trying to get a grip on understanding electrical power, something that'd require more time before any serious could be attempted, but he had plans for an experimental telegraph system. Rraerch had funding to produce a series of hulls and steam engines, larger than the current test bed and with more power, cargo space and capabilities. She asked about hull construction techniques, also about our use of sails. I think she was slightly disturbed to learn that apart from recreational use, they didn't play much of a part in my society at all. For a person from a culture where the wind and water are the lifeblood of society I guess that the news that windpower can be superseded might be a little upsetting.

And that afternoon, after a bit of talk and more than a bit of alcohol in the form of a very palatable wine, I realised that there was no reason I couldn't change other things. And they didn't have to be as dry and indiffiferent as metal and wood.

—v—

First came the sound of voices outside, a familiar chitter of laughter, then the

scratch at the door.

I looked up from the papers on the desk and stretched with the warmth of the afternoon sun on my back, then glanced at my watch: right on time. "It's open," I called.

"I'd be surprised if it was otherwise," came the cheerful reply as Maithris poked her head around. "What does you kind say? He'o?"

"Hello yourself," I greeted her as she came in. "Grab a seat. I'll just be a minute."

Maithris sat down opposite, watching as I carefully dipped a quill in the inkwell and scratched a few words on the paper. "What're you doing anyway?"

"Trying to use this damn pen," I grumbled as I finished the sentence, sprinkled a pinch of absorbant sand on the paper and funneled it back into the pot. I sat back and glumly surveyed my somewhat blotchy work. "I think I need more practice."

She also tipped her head, trying to see. "That's your writing?"

I nodded. "My name. I'm not so good at your kind. Anyway, it's just some ideas I wanted to keep straight in my head."

She blinked at me, maybe trying to see those ideas, then gave a small twitch of her ears. “You’ve been busy lately? I haven’t seen a hair of you for what... Two days now?”

“Down at the shipyards again,” I said.

“Sai,” now she smiled. “I hear you’re quite friendly with those two.”

“You seem to hear a lot.”

“With these?” She raised both hands to brush her tufted ears back, letting them spring back into place like a pair of Weebles, “How could I not?”

I had to grin at that and she affected a stern expression and motioned toward her mouth: I hastily rearranged my smile. “Anyway,” she continued, “I also heard you wanted to see me about something.”

“Yes.” I glanced down at my hands, suddenly feeling awkward. She watched me, and with those amber eyes it was quite disconcerting. “I’ve got some time to myself now. I wondered if you’d like to watch some of the... plays I’ve got. Plays from my kind?”

She looked a bit surprised, then amusement pursed her features. “Of course. That’d be fun. Why’d you even have to ask?”

I gave an awkward shrug. “I don’t know. I just thought you might have had something more important to do. Or you just didn’t want to...”

“Enough,” she chuckled, holding up a hand. “No, please. It sounds interesting. I haven’t seen much of your kind. What kind of play?”

I just swept my hand toward the laptop: “Your choice.”

So a few minutes later she was ensconced at the desk, the laptop screen propped in front of her while she scrolled through the movie preview icons. I crouched beside her and answered questions:

“What’s this one?”

“Ah, that’s about a man who’d been a crippled as a soldier in a small, insignificant war. Now he works as a servant for a rich household. The story is about how he tries to... impress a woman who’s already... taken by another man.” Concepts I’d grown up with simply didn’t translate into Rris.

Muzzle wrinkled and head tipped thoughtfully, then the next icon.

“Hai! Those look like Rris.”

Hmm, the old Lion King. “Not quite. They are not-real characters. Animals shown to behave like people. It’s a story for cubs, but it’s also fun for elders;

about growth and change and responsibilities and a people's place in the world."

"Animals?" She leaned forward to squint at the screen. "They look like people. Ah, they're the ones you told me about."

"A."

She cocked her head the other way. "Sounds quite intriguing. And what's this one?"

The scratch at the door interrupted my reply. Mai's head came up, her ears alert, "Who's that?"

"Don't worry," I smiled. "Just food. Good timing too."

She looked surprised, then interested as I answered the door. The Rris servant waiting there with the trolley ducked its head and watched me carefully. "I'll take it," I said and the servant backed off, looking a bit confused as I pulled the trolley inside and closed the door. The tray on the cart was silver, as was the cover, with a handle formed by a pair of entwined silver swan heads. Mai was standing, sniffing the air as I wheeled the trolley back and presented it to her, "I just thought we could use something to eat. Let's see if they got it right."

Raised the lid with a flourish. Hot steam and a mouthwatering familiar aroma rose into the air; Mai pulled her head back, looking almost comically startled.

“First time I’ve had pizza on a silver platter,” I mused. “Doesn’t look too bad.”

Pizza. Jumbo sized. Already sliced. Tomato sauce, cheese, carefully selected garnishings and a plethora of meats. All laid out on a huge platter among silverware, fine china plates and fingerbowls with intricate gold and blue patterns. Maithris ran a shockingly pink tongue around her chops, then asked me, “What is that? A dish of your kind?”

“Sort of,” I said. “A tradition. Something to eat while watching plays. If they got it right, that side should be cooked more to your taste.”

She took the offered plate - somewhat dubiously - sniffed, then picked up the piece: awkwardly, considering the size of it. A lump of topping slid off the base and fell to the plate, but she managed a mouthful, chewed in the openmouthed way of all Rris, then swallowed and licked crumbs and cheese from the fur around her mouth: “It’s good,” was her verdict.

“Glad you approve,” I smiled, then gestured at the laptop, “Shall we?”

“Certainly,” she bowed, then took another bite from her pizza, licking her chops again. “And bring the rest of this stuff, ah?” Barely understandable through that mouthful.

The first film she settled on was - ironically enough - The Lion King. I wasn’t too certain how she’d take it and kept an eye on her as the opening credits rolled. When she first saw the characters a visible flinch jolted her and she leaned forward, watching as the animated cubs romped.

“Do you want me to tell you what they’re saying?” I asked.

“Huhn?” She cocked her head, considering, then tipped her hand. “Ah. No, thank you. Just watch I think.”

So we did. Settled ourselves on the floor with a few pillows as cushions and leaning back against the foot of the bed. She sprawled out, bonelessly, her legs splayed and claws hooked into the carpet while the tray of pizza was sitting handy between us. The stuff wasn’t half bad actually: the crust was different and the cheese had an unusual flavour, but all in all it was quite palatable. Besides, it was good to have a taste of home again, and this was as close as I’d been for a long time: Watching movies with a friend and eating junk food. All right, so there were a few niggling differences, such as the nature of my companion; but hey, those I could live with.

Anyway, Mai wasn’t such an unappealing companion. I glanced across at her as she smiled, laughed at scenes that tickled her in some way, munched away on slices of pizza. A friend. No matter what she resembled, I liked her. If only she were...

No, that was getting into dangerous territory. A borderland where it might be possible to cross for a time, but anything beyond that was impossible. I’d been there once before and I didn’t need it again, but it wasn’t so easy to close the doors on those emotions.

I watched her wince as flames rose on the screen and Scar vanished for the last time. Yeah, he was scum, but he had style. The final credits scrolled onto the screen and her ears went back, “What’s this?”

“The play’s over. The names of the people who made this.”

She watched for a few seconds. “There’re a lot of them.”

“It takes a lot of work to make something like that.”

“Ah,” She rubbed her muzzle, “I suppose it would. I wouldn’t know where to start.” Then she stretched her legs: one at a time, her peculiar feet pointed and quivering, held for a short time then lowered. “Sai. That was intended for cubs?”

“That was the idea. A lot of adults enjoy it though.”

“All that for cubs. It was very...” She seemed to hunt for words, then said, “Mild, I think would be the word. No hunting, no blood. Violence was hidden. Real fighting is quite different. And no sex or real excitement.”

I blinked. I’d never looked on it that way. What were Rris plays like? “It was intended for children.”

She cocked her head. “So you said. You have different standards?”

“Don’t you?”

“I don’t think anyone makes entertainments especially for cubs. Maybe toys and songs and there are books for education, but not plays.”

“Why not?”

Maithris waved a shrug. “The [something] are trying to make money. I dare say it would cost more to produce such a show than it would earn. Anyway, if they can they simply go to the ones that are showing.”

“Do you have age limits for plays?”

She looked puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“Uhn...are there age restrictions? I mean, plays where only Rris over a certain age are allowed in?”

Now surprise widened her eyes. “What? Of course not. I think the idea is to try and attract as many people as possible. You mean your kind do that?”

I nodded. “As you said, that film doesn’t have show violence or sex. Cubs’ films don’t.”

It was her turn to ask, “Why?”

“It can be... disturbing. We try to keep them from... what is the word? Unpleasantness?”

She chittered at that. “Sex? Unpleasant?”

I shrugged slightly, “There are things they should learn about when they’re a bit older.”

“Huhn,” she mulled that over, then flickered her ears and her muzzle pursed in a smile. “The differences between us run a lot deeper than simply looks, a?”

I returned a tight smile that I didn’t entirely feel. “I’d noticed.”

“Yes,” she said slowly and then hesitated, looking to the screen where the Disney logo sedately rotated. “I suppose you would have,” she said in a small voice, then smiled again. “Well, perhaps we could have a look at another play? Is there one you think’s particulaly good?”

So, I showed her through some of the other films on the cards, translating the synopses for her until she picked one. Basic Instinct isn’t my favourite film, in fact there’re a lot I’d choose before that one: the only reason I had it on record was because I wanted to grab the leg-crossing scene and splice Elliot’s head onto it. Don’t ask: private joke. Still, it was her choice. Anyway, there’d be plenty of time to see the rest.

We finished the pizza in the first quarter. Mai watching wide-eyed and absently gnawing her way through slice after slice. Maybe the Lion King was entertaining, but it really didn't show anything of back home. Basic Instinct though, that had the cars and buildings, gadgetry and conveniences, the people, the sex and the murder. When the clothes came off Mai's ears went up. Then she said, "Oh."

A bit later, above the soundtrack from the bed: "That's a female, isn't it."

"That's right."

"But what's she...Huhn..." She trailed off and just stared with her head cocked and jaw slightly open.

She watched, and I could see confusion on her face as the film went on. Things like the car chases, the telephone conversations, they all needed explanations. I gave them when she asked, but for the most part she was content to watch the characters, all their running to and fro. Still, there was a reason that film had been so controversial, and that held just as much mystery for Maithris. I know a lot of it went right over her head: nuances and hints that I could read readily enough simply didn't register with her. The notorious leg-crossing scene however, did elicit a confused expression, as did the final sex scene.

Mai blinked, then her ears tipped back. "Mikah," she asked slowly. "Why does she tie their hands? Is that... common?"

"Not uncommon. It's a... game. Showing dominance."

“Huhn,” a low growl was all the opinion she offered as she watched Sharon Stone riding her partner, then: “Doesn’t that hurt? I mean, [something] him like that?”

I remembered similar scenes with Jackie and gave a small chuckle, “Hurt? No.” I didn’t know what Rris male physiology was like in those areas, but by now I was quite sure it was considerably different from mine. “No. It’s quite enjoyable.”

She glanced at me, then back to the screen. Her ears laid back a little but she didn’t say anything more until the titles ran. For a few seconds she blinked at them, then leaned back and stretched her arms out. “Your world... It’s really like that? Those vehicles and buildings... so many paved roads. To hear you speak about it is one thing, but to see it...” she broke off and scratched at her neck. “Hai, I suppose to you it’s quite normal.”

“Ah, these plays,” I gestured at the laptop, “usually... ah, try to make things look more interesting than they really are. It’s as real as any story can be.”

Mai just leaned back, staring up at the ceiling. “The story was about dominance, wasn’t it. Control. Not just in the sex, but in their lives. That female was teasing the male, letting him get so close but no further. He was trying to think he was leading the hunt, but she had him following trails leading nowhere. Letting him believe he was in control and using that mistaken belief to lead him like reigns.”

I looked at her, more than a little surprised. “I thought you couldn’t speak my language.”

The Rris doctor smiled. "I've seen enough of you and your expressions. I could understand some of theirs. A story about a state of mind; we have such, but I haven't heard of one so subtle. Using frustration as others might use a knife."

Sharon Stone, subtle? An alien with no understanding of the language and yet she'd picked out details I'd never considered. "You can see all that through expressions?"

She clicked teeth together in a snap at the air, then glanced sidelong at me. "They're something you have an abundance of. Once you're accustomed to them, they do say a lot about what goes on inside your head."

"Ah. And you're an expert on that, aren't you?" I teased.

"Perhaps in the differences," she retorted, then her pupils flickered to black in sudden distress and she turned away: suddenly interested in the outside sky. "It's getting dark. You think we'd have time to see another?"

I shrugged. "Sure. You like a drink? I'm afraid I can only offer water."

"Fine," she smiled and stretched a leg out, then pulled it back to her chest. "First though, I've got to urinate or something's going to burst."

While she was gone a menial came by to light the ceiling lamps, a touch with

a burning taper on the end of a pole and the gas wicks glowed to life. The Rris servant ducked its head and left as silently as it had come. It didn't take long before the light drew the bugs, a half dozen butting against the ceiling and lamps and more bouncing off windowpanes. I paused before closing the drapes, watching the last of the sun vanishing beyond the silhouette of treetops in the west: a darkening sky, the underbellies of high wind-streaked cloud painted sienna and salmon by the setting sun. Shadows fluttered against the sunset as a few late birds retired to their roosts in the trees.

"Something interesting out there?" the voice behind me asked.

"Just a pleasant evening." I closed the windows, drew the curtains and turned back to Mai, who finished tying the drawstring on her breeches before perching herself at the foot of the bed. "You don't find it a bit warm?" she asked.

I smiled at that and raised an eyebrow: "What do you think?"

She hissed softly and scratched at a temple with a clawtip. "Foolish question, a?"

"I've heard worse," I assured her. "Now, you've chosen a story you'd like to see?"

"I don't know..." she hesitated. "Are there any you find amusing?"

"Ah," I grinned and knelt down at the keyboard to begin sorting through some

of my clip files. “I think I can help you there. I’ve got some plays that’re considered classic humor.”

“There’s no color,” she said as the preview icons appeared on the desktop.

“No. They’re from a long time ago; before they could... show color. There’s no talking either, but I don’t think that’s going to matter. They’re from when my kind first started making plays like this, but they’re still amusing.” I shrugged. “At least I think they are. I’m not sure you’ll think the same.”

“I’ll try to understand them,” Mai patted my head then scrambled down to sit beside me as the film started. She stared. For a while she watched the screen and I saw her jaw twitch, then she shuddered and chittered once; then again; and again.

I don’t know what was funnier: Chaplin’s slapstick antics, or the furry felid rolling around in helpless spasms of laughter.

—v—

I’d spent enough time in the university, but this was the first time I’d actually gone in through the front door.

I sat back, watching with interest as the carriage turned and wrought iron gates passed by outside as we entered the university grounds. Gravel crunched and rattled under iron-bound wheels as we followed the short avenue through the

grounds, a sound that changed to a low rumble on the flagstones paving the sweeping drive directly outside the main buildings.

“I didn’t know this place was so big,” Mai said as she peered through the windows.

“You haven’t been here?”

“Could never afford it,” she shrugged. The carriage rocked to a halt and she patted my leg, “Ah, well. Come along.”

I ducked out of the carriage after her and stood in front of the university building, squinting into bright sunlight reflecting from white-framed windows in the sandy brick facade. Either a new building or it’d been recently refurbished. There were Rris around, entering or leaving the building. A group on their way down the front steps stopped to gawp at me, moving aside as Mai and I passed them on our way to the front door.

It took a while to find the library. Two Rris we tried to ask didn’t seem to want to stay around and talk. The first said it didn’t know while the second uttered an inarticulate squeak and ran. Third time lucky: a group of seven younger Rris who didn’t run. I heard their voices before they rounded a corner and stopped dead.

“Hai,” Maithris took advantage of their surprise, “We’re looking for Chirit ah Riers. You know where we might find him?”

They exchanged dubious looks, then one ventured, “Ah, his study’s down the hall. Last door.”

“Thank you,” Mai smiled.

“Ah, sir,” another Rris spoke up and I stopped, surprised that the Rris was addressing me. “Forgive my asking, but you know Rehichia wasn’t very happy about what happened at his seminar?”

“No?” So, he’d found out. “Good. I can’t say I was either.”

“So we noticed.” That muttered aside drew a couple of chitters.

“Sir?” another Rris student - small, slender build with light greyish fur peppered with black - watched me with green eyes. “Is what they say about you true?”

I carefully waved a Rris shrug. “I don’t know. What do ‘they’ say?”

Chitters, and the Rris ducked its head. “You’re an ape?”

Mai winced.

“Ape.” I chewed the word and smiled with restraint. “I’m an ape in the same way Rris are those skeletons Rehichia showed. It was a very long time ago.”

“Ah. You look different.” Eyes looked me up and down. “Don’t you get cold without fur?”

I glanced at Mai, “Why does everyone ask that?”

Now she shrugged. “I really couldn’t imagine. Now, I’m sorry, but ah Riers probably doesn’t want to wait around for the rest of the day. Mikah?”

“Yeah, You’re right,” I sighed and bade the students farewell: “Good meeting you.”

“Ah, it was,” the gray furred one said as I walked off with Mai. Chitters rose from behind and I wasn’t sure if they were making fun of me or not.

A claw nicked my arm. “Made a friend, a?” Mai smiled at me.

“Did I?”

She snorted. “You saw. She was quite interested in you.”

“She? That was a female?” I considered that for a second, then shrugged. “I suppose I am a bit more interesting to look at than most Rris.”

Mai hissed and took a swipe at a wall, claws retracted so her fingertips just slapped wood. “She,” she chittered. “Of course that was a female. You still can’t tell? And by ‘interested’ I mean she looked like she might have wanted to try something that tastes a little different.”

“What?”

“She was looking for some spice, a?” Now she lolled her tongue at me.

“You mean it was sexual?”

“A,” she smirked.

“You... she... She was coming on to me?” I looked back down the hall, but of course they were gone.

“Whatever that means,” she said. “Why so surprised? Looking at your entertainments, it could be hard to imagine your kind thinks about anything else.”

“Oh, very amusing,” I growled and she laughed even as we reached the last door in the corridor. She scratched above the latch and a muffled reply sound

from inside.

The door squeaked a bit and I followed Maithris into gloom; bumped into her when she stopped inside to look around. Some light filtered in through a small window, the only light in a room that seemed to be papered with glass fronted bookshelves. All of these were filled to overflowing with books, scrolls, and sheaves of parchment. What didn't fit into those shelves sought refuge on the desk opposite the door. Unusual: it wasn't one of the low desks that seemed the norm for Rris, one that required you to sit on a floor cushion. Instead, it looked like something that could have come straight out of a human executive's office, a huge old-looking thing fronted with heavy mahogany panels, the wood matching that of the two low chairs set before it. The desktop itself was lost beneath teetering stacks of leather-bound volumes and slim folios that formed a parapet around the edges of the desk from behind which a frazzled Rris's face looked up at us. "I was expecting you a while ago," Chirit said.

Maithris ducked her head. "Apologies, Sir. This place is bigger than I thought."

He chuckled softly. "Ah. Strangers can find it confusing. Mikah, I haven't seen you since Rehichia's seminar."

I sighed. "Everyone seems to remember that," I said.

"Huhn. Good to see that [something] fool have some of the air taken out of him," the elderly Rris snorted. I felt slightly confused: Kh'hitch had reamed me out for that tomfoolery, but most other Rris seemed far from bothered by it. "Be seated," he offered.

I had to pick up an armload of papers from my chair, looked around for a place to set it before finally placing it on the floor. The upholstery was worn, the stuffing so compacted that it felt like I was sitting on wood, save this wood had been shaped by inhuman rear ends. Not so comfortable. Mai also squirmed a bit and her tail looped out through a groove in the back.

“Now, business,” Chirit continued. “You requested to see the archives?”

“Yes, sir,” Maithris said and glanced at me. “Mikah, he has a question. I think the only answer might be here.”

“And this question?”

“Has there ever been anything like him recorded? Anything nobody could explain?”

A slow exhalation of breath. “You’re not the only one asking that. His highness has had a group working on that question for some time now. Plenty of strange happenings in the records, but as yet nothing like him.”

I hadn’t expected much more, but, “Perhaps I could look at a few,” I offered. “I might recognise something... I don’t know, I might see something that means more to me than it would to Ris.”

He cocked his head and one hand came up to stroke his greying cheek tufts. “You believe there’s much chance of that?”

I glanced at Mai, then looked away and shook my head. No, there wasn't much chance at all.

"Sir," she said. "There might be something that's been missed. There might be some scent that'll tell us what happened to him." Then she touched my arm and squeezed gently as she said, "He hasn't many other hopes."

Chirit ducked his head: "By all means." Then he stood, using the side of the desk to lever himself to his feet, growling a bit as he did so. "I can show you what we have, but there's so much to be sorted... it will take a long time."

He had a walking stick propped beside the desk, a tool he leaned heavily on and I saw his left hand and arm carried a long strip where the fur didn't grow. I guess I was staring because he said to me, "Altercation with someone who was a better bladesman than I. What about your face?"

"Altercation with someone who had bigger teeth than I," I said.

Chirit's head went back, the pupils of his eyes dilated to all but blot out the amber that was usually there. Maithris gave me a look and I realised than mentioning fighting Ris might not have been the smartest move. For a few seconds Chirit studied me, then relaxed and snorted. "Huhn. Come on."

It was just down the hall. A glass-panelled door that led down a short wooden staircase and along another hall. I caught glimpses of some of the rooms off to either side: storerooms they looked like, stacks of cloth, or boxes, bottles. A few

workrooms with benches and tools hung carefully on the walls. The smell was musty, like dust and old leather and stronger, chemical scents. A utility corridor, the door at the end opening into the university library.

Not as ornate as the Palace library, it had a newer look and feel about it. The high ceiling and the upper walls were plastered and whitewashed, a brilliant white in the illumination from skylights. The main room was a rectangle with various antechambers and vestibules branching off down its length. Shelves filled all other available wall space. Dark wood and brass railings polished to a sheen. Spines of paper and colored leather - black, red, green, gold and brown, thousands of them, lined on shelves racked up so high they'd have to use footladders to reach the upper ones. Tables were arranged down the centre of the library, the low-style with floor cushions and perhaps a dozen Rris poring over books. Heads lifted at the sound of Chirit's stick on the floor as he led us toward the back of the library, a low susurrant filled the room behind us.

Mai glanced up at me: just checking. I returned a tight smile.

Chirit led us to some private studies set toward the rear of the library: small rooms with reading tables, lamps and cushions and doors, set up for seclusion, quiet and privacy. The elderly Rris opened the door to the last and I heard a startled yelp, then, "Sir. I wasn't expecting... Sai!"

That exclamation sounded when I ducked through the door. A Rris was standing where it'd apparently jumped up from a low table scattered with literature, unrolled scrolls and writing equipment. A slate chalkboard hanging from the wall was covered with Rris text, some parts circled or underlined.

"That's him, isn't it." The Rris was staring at me, ears slowly coming up again. "That's what this is all about?"

“A, that’s him,” Chirit said. “Mikah, aesh Teremae, this is Makepeace...”

“Makepeace?” I blinked, not sure if I’d translated correctly. The Rris all looked at me.

“Yes,” Chirit said. “Makepeace.”

“Okay.” I almost made a crack about something that’d be completely meaningless to them, then shrugged. “Makepeace. Why not?”

Chirit coughed, then continued. “Makepeace has been hunting the archives for any references she can find. I think you’ll want to talk to her about her findings, so I’ll leave you in her care. Makepeace, I expect you to afford our guests every courtesy.”

“Of course,” she ducked her head.

“How many are working on this?” Mai asked. “Not just her, surely?”

“Hai, no. Malichai and Hesk are hunting the archives at the moment and there are a dozen students involved; when their studies allow. Now, if you will excuse me?”

“Of course.”

“Ma’am,” Chirit flicked his ears at her, then started for the door. A moment’s hesitation, then he turned back to me. “Best luck,” he said, then was gone.

Best luck. I hoped I’d have it.

We sat, settling ourselves at the table. Makepeace settled as gracefully as a falling feather and watched as I took my place somewhat more awkwardly, flinched when I spoke. “Chirit explained what you’ve been doing. If you’ve found anything... I’d like to have a look at anything you’ve found.”

“Sir,” her hands busied themselves with scraps of paper, “There isn’t much. Such an ambiguous request and there is so much to search. What we’ve found... we just don’t know what we’re looking for...”

“Makepeace,” I interjected and she stopped her babbling. Scared, I recognised that look. “I don’t bite.”

“He’s not as terrible as he looks,” Mai chipped in.

“You flatterer, you,” I grumbled.

She smiled. “You get used to him. Believe me. Now, what’ve you turned up?”

My time with Maithris had made me forget a few things. One of those was how strange Ris tended to react to my presence. Maithris's reassurances smoothed Makepeace's ruffled fur, but she still wasn't that comfortable addressing me. For the first hour or so, Maithris acted as a buffer between us: a go-between whom Makepeace found it easier to talk to.

They'd found a lot of reports of strange occurrences. Reports of noises or lights or disturbances:

"... and there was a noise of thunder in the night and the next day the milk cattle were dry."

"... were fires throughout the town..."

"... green lights around the guild gates. A steward was slightly burned when he struck it with a poker..."

"A hamlet was struck with an unknown illness. Several people were struck down with debilitating fevers..."

Hours later: Pages upon pages of notes and references of things like that. Some were unusual, inexplicable, or otherwise mysterious; many others were foolish or simply the results of ignorance. There were histories of strange animals, most of which had since been identified and in a few cases turned out to be outright hoaxes or jokes. But there was nothing that might have suggested the presence of another person... another human. Nothing that might have linked to

a way home.

“You were really expecting something?” Maithris asked.

I rubbed my forehead and eyes, then sighed into my hands and raised my head, shook it: “It was a long shot.”

“Long shot...? Ai, I understand.” The weight of a furry hand settled on my shoulder and squeezed; claws nicked my skin through my shirt, “There’s still a lot of places to search, and the other kingdoms might have something. I’m sure they’d be willing to search their own archives.”

“Yeah,” I flipped the notebook in front of me shut and patted her hand, held it for a second before she lowered it, then noticed Makepeace staring at us. “How much more stuff like this is there?” I asked.

“Uhhh,” she blinked and tore her eyes off Mai’s hand. “A lot, sir. We’ve still got most of the archives ahead of us.”

“You see,” Mai told me brightly. “There’s still hope.”

“Yes, there’s still hope, ” I replied with a small smile. “Just not much.”

She looked a little pained, stared at me for a few seconds, then hissed air through closed teeth and turned to the other Rris: “Makepeace, thank you.

You've been most helpful."

Makepeace ducked her head and said, "My job, Ma'am."

"Of course." Mai looked at the papers covering the table. "We'll doubtless be back again, but if you find anything..." She left that hanging. If they found anything, it was their choice whether or not the information made its way to us.

"Chirit will be told," Makepeace said and Mai tapped my arm, "Come on, there's nothing else we can do here."

"Thank you," I told Makepeace before we left her to get on with her work. As we walked away from the room we passed a pair of Rris who stopped to stare after us. I heard a few muted comments and turned to see them going into the room we'd just left: Makepeace's partners I guessed. Well, she'd have an interesting story for them.

"Not too disappointed?"

A tight smile. "It wasn't much more than I'd expected."

"Ah."

Faces turned to watch us as we left the library, as they all the way back to the front steps of the university. The carriage was still waiting, the river sitting up

straight as we came out. A flick of the reigns, hooves and wheels rattling on flagstones as the carriage moved to draw up at the foot of the steps.

“Sai,” Maithris touched my arm, a leathery finger tracing across my skin to get my attention. “Maybe you’d like to go somewhere?”

That caught my attention, “Such as?”

“Ah,” she squinted up at the sun, the light awakening highlights in the fur of her muzzle. “Hungry? I know a place we can get some food.”

“And they’d let me in?”

“Well, you’ve been there before.”

I had to think for a second before the penny dropped. “There?” I asked incredulously.

“It might not look like much, but the food’s good. Anyway, I’ve got friends there; they’ll put you up. What do you say?”

What did I say? I was tired, disillusioned. It would have been easy to go back to my rooms and hide my head in the sand, ignore the alien around me, shelter from the world: a sure path back to the scars on my wrist. No, she was offering her friendship and I’d be a fool to refuse. I returned her smile:

“I say yes.”

—v—

“We’ll be fine,” Mai assured the captain.

The soldier looked uncertain. “Ma’am, we have our orders, and leaving you alone in there...” He gestured at the weather-stained tavern, the facade with the stuffed bird above the door bathed in the warmth of the setting sun. Wisps of clouds in the otherwise clear sky beyond the red-tiled roof reflected golden light.

“In there are my friends,” she replied. “Nothing’s going to happen.”

“Ma’am. You can’t be certain. And I was ordered...”

“And you know the authority his highness vested me,” she growled.

The captain went rigid, then his ears laid back as he ducked his head. “Yes, ma’am. We’ll wait.”

His tail was lashing as he went to rejoin his squad. Mai came over to where I was waiting. “No problems,” she said.

“He seems to think there is,” I observed, then looked at her curiously: “What did you mean, about your authority?”

She waved a shrug, “Time for that later, ah? Come on, you might be able to go all day without eating, but I’m hungry.” She took a few steps, then looked back, “You’re coming?”

I rolled my eyes, then hurried to catch up with her.

The reaction when we stepped inside was predictable. There were maybe twenty five or thirty Rris at tables and booths around the room. Conversation around the tavern died, ripples of silence spreading around the room as they saw us, saw me. The crackling of the fire in the hearth was loud in the stillness, the smell of food mingling with the scent of a large number of Rris: not the most appealing aroma. I looked to Mai for her cue and saw her ears had gone down. I guess she hadn’t expected such a reaction, but if she was going to take me to places like this, she’d better get used to it. It was brighter in there than it’d been the last time I’d visited: Light slanted in through the front windows, sunbeams visible in the smoky air.

“Maithris?” a voice ventured from the back of the room and I saw several Rris flinch at the sound. “Hai! Maithris!”

The Rris who’d called out was one of a group at a table back toward the fire. The caller’s tablemates all looked at it as if they thought it were crazy.

“You remember Eser❖t,” Maithris murmured to me. “Come along.”

I stayed at her side as we threaded our way through the room, accompanied by the sound of furniture scraping on the floor as patrons shied away from me and the low murmur that spread in our wake. Rris all around stared openly, including those sitting with Eser❖t. Five of them. Of the Rris gathered at that table I only recognised Eser❖t, that one from the market with his dark left ear and the gold ring threaded through it. The others were strangers, sitting with their food forgotten on the plates before them as they watched me.

One of them, wearing a tie-died tunic trimmed with what looked like hemp rope, looked at Eser❖t and twitched his ears my way: “That’s what you were talking about?”

“Huhn, I told you,” he snorted, staring as we approached. “Maithris, what’re you doing here?”

She cocked her head, “Same thing you are, I’d expect. We thought we’d hunt down some good food. So, what sort of mood is Yischas in?”

“Hnnn,” he looked down at his plate and the half-eaten meat there. “Hurried, I think.”

Another Rris, a smoking corncob pipe in his hand, leaned forward: “Hai, Maithris. Decided to [something] with the rest of us lowly creatures, ah? What’s the story behind your... friend there?”

“I’d have thought he’d have told you,” she said, getting up at Eser♦t.

“Didn’t believe me,” he said, toying with his mug. “Rockheads.”

“Hai,” another retorted. “You pick your brain often enough. Half of everything you say exists only in your skull.”

“That looks like it’s in my skull?” He jerked a thumb with the claw extended in my direction. I frowned.

“Move over,” Mai tapped the shoulder of the Rris sitting on the bench closest to us. The Rris snarled at her and she lightly cuffed its muzzle; “Shut it, Heschi. Just move along.”

Plates rattled as the Rris did so and Mai sat, scooting along to leave the place at the end free and patted it with her hand, “Have a seat.”

I did. Gingerly sitting and hearing wood creak. It made me feel less conspicuous than standing there, but I still felt eyes boring into my back. Background conversations were starting up again: hushed whispers washing the room in a low white noise. I couldn’t help but wonder how many were talking about me, a thought that was disrupted when Mai’s hand patted the right leg of my jeans. “I’d like to introduce all of you to Mikah. Don’t be put off by his looks: he’s almost a Rris inside.”

“It talks?” one asked. “Eser♦t, you said it can talk.”

“Yes, it can talk,” I said. “And its name is Michael.”

“That answers your question?” Mai asked the dumbfounded faces around the table.

“Told you,” Eser♦ was saying. “Would you listen? No. Laugh, you did. Pinheads.” Then he ripped a mouthful of meat off the haunch on the plate before him and chewed noisily and openmouthed.

“Mikah,” Mai gestured at the staring faces, clockwise around the table starting with the masticating Rris opposite me. “Eser♦ you know. These are Tohechinai, Mesic, K’heseri, Heschi.”

“Please to meet you,” I said.

“Maithris,” the one named Mesic said, “What are you doing with... this?”

“Showing him some of the highlights of our city. Don’t really know why I brought him here...”

A hiss of exasperation: “You know what I mean.”

I saw fingers curl, her claws extruding to hook into the wood of the tabletop.

“He was ill. The Palace came to me for help tending him. Now, I’m helping him around, teaching him a bit.”

“You’re male, are you?” K’heseri said to me.

“Yes,” I replied. “What about you?”

Eser♦ coughed. There were chitters and K’heseri looked surprised. “Is that a joke?”

Maithris sighed. “No joke. I suppose we should get this out of the way.” Then she went around the table, starting with Eser♦: “Male, male, female, female, male, female.” The last was herself.

“You can’t tell?” Eser♦ asked.

“Not very well,” I admitted.

“Not teaching him well enough,” K’heseri observed. “Must make your sex life awkward. Hai, the ones with the penises are males; those who don’t have them, aren’t. Does that help?”

Laughter chattered around the table. I couldn’t tell if it was cruel or just amused.

“I think he’s doing quite well,” Mai retorted and I can’t explain how much her defense meant to me. “It’s just he has problems in the most unexpected areas.”

Hmm, inflates my balloon, then punctures it just as efficiently.

Across the table, Tohechinai took a drag on his pipe and blew sweetly-scented smoke into the air, then asked, “What are you? Where’re you from?”

“That’s a long story,” I said.

“I’ve got time.”

I looked at Mai and she waved a shrug: “We’ve got a while. Anyway, it’s an interesting tale. Mikah, I’ll get you some food if you like. What’s the dish today?”

“Stew,” Mesic sighed. “The rolls are fresh though.”

“Great. Rolls and stew good for you?”

“Fine,” I said. “Any chance of a drink?”

“Sai, better than average,” she smiled and got up, patting my shoulder on her way past.

Eser♦t leaned forward: “So, what’s this story?”

“I come from a long way away...”

“I didn’t think you lived next door,” Heschi said and the others laughed.

“Hey, you want to hear this?” I asked.

“Apologies.” He subsided and took a pull from his cup.

They listened while I told my story. I gave them the short version, editing a few bits and pieces. I didn’t mention the accusations of murder that’d been leveled against me, the times I’d had to kill, nor the disparity between our cultures. There were a few interruptions, some questions. I was about halfway halfway through when Mai returned with a tray of food. The place wasn’t wealthy: the plates were rough lathed wood, grease from meals soaked into it. I touched the unfinished wood and suddenly realised how far above all this I was at the Palace with the bone china and fine cutlery and hot and cold running water. Even there I missed the luxuries of home, but compared with a place like this, I was living in the lap.

“Hai, you going to finish your story?” Eser♦t asked.

“Uh?” I looked up from my reverie. “Oh, yeah. Sorry. ” I broke off a piece of bread, dipped it in gravy and nibbled on that as I continued my tale. They listened while I tried to eat and talk at the same time, an exercise that wasn’t entirely succesful: my accent wasn’t crystal clear to Rris at the best of times. It was when I finished that they started asking questions, mostly about where I came from. The explanations were difficult: these guys weren’t the educated upper class. They were dock workers, weavers, shopkeepers. Granted, they were better educated than a human from a comprable period, but that didn’t mean they had much of an idea of what their world was like. Of all of them only Mai and Tohechina had any real knowledge of geography, the smoking Rris being the manager of a warehouse storing goods brought in on the lake network. My story that I ‘just appeared’ in their land confused them and I think I left them with the impression that my kind existed in some distant and unexplored corner of their land.

And when I told them what what my occupation was, there was an outbreak of laughter, chittering like chipmunks on speed. “Ai, Eser♦t,” Mesic chuckled, “you hear that? You’ve got competition.”

Eser♦t retaliated with a piece of bread and a snort, “Him? Do I look worried?”

“Perhaps you should be,” Mai put in. “He’s not bad.”

“Ah? As good as me?”

“Well, perhaps not. But I’m sure one day you’ll catch up with him.”

More laughter. Eser♦'s eyes narrowed and he growled, a low rumble that didn't do anything to deter the amusement.

"You're an artist?" I asked him, my interest roused.

"I thought I was," he growled.

"What do you work with? I mean, what material?"

"Paints," he said warily, as if he wasn't quite sure if he should be offering that answer.

"I've seen the paintings at the Palace. They are paints made with oil?"

"Ah," he gestured affirmative. "I suppose they would be. Expensive, but good to work with. You know of them?"

"Yes. A bit slow to dry, but the color is..." I fumbled for words, trying the one I thought meant 'deep', then looked at Mai, "Is that right?"

She smiled, "Good try. You said 'hithirchi'ch'." A usage of the term 'depth' that didn't make sense except when applied to something like a well or river.

“Oh.” I frowned. “I meant the color is... stronger. I’m sorry, I’m still learning your language.”

“Surprising you can talk at all,” K’herseri observed.

“Hold,” Eser♦t said, looking puzzled. “You said it was a ‘bit slow to dry’. You know something faster?”

“A few paints work like oils, but dry much faster.”

“A?” His eyes widened. “What’s it called? How do you make it...”

“A special oil mix. I don’t have the details, but I can find out...”

I guess I lost track of time. It didn’t matter that he wasn’t human, he was someone I had something in common with. For the first time in a long while I spent hours talking shop and I enjoyed it. Just chatting with no real pressure or demands. Around me conversations were starting up again, the sound of cutlery and laughter, the snarls of an argument riding above the background noise.

One of those rare times when I almost felt a part of the world around me. And later on when Mai and I once again stepped out into the night air, the three-quarter moon was past its apogee. I looked up at the stars and the wisps of cloud there and breathed deeply: smelling water and the faint taste of smoke.

A hand touched my shoulder: “You enjoyed yourself?” Mai asked.

I looked down at those amber eyes and smiled. “Yes. Very much.”

—v—

I opened the doors.

I didn’t know what was in there, but I could feel it. There was blackness in there as the rickety doors swung soundlessly open, the wood as pale and as bleached as bones. I walked, through marble halls where my footsteps echoed from walls, along endless corridors. Something was stalking me: hunting me. Dark shapes fluttered across the edges of vision.

Heart tightening in my chest. Trying door after door. They opened onto more doors.

A glittering room of white and light where masks surrounded me, orbiting in stately grace. Human masquerades, a menagerie of fantastic creatures, cat faces... circling, catching at me, the light and shadow blending; positive and negative shifting until branches were waving against the black sky. A forest of bone-white trees, like living driftwood and in their depth lithe shapes flickered, a feeling of being hunted by something that lived in the corner or my fears.

Babbling water. Crystal water over dark stones. I touched the water, the reflection...

Amber eyes over a snarl that exploded from the darkness, teeth sinking deep, claws tearing and raking...

Echoes of my scream were still raw in my throat when the Rris I was fighting turned to a tangle of rumpled sheets. In the darkness I froze as reality seeped in past the terrors, then sagged back into the sweat-dampened cloth. I lay there, panting hard while knotted muscles twitched and sent jolts of pain through deep scars.

I don't know how long I lay there in a pile of twisted bedclothes, staring into the darkness. When finally I rolled over to stand, my legs were shaking so violently I only managed it on my second try.

Enough moonlight found its way in through the bathroom window, casting a blue light over the tiles. I fumbled the pitcher before managing to fill the bowl, then splashed handfuls onto my face. The water was cold, dribbling down through my beard to drip onto my bare chest and shoulders. I closed my eyes and leaned on the bench, opened them to look down into the bowl and see the ripples and the face staring back at me. I shuddered.

"Mikah?"

"Hi, Maithris," I said softly. I didn't have to turn around to know who it was. I heard the scarcely audible click of claws on the tiles: a step, then a hesitation.

"Bad dreams again," she said, a voice so low it was almost a growl.

I nodded vaguely, feeling completely wrung out. The movement behind me was more something I felt than heard, so I was expecting the touch on my arm. She was looking up at me, moonlight and shadow bringing out the contours of her face beneath the fur; her eyes dark pools of concern. "Mikah?"

Then I was hugging her, pressing my face against the fur of her head. A flinch and a small sound of surprise, then her arms went around me. A timeless moment; a moment of security and comfort that reminded me of when someone else had held me like that.

"Mikah?" A low voice rumbled. "Are you all right?"

"I..." I took a breath and pulled myself together, stepping away. She ducked her head slightly, watching me. "I'm fine. I didn't mean to... I'm sorry," I said, not able to meet her eyes.

She smiled a bit then. At least I think she did: it was difficult to tell in the gloom: "Don't be. Would you like me to stay tonight?"

And for a second I just stared: "What?"

"Should I stay? I thought you might sleep better if there was someone here with you."

I blinked, then looked away: an entirely innocent offer and I ended up the

greater fool.

“Mikah?” She tipped her head quizzically.

“No. No, thank you.” I smiled slightly. “I’ll manage.”

Mai was silent for a heartbeat, studying me. Then I saw her hand move, “If you’re sure.” She shifted and touched my arm, stroking the hairs gently before withdrawing. “If you need anything, ask the guards. They’ll call me.”

I just nodded. A whisper of padded feet and she was gone. For a while more I stood there staring at the patch of moonlight, then shivered violently and turned to trudge back to bed.

—v—

The evening sun was low in the sky and bright in my eyes as we left the mill. The light brought a touch of warmth against the cool breeze insinuating itself through the city streets.

It’d been a busy day. I’d been up and about and bound for the southern end of town before the sunlight hit the hills. A quiet ride, I spent it watching the city coming to life around me: pedallers and merchants plying their wares, the smell of fresh-baked goods from bakeries. As we crossed the Redmale bridge I could see boats putting out from the docks: a procession of hulls and sails bound downstream as the city’s fishing fleet set out for the day.

When the carriage finally clattered to a halt, it was in a forecourt bustling with wagons and animals and Rris as bales of goods were loaded and unloaded. Chaeitch was already waiting for me, with his tawny fur freshly brushed and russet sigils dyed on his forearms. He was wearing a pair of green crushed-velvet breeches: expensive looking and quite out of place there.

I was introduced to several Rris; individuals of some importance who drew themselves up and did their best to hide that nervousness their ears and tails betrayed. They were industrialists and merchants; Guild members with a vested interest in the mill there to see what they were paying for.

That was why I was there, why we were there. Rraerch was working to negotiate a prototype sales contract with the Textiles Guild, a blueprint for future deals with partners both in and out of Land-of-Water. I'd been through talks with Guild representatives before and they'd seen some of the improvements that could be made to their current equipment, but I'd never seen one of their factories. I can't say I was very familiar with what went on in one of their factories, so it was felt that I should have a guided tour of the plant they were looking at upgrading.

The place was big, and busy. From the loading dock where heavy bales were Rris-handled to and from storerooms, to the offices: small, dark areas where a half-dozen clerks looked up from their low desks as I entered. One bolted out the other door, the abacus it'd been working with rattling to the floor. Behind me a couple of the guild representatives muttered something: I looked at Chaeitch who fluffed his fur and didn't meet my eyes while we looked through that place, at the archaic and chaotic filing system, the columns of tight and illegible figures in the heavy ledgers.

From there it was down to the factory floor. The main floor was in a brick

building, a single open space bigger than it'd looked from the outside: the size of basketball court, with cast iron columns supporting a tarred wooden roof. A number of high mullioned windows would have provided better light if they'd been cleaner, but they let in enough to make out the looms: a bewildering matrix of machinery, wooden frames and threads, spinning belts and drive shafts that filled the floor. Furry bodies moved amongst the machinery as Rris workers tended the machinery. No clothing, I noticed; I guessed things got pretty hot in there. And audible under everything else, a dull pulse below the cacophony of clattering of the machinery and sound of Rris voices, was the steady dull thumping of steam engines somewhere else in the facility.

A foreman... woman, person, whatever ... showed us around. The machinery looked complex, but what it actually did was simple enough: the looms were two-harness ones running plain weave cloth. Two sets of warp threads alternately rising and falling while shuttles ratcheted between them; a device something like an oversized comb swung down between warp threads, compacting the weave, then the cycle started over. The Rris attendants working among the machinery kept their tails clipped to their legs, lest a careless moment cost them at best an indignity, at worst a painful loss. They dashed here and there, replacing exhausted supplies of thread for shuttles, oiling machinery. Quite often machines were shut down completely to allow workers to climb among the equipment to repair snapped threads or jammed machinery. Hard and dangerous work. I kept my distance: the last thing I needed was to startle someone into making a fatal mistake.

I followed the foreman's explanation of the process as best I could, but still Chaeitch had to clarify some points. Usually the problem was simply technical terms I didn't understand due to my limited vocabulary, but there were times - with the background noise and the speed at which the Rris spoke - when I just couldn't make out the words. Still, the demonstration showed me just what the mill had and let me better see how improvements might be made. For instance the machines had to be halted with whenever a shuttle broke a thread or needed respooling which was surprisingly often. Early looms back home did that automatically and on the fly. I had pictures of those looms, but not detailed schematics.

The engines that powered the factory were housed in an adjoining building: a squat construction of new brick, already stained by the soot falling from the chimney. Inside, the atmosphere was hot, humid and filled with steam and the hiss and thump of the engines: a pair of wood-fired boilers powered the older model steam engines, seemingly filling the room with spinning wheels and shafts. They'd been lovingly tended; every rivet polished to a coppery sheen, every iron face blacked until light just fell into them. Still, they hissed and leaked steam that saturated the air and dampened my clothes and Rris fur.

What they wanted done was going to be expensive and would require a lot of work. Designing prototypes, testing, refining, downtime for the factory while the new equipment was installed... well, the sun was low in the sky when we stepped out onto the front steps.

"I think they're almost used to you," Chaeitch smiled into the light, his fingers busy tapping weed into his corn cob pipe.

"Hmm," I nodded noncommittally, waiting for him. "Yes. You could tell they were almost ready to ask me home to meet their daughters."

Chaeitch chittered and fumbled in his belt pouch for his flint and steel lighter, "That might be going a few steps over the edge." I watched as his furry hands struck sparks into the tinder in his pipe. He blew gently, then took the stem between his teeth and puffed on the pipe as he put the lighter away. Quite a juggling act just to light a pipe.

"Ai," the Rris took his pipe out and gestured with it toward the carriages, "And speaking of daughters..."

I looked: the Rris sitting in the open doorway of the carriage stirred, standing and watching us with head cocked and a smile on her face. Maithris. I hadn't expected to see her. "Your lady companion," Chaeitch grinned, letting his tongue loll in an expression I couldn't construe as anything but a leer.

"And you can stop that," I growled. "She's just a friend."

"Ah," He affected an insufferably knowledgeable expression, took a drag on his pipe and blew a cloud of sweetish smoke. "Of course she is."

I just sighed and shook my head.

He chittered and lightly slapped my arm, "You go and enjoy yourself tonight. I'll see you tomorrow." A flip of hand in farewell and he set off toward his ride. I ran over a list of choice retorts in my mind, decided to let it go.

"What was that about?" Maithris asked.

"Oh, nothing much. His idea of a joke," I shrugged. "Anyway, what are you doing here? I wasn't expecting to see you."

"I had some time in my cup, so I thought I'd come by." She looked me up and down, eyeing my damp clothes, "And how was your day?"

I plucked at my shirt, “Oh, about normal. Whatever that means these days.”

She laughed, a chitter that wrinkled the fur of her face. “Ah, changing times we live in.”

Too true. As the carriage clattered out into the busy street I leaned back and watched the crowds passing by outside. The streets were narrower in this part of the town, the buildings a bit more run-down. As we rode Mai pointed out sites of interest, named the streets and the squares as we passed through them. I was starting to get an idea of how Shattered Water was laid out, in a series of intersecting radial patterns: like the ripples rain would cause across the surface of a pond. Still, there were a maze of streets, alleys, and avenues throughout the city, confusing enough that I almost didn’t notice when we diverted from the route back to the Palace.

“Something I thought you’d like to see,” Maithris said.

“What?”

“Ah,” she smiled and waved a finger. “Patience, you’ll see.”

I can’t say I was that comfortable with surprises. Enough had happened to me that I’d become wary around Rris; perhaps a bit paranoid. Maithris... I trusted her, but I still felt a knot of uncertainty as she led me into the unknown. I think she knew. I don’t know how... smelled my unease perhaps. An inhuman hand touched my leg, stroked my jeans: “It’s all right. I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“Where are we going?”

She just patted my leg again and smiled.

We crossed the river at the Hands and Sky bridge then followed a convoluted road uphill between buildings that arched out over the street, leaning so much that the upper floors almost touched. The street was paved in places - a harsh rattling beneath the wheels - whilst in others it was simply packed dirt. An old part of the city, built inside the old walls in a time when there hadn't been a lot of space.

Sunlight was brushing the roofs of the buildings around us when we halted.

“Come on,” Mai urged me as she threw the door open and was gone. I followed.

The carriage had stopped by the ruins of an old wall and archway. The wall had been imposing in its heyday and what was left was still impressive: the uneven parapet was high over my head, the granite blocks patched with lichen and scarred by Rris script chisled into it. Graffiti? Maithris hooked claws into my sleeve and tugged me through the arch, “Come on.”

And when I saw what lay through the other side of the archway I stopped in surprise. “There?”

It was a castle. Or the remains of one. I suppose at one stage the hilltop had

been the bailey and keep of a fortified castle, now only part of the inner keep remained at the center of a small hilltop park: a pair of towers and part of a hall, one wall crumbled away to reveal broken floors and the skeletons of rafters where roof tiles had gone. It wasn't recent; piles of rubble were overgrown with grass and weeds, and if there'd been any larger blocks of masonry, they'd long since been carted off as building material. The whole place was probably being pilfered a piece at a time by locals who needed bits and pieces for their own purposes. Sad in a way.

And Maithris kept us moving, across the grass and into the ruins. Colder in the shadows, enough to make me shiver. Gravel crunched under my boots as we moved, myself following the slightly paler shadow that was Mai through the twilight, through a doorway into blackness.

"Mai? I can't see."

"Rot. I forgot. Here, hold me."

And I flinched wildly when in the darkness a hand took mine. In the blackness the touch was even more alien than her appearance: inhuman fur and flesh and muscles wrapped around inhuman bones. A tug urging me further into the dark and I balked.

"Mikah?" She tugged at my hand, hesitated. "It's all right."

I swallowed, then nodded. "I... trust you."

There was a moment's silence in the blackness, then a feeling of something moving toward my face just before soft fur brushed against my cheek. "Come on," Miathris murmured.

So she led me through the blackness so thick I could barely see my hand in front of my face, up a winding stone staircase until light appeared around a corner. We emerged on a rampart circling the tower. Off to the left the crenellated parapet was in ruins and flagstones were missing, but the part we were standing on seemed sound enough. Why'd she brought me up there? Maithris didn't say anything, just stepped back and ducked her head slightly while still watching me. I felt like she was expecting something of me.

What?

Four floors up, looking south over the town below where the last sunlight was stroking the rooftops. A few steps took me to the west face where I stopped, and understood.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Too true: I don't feel any description could do justice to that sight spread out below me that evening. Shattered Water was a jagged panorama of rooflines and chimneys stretching away to the lake, the setting sun washing over the city and setting tiled roofs to glowing, turning the lake to a single gold mirror. Beyond that, forested hills gently rolled away to where a swollen red sun was melting into the distant horizon. The sky around the sinking orb was a red canvass slashed with yellows and ochres as dying light prised through wisps of high cloud. Directly overhead a few stray clouds were painted by the fading sun, turned to wisps of pink against a dark background.

For several minutes I watched, scarcely noticing when Maithris stepped up

beside me. “Beautiful,” I murmured.

“I’ve always thought so,” she said, watching me. She ducked her head when I turned her way and smiled slightly. “It’s an old place. I think this is why it’s still standing.”

“What is it?”

“The old keep,” she said and stepped up to the parapet to lean against worn stone as she looked out over the city and surrounds; a surreal silhouette limed in evening light. “Shattered Water has always been here,” she said eventually. “It was small. In the earliest days it was just a small settlement: a fishing town, trading post, something of that ilk. Then the trade routes [something], the town’s position brought prosperity and it grew. Through the times there’s been peace and prosperity and there’s been fighting, several wars, and the keep and walls were built around the town. You can see where the old wall ran, those old towers there and over there. That was a long time ago.

“Since, there has been more fighting, more years passing. The town continued to grow. The guns came and the walls weren’t protection anymore and the city spread beyond them. The Peace was made over half a hundred years ago. Since then there have been some border skirmishes, but most of the fighting has been over the conference table with money and trade.”

For a while longer she talked. The sun sank as she pointed out spots of interest, naming names, providing snippets of information about various corners. She didn’t know the exact history of the city, but she knew stories and those she related, tales about how a street was named, why there were Rris skulls in the memorial stones in Backbiter square. An old city. I knew people back home who considered a 400 year colonial homestead old; this place was older by an order

of magnitude. There were roof tiles there that were old when Abraham Lincoln was in diapers. There was that air to the place, a feeling of age.

I stood there on that ancient fortress as the light faded over Shattered Water, a person I was coming to call friend at my side. The sun was gone, the glow on the horizon dying as the stars came out. Out there, a lone cloud flashed a final time before the light was gone and moonlight, the faint glimmers of lights from the city below, was all there were. A cool breeze crossed the ramparts, raising hairs where it touched my bare skin and an inhuman hand touched my arm. "Mikah? You're cold?"

I looked at that alien silhouette: moonlight on fur and black shadow. "A bit," I said.

"Maybe we should head back."

"A. I think that might be best."

She stayed close as she guided me through the darkness. I could feel warmth through her fur every time I bumped against her, quite welcome after the cold, and I have to confess I bumped against her quite a lot in that blackness. "Hai, you're doing that deliberately," her voice chattered.

"No," I protested. "You just seem to be there..."

"Just hold my hand... Hai! That's my tail."

“Oh, sorry. It all looks the same. Ah! Claws, Mai!”

“Sorry, but it all looks the same...”

When we emerged from the darkness into moonlight we were engaged in a gentle tug-of-war over her tail, two kinds of laughter loud amongst the stillness of the ruins. And when the carriage door had closed and we jolted into motion I leaned back and said to the shadows, “Thank you.”

“Any time,” I couldn’t see her expression - the only light was the inconstant moonlight filtering through the windows, crossing her legs but leaving her face in shadow. “You enjoyed it?”

I nodded, “It was a sight worth seeing.”

“Perhaps we could do it again some time.”

“I’d like that,” I said. The truth; I’d enjoyed myself.

She leaned forward, elbows on knees and her head in the wan moonlight as she smiled. “A promise then.”

The next few days were hard grind. I spent a lot of time with Chaeitch, a majority of which was taken up with the Textile Guild contract. The first things to go in were the engines, a job that required a lot of measuring and development of a gear train to match their output to the belts and shafts that drove the looms. That wasn't really a problem: the steam engines were smaller than the older models so they'd fit into the engine room with plenty of space to spare. That was the time he started developing an interest in electrical power. When the alternative is handling a half-ton spinning wood and metal beam, a system where power can be transferred by wire comes to look damn attractive.

When it came to modifying the looms, that was different.

I pulled up everything I could find on the laptop pertaining to weaving, textiles, looms and spinning. There wasn't as much as I'd been hoping, but it was enough to give us some tips. Chaeitch's first major triumph was coming up with an auto-loading shuttle. If the thread ran out or broke, the shuttle would automatically take up a new one on the fly, saving time and fingers.

I have to say that now, sitting in the warmth of the sunlight as I look back and write this journal, it might seem that all this was so easy. Just think it up and build it. I have to say from experience it wasn't: there was a lot of time, mistakes, effort and swearing expended every day. My laptop wasn't an oracle that could provide every answer. Hell, I was a graphics specialist: I had all kinds of clipart archived, I had pictures of looms, but I didn't have technical breakdowns of everything. There's only so much you can learn by looking at a picture. For everything we got working, there was a small pile of things that became so much scrap.

Still, Chaeitch could work miracles with what I could give him: always coming up with elegant solutions to niggly little problems. While I could offer

the raw materials, it was the technically-inclined Rris such as himself who polished and shaped that into something that worked. That involved hard work, evenings returning to my quarters covered in dirt and dust and the smell of hot metal. The days I had off couldn't have been more welcome.

It one of those mornings when there was a moment of panic, then the realisation that I didn't have to be up before the sun sank in. The next couple of hours were spent in a blissful stupor, just dozing on the edge of wakefulness, chasing after dreams of home and Jackie. In fact when I felt someone settle on edge of the bed and fingers gently stoked my face, that was the name I mumbled.

"No," a much gruffer voice replied in a language Jackie had never spoken. "I'm afraid not."

I flinched, then rolled onto my back and blinked sleepily up at Maithris. "Oh. Good morning."

"Yes, it was," she smiled back.

—v—

An easy morning. The sky overhead was a crystal blue, deep enough that you could believe it was solid enough to shatter. Away on the horizon the heavens were darker; ranks of cumulonimbus rising like dark mountains, but those were concerns of the future. I spent the present enjoying the day.

Once again Maithris and I took the carriage out into the town. We left it just before the Redmale Bridge and crossed the river on foot, watching a couple of boats passing beneath the spans. A sight; Mai in her coarse green breeches and soft leather vest leaning on the balustrade with the city waterfront and ships as a backdrop.

The market was there, as it always was: an everchanging maze of tents and wagons and bustling Rris. Mai stayed close by my side as we explored the stalls and tried to ignore the stares and comments. I had some cash by then, a few small silver coins that felt uncomfortably heavy in my wallet, so as we explored we brought some odds and ends; food: fresh -baked scones with cheese and meat in them. Mai spent some time admiring a tiny decorative ear clip: a little sprig of leaves made from copper. I made a gift of it for her and that's a bittersweet memory: the expression on her face when I pressed the trinket into her palm.

Stalls of handcrafts, tools, rugs and textiles, household goods, small articles of furniture. Rris staring at me as we wandered through the isles, just browsing. Something that made an impression was the sight of Rris - upper class merchants maybe - wearing very familiar pants: a heavy blue material reinforced with rivets and a dark belt. Okay, so there were a few differences in the cut around the ankles, but they were unmistakably copies of my own. I returned the stares they gave me, just as surprised as they were.

"They're different," Mai said by way of explanation. "That's the appeal." She shrugged then and smiled, "And I've heard they're quite comfortable, if a little harsh on the fur."

I wondered if I was earning royalties from those. I'd started to loose track.

As the long summer day passed we wandered the market and the surrounding

environs. We spent some time at a small park, sitting on the grass under the spreading branches of an elderly oak and watching the city passing by. Nearby, a group of young cubs clustered, watching me with all the fascination a child might give a circus. When I beckoned to them they scattered like birds, chittering and shouting. I watched them, feeling slightly stung.

“Don’t worry,” Mai said. “They just need to get to know you.”

Maybe. Maybe.

Later, as the shadows grew longer and the clouds gathered in the reunion over the lake, we made our way back to the waterfront and the warmth of the tavern there. It was a watering hole that was coming to be familiar. In the half-dozen times I’d patronised the place I’d come to know the smoke and dimness and smells and even a few of the Rris who frequented the tavern. That evening Tohechinai and Mesic were sitting at their customary table, talking over their drinks and watching another Rris settled over by the fire strumming away on an instrument that resembled a wooden banjo. It produced an unusual sound: more abrupt than a guitar, higher pitched. And the music was similar to the stuff I’d heard at the official functions at the Palace, an eerie sound that tapered off into discordant twangs when the minstrel noticed me and stared, kept staring as Maithris and I joined her friends at the table. Someone shouted and the musician shuddered violently, then tried to pick up the strands of the song where they’d fallen.

Tohechinai drank and added to the general atmosphere of the place with drags on his pipe; Mesic still had her reservations about me, but she was more friendly than that first time we’d met. So, we talked, passing the time as the light outside the windows faded and the halflight faded to a muggy, firelit gloom. Eventually a cub came around with a taper, lighting small oil lamps that at least gave me enough light to see by. As the evening went on, the rest of Mai’s friends drifted in for their evening meal. The dish of the day was a heavy black bread, slabs of

roast meat and potatoes buried under a gravy with the consistency of silly putty. It tasted better than it looked.

And Mai's friends didn't ignore me as they ate and talked, joking and laughing. The dim light and warmth, the smell of food and wood smoke closed around in a cosy gloom that reminded me of some my favorite coffee houses back home, save that my companions could never be mistaken for human. In that half-light they became something else, a sight that sent chills skittering down my spine when I looked up to it: a shifting tableau of figures limned by flickering orange lamps and shadows, transformed into things one might better expect to find on the cornices of a gothic cathedral. Mesmerizing in its grotesqueness.

A claw hooked my leg, jerking my attention from that scene down to Mai's shimmering eyes: "Mikah?" she murmured, below the background chatter. "Something wrong?"

"Uh..." I blinked, turned back to my meal. "No. Just..." "I smiled at her then, "Have you ever wondered if what you saw was what everyone else saw?"

For a second her expression was one I couldn't fathom, then she chittered and her hand slapped my leg, "This isn't something you're used to, is it?"

I wagged my hand: "The company's different."

"I imagine it is." She took a sip from her drink, then cocked her head. "Did you do this where you came from? I mean, your kind: you have common meeting places?"

“Like this?” I looked around. “We have similar places.”

“A?” Mesic interjected from across the other side of the table, leaning forward as she eavesdropped. “A room full of things like you. Now, that would be a sight to bring nightmares.”

The chitters of laughter that brought were cut off by Mai’s snarl. Her muzzle was distorted in anger as she leaned over, “Mesic, perhaps you could choose your words more carefully.”

A startled Mesic tipped her head back, “Hai, it was a joke.”

And Maithris hissed, “You think...”

“Mai,” I touched her arm. “It’s all right.” She looked at me, wrinkles up the bridge of her muzzle from her bared teeth. “It’s all right,” I repeated.

She looked back at Mesic and slowly the distortions of fury smoothed out, “I’m sorry, I just don’t like seeing my friends insulted.”

“No,” I said, smiling gently. “It wasn’t an insult. If I were to point out she really doesn’t smell that bad for such a fat female, now that would be an insult.”

“I...” Mesic started to say, then cut off and frowned. “What? Why you...”

The laughter from around the table drowned her out. A chittering Tohechani slapped her arm, and she subsided into grumbling complaints, eyeing me dangerously. It was something I couldn’t afford: a Rris with an active dislike of me. The next time it was her turn to buy a round I made an effort to throw some oil on troubled waters by shouting her. I think it helped; at least she started talking to me again.

—v—

“You handled that well,” Mai said as we stepped out of the fug of the tavern and into the dark of the night air. Heavily overcast now, the moon a barely discernable lighter smudge against the cloud. Upstream, the lights on the Redmale bridge were a string of glowing pearls against the darkness. The warmth of the day was still fading and the air was thick with a promise of rain. I tucked my hands into my jean pockets

“Ah, she’s not so bad.” I shrugged. “I was sort of expecting something like that. And thank you.”

“Ah? What for?”

“For standing by me,” I smiled. “Friend.”

In the pale glow spilling from the tavern windows she smiled in return.

“Anytime.” Then a hand gently swatted my arm, “Come on, we should head back.”

“All the way?” I asked dubiously, thinking of the miles back to the Palace.

“Just as far as the Mediator Hall. Just over the Redmale bridge. We can ride from there.”

Oh, now they were a taxi service as well? “They do that?”

“For you, certainly.”

“I guess difference has it’s advantages,” I smiled, then looked up as a few drops hit my shoulder. “Uh-oh, you feel that?”

“What... ?” She looked up and got a fat droplet on the muzzle, shook her head and flicked a pink tongue across her nose, “Huhn, A. Maybe we should hurry.”

We weren’t even halfway to the bridge when the heavens split. The opening shower didn’t feel like rain, it was more like a solid mass of water that fell, hit the roofs and the streets and rebounded into a spray that hung around our ankles. Waterfalls started from the rooftops, falling to shatter on the cobbles; rivulets formed, pooling and merging into small streams flowing across the the wharf to the river. Mai stopped and looked up and grimaced at the downpour, her fur already plastered to her face. Then she chittered and grabbed hold of my arm, “Come on. This is closer.”

“Where...” I started to ask, but she was already pulling me along, up a narrow side street where sheets of water cascaded down from the darkness of overhanging eaves high above and crashed to the cobbles in the centre of the alley, splattering us even as we hugged the walls. “Mai? Where are we going?”

“Just up here,” she urged me. In the gloom the puddles were impossible to avoid and the dampness started invading even my waterproof boots.

At the next intersection Mai and I huddled in the meagre shelter offered by a doorway, her sodden fur pressed against my arm as the dark bulk of a wagon laden high with goods rattled and squeaked across the road ahead. The driver was a shadowy figure buried under a drab-green oilcloth that glistened with water and reflections from isolated windows. As soon as it was past we darted out to brave the elements in a short dash across the thoroughfare to the darkness of a building entryway.

A dark tunnel through the outer wall of the building. The feeble blue glow at the ends of the tunnel could only be considered illumination when compared to the gut-blackness of the rest of the passage. Falling water curtained the arches at either end in sheets of flickering light. Glimmers reflecting from a stream of water wending its way down the centre of the passage on its way to the street. In the gloom Mai shook herself off and I could follow her shadow against the light of the water curtain as she stopped at a door. I heard a key rattle in the lock.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Somewhere dry,” her voice replied. “Come in. Careful, there’s a step.”

I did so, stumbling a bit on uneven wooden flooring. Mai closed the door and what light there'd been was gone. "Mai?"

"Right here," a voice spoke, almost in my ear, then a damp hand touched my shoulder: "Come on. Stairs here."

"What is this place?" I asked as she helped me find my way up a steep and narrow staircase.

"Huhn, it's nothing like your rooms," she said. Pale light washed into the stairwell as she opened a door. "It's comfortable though."

I stepped in behind her, standing there dripping on the wooden floor and uncertainly looking around at shadows and darkness: A loft room, not very large. The only light seeping in was a pale glimmer from an opened window through which I could see rain drumming on a tile roof, producing a low hiss that pervaded the room. Enough light to see the low bed of thin pallets against the wall opposite the window and a small desk with a rickety stool where Mai was crouched. Steel struck flint several times, sparks flashing in the darkness. Tinder glowed as she breathed on it, then a flame caught, painting her face with wildly flickering light and shadow. I watched as she transferred the flame to a small oil lamp that sputtered and smoked and eventually settled. Dancing orange light fenced with the shadows as a breeze blew through, casting enough illumination that I could see the coarse and somewhat threadbare sheets. At the foot of the bed a patch of darkness resolved into a heavy, iron-bound chest. A small carving of a Rris hung from the wall above the desk. Opposite the door there was a small stone fireplace, some bare shelves and cupboards on either side of the chimney.

“You live here?” I asked.

“A,” she sat on the stool at the desk and smiled up at me while water dripped from her fur and puddled beneath her. “Of course. It’s not like my rooms at the Palace, but it’s further up the hill than my room in the Cracks.” She saw my puzzled look and elaborated: “That means it’s better than the last place.”

Oh. I blinked. Back home I had a walk-in closet only a bit smaller than this. Better? What had her other place been like?

Perhaps she saw my expression. She looked a bit hurt. “It’s dry,” she said a little defensively. “And it’s a place to sleep.”

“I just thought... After everything, they would be paying you...” I trailed off.

“Ah, the pay’s good,” she smiled and rubbed hands through her facial fur, shaking water out. “I’d never be able to afford this otherwise. Anyway, it’s all I need.”

“Oh.” Floorboards creaked as I crossed over to the window. Just outside that a water-slicked tiled roof sloped away, and below that darkness and rain shrouded a small central courtyard. There was a scraggly little garden down there with trees and bushes just visible in the shadows. A cloistered walkway cloaked in blackness ran around the periphery of the ground floor of the atrium. Here and there around the courtyard glimmers of light were visible through the gloom: faint light escaping shuttered windows.

“You’d better get out of those,” Mai’s voice spoke up.

“What?” I turned away from the rain drumming on tiles and leaves. Her vest was already hanging near the fireplace and she was shucking her breeches.

“Your clothes? You’ll drown if you stay there.” She nodded at my feet.

I looked down at the puddle forming on her floor. “Oh. Sorry.”

She chittered, then wrung her breeks. A stream of water pattered on the floor before she shook them and hung them up alongside her vest. While I unbuttoned and peeled off my sodden shirt she unfolded a threadbare piece of cloth and vigorously towled off, toussling her fur into a fluffed out mess. Looking like a cat that just come out the worst after a tussle with a tumble drier she crossed over to the old chest. Hinges squealed as she opened it and rumaged around inside, producing a familiar roll of dark red leather.

“You’re lucky you don’t have fur,” she grumbled as she unrolled her grooming kit and set about raking a comb through tangled fur. “You don’t have to worry about this. Ah, you can hang those over there. Ai! Shave this.”

“Fur’s got its advantages,” I observed as I hung my shirt and gingerly sat on the edge of her low bed to undo my boots. Awkward connotations: her room, her bed. A situation that might have meant something else if she were a human. I glanced at her sitting there working some order into her fur and made a conscious effort to try and relax. Not so easy to do while I was pulling off my pants and my damp skin was pebbling in the cool air. A distant rumble rolled over the city: far-off thunder.

“Mai?” I asked, somewhat self consciously. “Would you have something I could wear?”

Maithris looked up at me, slightly puzzled, then the light dawned. “You’re cold? Sa! I didn’t think... Pestilence, I don’t think my clothes would fit you. Would a blanket do?”

It did. A coarse-woven gray blanket, the only one she had. I hung my clammy clothes up and then sat on the edge of her bed with the coarse sheet wrapped around my shoulders, watching as Mai fiddled with the small fireplace and feeling like a freeloader. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be such a burden.”

“It’s all right,” she said over her shoulder as she laid a fire in the small grate. “I should’ve thought.”

“Ah, you can’t do everything.” I rubbed my hands and pulled the blanket a little tighter. “Perhaps I could grow fur? That might make things easier.”

The Rris chittered and dipped a piece of kindling into the flue of the lamp, catching a fragment of light. “A laudable suggestion, though I think people might still notice the difference.”

Carefully, furry fingers carried the tentative flame to the grate. It flickered as it caught the chimney draught, then touched the kindling. A tiny glow, larger flames spreading. Maithris added pieces from her meagre pile and sat back on her inhuman ankle joints watching the flames grow. “That’ll help a bit,” she said

and flowed to her feet in a single quicksilver motion. “Hai, Mikah, if you want to make things easier, could you just keep that going? I have to use the water closet or something’s going to burst.”

“Uh, yes. I think I can handle that.”

She smiled and reached up to stroke my cheek on the way past to the door, still wearing only her fur; “Just be a minute,” she told me.

I stared at the wooden planks, hearing a faint creak of a floorboard as she descended the stairs, then I shrugged and crossed to the fire. It was going fine. Make work, I realised with a slight smile. I fed the flames a slightly larger piece of wood and stood up, adjusting the blanket and looking around, the desk catching my eye. It was well used: ink stains and a few scratches marred the surface. A sealed inkwell sat beside a small wooden box, just large enough to hold a few quills. Four well-used, leather-bound books were stacked toward the back of the desk. I touched the uppermost, tracing out the Rris markings on the beige cover: [Revelation? Insight?] of the Body, I laboriously translated. Inside were columns of printed text and intricate sepia wash and line drawings of Rris bodies, body parts, organs... An anatomy textbook. About what you’d expect a doctor to have.

Beneath that was a thinner volume, dogeared and bound in a crinkled black leather cover with no title or text anywhere. Inside, a crabbed script covered page after page, interspaced by occasional line drawings. They were... proficient, but not overly impressive: sketches of organs and anatomy with notes and labels dotted in the margins. I traced a drawing of a Rris skull and looked at a notation in the margin.

“A chir’it standing? In the eyes. See how mistrach se... sechre?... “

I couldn't make any sense out of it. I flicked through the pages, then stopped and went back when some sketches in the last entries caught my eye. I spread the book open and stared.

Pictures of me, of a human at least. I leafed through the latter pages, seeing sketches of my body, anatomical details, my hands and head, details of my eyes and ears, notes and measurements in that tight handwriting in the margins. She knew more about me than I did. Was this what she was doing? Simply studying me? Making notes?

And from behind came the soft click of the door latch closing. Mai was standing there in her bedraggled fur, watching me, head tipped to one side. Her eyes flickered from the book in my hands up to my eyes.

"I'm sorry," I said, moving my hands away. "I didn't mean to ... If this is personal..." I glanced at the black notebook, then at her and appealed: "Mai, what is this?"

"Ah. My work."

"But these...?"

She sighed, walked over to look down at the page: a picture of a human, similar to Universal Man, but with more familiar features. "As I said; my work. I'm supposed to look after you. I'm doing what I can but...you aren't Rris." She waved a shrug and turned the page: a portrait of my face. "You don't act like

Rris, you don't think like Rris."

Another page: a picture of my eye. A clawed finger touched below that, then reached up to stroke the skin below mine. I still flinched at the sensation: "You don't [perceive] like we do. I'm trying to understand how you do, what you are. The differences in how we think, the similarities. That doesn't offend you?" she asked.

"No," I gave a small shake of my head, then slowly closed the book. "I'm sorry."

Maithris patted my shoulder, then shifted the hand to toy absently at the longer fur on her chest. "Mikah, you're not something to be studied; you're a person. I know that. Different from us, but still a person." She ducked her muzzle and looked up at me with slitted pupils, an almost coy look. "A person I like."

I returned a tight smile. "Thank you," I whispered, "friend." Then reached out to brush down an errant clump of fur on her shoulder. Outside, the rain picked up, drumming on the roof and Mai glanced past me, then flicked her ears. "And I thought you were going to be looking after the fire."

"I was...Oh, shit! "

It wasn't dead, just resting. Just a bit of poking to bring it back to life. Mai watched my efforts to restore it, amusement in her expression, "Tell you what," she smiled, "I'll forgive you, on one condition."

“What?” I asked warily.

She tossed something my way. I plucked it out of the air and turned it over: her brush. “You help me with my fur.”

I laughed. “A deal.”

So she sprawled out on her stomach the hearth, head laid on her forearms while I sorted through her grooming kit and picked out a broad-toothed comb. She rumbled softly as I started working the worst of the snarls out of her back. “This happen every time you get wet?” I asked.

“A, most times,” she replied, already relaxing under the brushing.

“Could make a fortune selling hot-air fur driers,” I said, working a recalcitrant knot.

“You already have a fortune,” she chuckled, then asked, “What driers?”

I told her and she vented a low sound that was not quite a growl, “Huhnn, I want one. When you make them, keep one for me.”

We spent the evening there, in her small attic room with rain drumming a

stacatto tatoo on the roof above and a small fire flickering in the grate. We sat there and talked while I brushed and groomed her fur and distant thunder rolled over the lake and sleeping city. A long while before the last of her fur was dried, gleaming in the glow from a fire that'd died to embers and the rain never stopped.

There was only the one bed and I insisted she have it: It was too small for me anyway. I made do with just taking one of the thin pallets that made up the mattress and laying it on the floor near the remains of the fire. It was a thin sandwich of linen stuffed with wool, but better than wooden boards. Mai let me keep the blanket, and long after the last embers had died I lay there, watching the darkness, a square of night-glow that was the window, listening to the rain and Mai's light snores.

—v—

A cold darkness. I moved through shadowy wooden halls, following a faint glimmer that kept the darkness at bay, not sure where I was going. Draughts skittered through chinks in boarded-up windows, freezing pieces of icy air touching me as I passed dark pictures I couldn't make out. Sounds echoed, shapes flitting by at the edges of vision, a fear of the unknown. I don't know what I was looking for, I don't know why I opened that door.

A room, stretching away into a distant gloom. There was a small circle lit by flickering red, an old wooden table placed in the centre of that light with something lying on it. I approached, looking down on myself... half of myself: the left side lying still, the other an anatomy lesson of bone and flayed skin and tendons and muscles.

No!

I reared back and the darkness at the peripheries of the room resolved into tiers of benches, filled with silent figures, a thousand points of shimmering fire reflected from oil-on-water, all watching me.

I ran.

Trees. Snow. Moonlight and shadow. The shapes moving between them lean, predatory. Cries rose around me as I struggled onward with my heart pounding, and there were only trees. Fleeting glimpses of hunters, sometimes on two legs, sometimes on four, never clear. Running, the terror building into desperation as the howls grew closer and from the shadows a shape leaped to seize me with raking claws and furious eyes burned as glistening fangs ripped into my face as I screamed...

“Mikah!” the maw snarled.

The hands were still holding me, the face still there, and my arm was up in a frantic effort to ward it off while my heart labored and lungs burned. “Mikah?” the face asked again and where I was, who this was, came back to me.

“Oh, Shit,” I sobbed air, sagging back to lie flat on the biscuit-thin mattress. I felt ill, lightheaded, exhausted, muscles still trembling while my heart still pounded. Fur shifted beside me, brushing against my skin. A hand with callused pads on palm and fingertips stroked my temple and hair.

“A bad one,” a low voice said.

“Yeah,” I croaked, then licked my lips. “You could... you could say that.”

“I think I just did. You’re all right?”

I lay quietly for a few more seconds before struggling to sit up and huddle tailor-fashion, wrapping the sheet up around me like a shawl. A glance out the window showed it was still night, still raining. Feeble moonlight fighting through the clouds, gray as a ghost: a steady shower of heavy raindrops pattering on rooftop tiles and cobblestones, raising a fine ankle-high mist as droplets were shattered. Pacing itself, something that could last all night.

“Mikah?” A furry hand touched my arm and inhuman eyes searched my face. “Please, you’re all right?”

Inhuman eyes. Amber, lambent orange with that slit of jade that just as quickly went to a black moon. And there was nothing but concern there. I looked away, caught after her hand and that just served to highlight my shaking. “I’m all right.” I tried to laugh and knew that the strangled noise could never be mistaken for a genuine one, not even by her. “I’m almost used to them. I’m almost...I ...” I choked off, bit my lip and swallowed hard as I squeezed her hand, holding on.

“Hai,” she said softly and I felt her stir, then arms went around me and I hugged her back, burying my face in fur, smelling the musk of remaining dampness, feeling hot breath on my neck. A warmth, a security for an eternity that wasn’t long enough.

Movement. A small warm roughness lathing my neck. I flinched, then held still as she licked me, a rough tongue dabbing against my neck, rising until a warm breath tickled my ear. A final nuzzle and Maithris pulled back, just a bit, enough for her hands to move and touch my cheeks, my neck, my chest, stroking my skin just under the blanket. I realised I was holding my breath and took a ragged gasp of air.

Maithris dipped her muzzle, looking up at me, almost shyly. Expressions, body language, all such dangerous ground, all so confusing. “Mikah?” she asked.

“I... I’m...” I thought I knew where this was leading and stammered off into silence, my throat strangling the words, wishing she would say something to justify this.

Her eyes studied mine, so close. “If you don’t want this, just say.”

And I still hesitated. Flashes of another face, another time when I’d had someone, when I’d been so near to her and I’d wanted so much to say what I felt, what I wanted, but was so afraid. Afraid to cross that barrier that could never be broken, afraid of what it would make of me and her. Lost chances. Those nights when she was close and we almost touched and I was the coward. It was the same fear; the terror of that first step, of the unknown. And now... she was gone. Past, and I’d never been able to tell her.

Now another face was watching me, the lambent eyes filled with such intensity and curiosity flinched and cast down, ears drooping as she turned away, began to withdraw. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to...”

I caught the hand as it left my chest and she cocked her head, the ears coming up once again. “Maithris...” I didn’t know how to say it. “I... please, stay. I... need you.”

“Hnnn,” It was a low purr, a low voice, and her expression was almost coy. “Need is a strong word.”

I swallowed, noisily. “I don’t... if you don’t want...”

“Then I wouldn’t have asked, a?” she said softly, her arms sliding around in an embrace until we were both wrapped in the sheet, her furry body pressing against my chest, against...

I shuddered.

“Cold?” she asked.

“Not... ” I swallowed. “Not cold.”

Maithris pressed up against me, longer fur rubbing against me and trapping my excitement between us. “Huhn,” she breathed, glancing down. Her ears flickered, a flash of something, then she smiled. “Different,” she rumbled gently. “Just this arouses you?”

“A,” I choked out. My hands were shaking; I clenched them in her shoulder

fur, hastily let go again. Confused, uncertain. How could she be so calm? “Mai, this is... new.”

She chittered, “For me too. I think we’ll have to write the book, a?”

“I don’t... ” I touched her again, gingerly stroking down her chest, feeling a slow drubbing deep within. “I mean... what... what do I do? You know me, you know all about me. I don’t know anything about you... about Rris. What you like...?”

“Calm, calm,” she chirred softly, a finger touching my jaw and hushing my stumbling chatter. “What do I like,” she correctly gently, then cocked her head and pulled back a bit to regard me curiously. “They all but turned you inside out and nobody ever told you anything about us?”

I shook my head.

“Huhnn,” that low sound again, not quite a growl, and she leaned close. A tongue like warm sandpaper rasped against my neck and hot breath touched my ear: “Then perhaps there’re some lessons we can go over tonight, a?” She reached up to take my hand from where it was pressed between us, gently slid it down through fur and over muscle to rest over her ribs. More whispers, gentle hints. I scratched gently and she twisted, stretching and rumbling softly as her hands rubbed against my skin. An exhalation on my neck, a gentle nipping.

We played; touching and exploring and learning. Hands and fingers of both kinds twining, fur rubbing, claws pricking on sensitive flesh, teeth nibbling and biting. A time when my blood was hot as her breath as we laughed and learned.

The differences, the touches that brought pleasure, the ones that didn't, the apprehensions and fears being slowly eaten away on the wave of an exhilaration and a growing need that enveloped and caught at me. Kneeling there, cool air on my skin, the heat of her body where it touched mine: the arm around me, the head leaning on my chest, the pads on the hand as it touched curiously and gently at first, then gripped and moved slowly...

"Mai..." It was almost a gasp.

A chitter and lambent eyes met mine, a smile and she released me. "You feel ready," she said softly, mischevously. "You know what to do now?"

"I think I can take it from here," I murmured, my breath stirring the fur in her ear.

And she chirred again, lunging to nip at my nose before turning in my arms. Her tail flicked against me as I stroked her back, her ribs, and she squirmed, then knelt in the same way a courtesan had those months ago. Only this time I was as ready as she was.

Her yowl rang out above the sound of the rain.

I froze in alarm. "Mai?"

"Rot," she panted, the fur of her back rippling as she shifted and flexed, tossing her head. "Hai, suppuration! Different. Don't stop."

Don't stop. A jab of the hips to emphasize. Muscles gripping me as I shifted, an intolerable friction. Gasping cool air, closed eyes raised to the blackness of the ceiling... and there was no mistaking her. Different she'd said. Differences in the air, in the sensations, the tail flicking against me, in her; differences as we moved together, muscles shifting under her fur as she gave vent to small mewlings; a series of almost inaudible pops of claws through fabric as she clenched at the mattress. Differences that didn't change the heat welling, the electric jolt through my spine and muscles that crested in soundless white light through my nervous system and faded and I was holding her, sweat cool in the night as we sagged together. Slowly collapsed to the mattress.

For some while we just lay there, both of us breathing hard. My breath stirred the fur on the back of her head.

"Huhn," she rumbled after a while. "That was an experience."

"Good or bad?" I asked innocently, tracing abstract patterns over her shoulderblades.

She chittered at the question; "Now that question's not so different from our males. Hai, tell me...you usually mate for that long?"

"Sorry," I said, feeling slightly stung. "It's been a long time... I was a bit... ah, over-anxious."

"A?" Her head shifted. "No, I... You mean that was short for you? You

usually last longer?”

Oh, she'd meant... I laughed into the warmth of her fur. “Yes. Usually. Well, most of the time anyway.”

Her body shook as she chittered, then rolled to spoon up against me, an arm going over my hip and fingerpads brushing against my bare skin, tickling slightly. Her head moved and a rough tongue lapped at the hollow of my neck, then warm, harsh breath touched the dampness as she rumbled, “Well, then perhaps we could last a bit longer this time?”

“Hai, hold,” I smiled and laid a finger on the the crown of her head, just between her ears. “Slow down. Give me some time.”

“Time?” She looked puzzled, and from there her questions led to explanations. Another difference there; one that Maithris took with a touch of incredulity, and then amusement. Rris lovemaking is like a Chinese meal: small portions, but a lot of them. It seemed I didn't have their recuperative powers.

“So there's something you can't do after all, a?” she smiled mischevously, a claw poking at my hide.

“Hey,” I pouted, “I'm not perfect.”

“Huhnn,” she mock-growled. “Sorry. It was most enjoyable.”

“Oh, for you too?”

Mai chittered and nipped at my nose again, and for a while we lay there. The blanket was thin and not much protection against the night, but Mai’s body was warm against me as we lay entwined beneath the cloth: legs wrapped, huddled close enough that I could feel the steady drubbing of her heart. Talking, her low voice only audible over the susuruss of the rain by virtue of her proximity, gentle touching as she continued my education and at the same time learned a few things herself. Touching and teasing, Mai a source of warmth as she nestled close and the pads of her hands were indescribably weird as they touched me, across my hips, my back, my scars.

“So strange,” her voice husked. “Not having fur. How does it feel? So exposed, to every touch, every movement.”

It was the first time she’d asked me something like that. Those months when she stayed with me, answering my questions but never broaching those... those subjects that brought up our differences. I moved my hand to stroke the fur just below her eye: like silk under my finger. “I never thought much about it,” I finally said. “I mean... it’s me. I’ve always been like this.” I sighed, moved to stroke the slightly coarse fur on her shoulder.

“Cold sometimes,” I said after some contemplation. “More exposed than your kind, but I can feel things around... the sun, the wind, a touch, in ways you can’t.”

“Hnnn,” she rumbled. “I’d wondered... when we were swimming. You do have your place in the world.”

“Thank you.”

She smiled, then a light touch on my side, “Can you feel this?”

“Yes.”

A tiny clawtip against my hip: “And this?”

“A.”

Feather-light brush of a tailtip across my thigh: “This?”

More touching, mischevious caresses that turned from play to something more erotic, until I took her hand and guided it down. “This?” I smiled, looking into her eyes.

“Huhn, yes,” she growled and squeezed, eliciting a gasp from me, “Now?” she asked.

“Now,” I rumbled back at her and she vented a small mewl as I shifted, rolling her, laying across her. She made a surprised noise, then chittered and blinked up at me:

“Your way?”

“A change?” I smiled back.

“A,” she reached up to caress my face, her breathing as deep as mine, our hearts meeting through our skin. “A,” she rumbled the simple affirmative.

I shifted, moving and there was tight slippery heat that flowed around me and she gasped, head lolling as her hands clenched the mattress. A hesitation, twisting to nuzzle at her shoulder, aware of how much smaller than me she was, aware of the slow buzz sounding deep inside her. Just waiting, then, slowly, moving. A heat that enveloped me as I shifted, aware of her breathing, aware of the alien heat that gripped me, enveloped me as I reached her heart, feeling it beating around me, below me, as one with me.

A slow moving, to and fro, taking my time this round. Minutes of slow moving, just spinning it out. Beneath me Mai mewled and shifted, eyes closed while her thighs clamped tight around my hips, the sounds of our lovemaking wet and rhythmic above the rain drumming on the roof. I could feel the changes through her, a growing tension like the tightening of a wire, the vibrating of a string as she clenched around me. Breathing hard and hot, small noises escaping her, her entire body quivering, her lips fleered back from her teeth...

“Mai?” I slowed, panting, uncertain.

“Don’t!” she gasped and her hands came around to grip my back and buttocks, her spine arching off the mattress as she pulled us together again: hard, panting against me, pulling at me so I moved faster and harder and she clenched and

growled and bared her teeth and that string wound tighter and tighter inside and when it snapped...

Her body bucked violently, spasming against me as her hands clenched, and her cry would have been loud in the small room save that it was drowned by my howl of pain.

—v—

“Oh, suppuration take it, I’m sorry Mikah,” Mai lamented. “I didn’t mean...”

“It’s okay. Don’t blame yourself.” I winced as the cloth carefully dabbed against my back.

“But I did this. I wasn’t... I don’t...” she trailed off and pulled the cloth away, as if not wanting to cause more damage. “I don’t know what I was thinking. Hai, rot everything, I’m sorry.”

“So you’ve said,” I smiled a bit through the pain. “It’s all right. I’ll live.”

She was quiet, her ears still down in distress as she went back to tending the ten bloody punctures and scratches across my back. The rain was a continuous hiss in the darkness, occasionally punctuated by a roll of distant thunder. I shivered in a transient draught and flinched as Mai worked at another tender spot. I looked around and caught a glimpse of red saturating the cloth.

“These... should heal,” Maithris said in a small voice. “I don’t think you’ll need sewing up...” A hesitation, then: “Mikah, what happened?”

I smiled ruefully, “You seemed to forget your claws. I’m not...”

“No,” she interrupted emphatically. “No. Not that. I’m sorry about it, but...” I heard her hiss softly, a sound of frustration, then: “What happened? What was that? Why did I do that? It was ... I... I’ve never felt anything like that. It was just... I don’t know: like I was trying to get somewhere, and all I cared about was getting there. Nothing else, just...” She trailed off into silence.

And I opened my mouth and found myself with nothing to say, suddenly realising what she meant. My back stung as I turned, sitting face to face with her on that thin mattress. She was watching me with eyes wide and ears turned back. “You’re serious. You mean you don’t... that’s your first, isn’t it? Nobody told you?” I had to laugh, trying to smother a grin behind my hand. “You’re a doctor and you don’t know?”

“My first what?” she appealed. “Mikah, what happened?”

I blinked stupidly, then tried to explain using terms I still wasn’t familiar with. “It was a... a...Ai, it was like when a male... finishes? The word for that? Well, he feels a pleasure, a peak. As you did. That place you were trying to get to? Well, you reached it.”

She blinked, turning her head to study the rain for a few heartbeats, then: “Your females, this is common for them?”

“Common enough, yes. I suppose there are a few who lead sheltered lives who might never have heard of it, but... “

“No, Mikah,” she raked fingers through her facial fur then leaned forward, a clawed fingertip tapping the back of my hand. “You don’t understand. I know Rris, I’ve know what happens during sex, and this isn’t usual. This... hasn’t happened before. Not to me. Not to any Rris I’ve ever heard of. We feel pleasure, but... but nothing like that. Usually he mounts and there’s the sensation until he finishes, but never like that. Never...” She trailed off and stared at me, thoughts whirling behind her eyes.

And I was dumbfounded. In the pregnant silence that followed I stared back and swallowed loudly. Adding up what’d happened... it wasn’t too difficult: I lasted longer than their males. I lasted beyond the point where they finished, past the point they withdrew and triggered the females’ d?nouement; lasting longer and taking her somewhere she’d never been... Rris females: they were capable of orgasm, but so few had ever experienced it that even a Rris doctor didn’t know... the first orgasm for a I shook my head, then started absorbing the ramifications.

“Oh, shit.” Now what had I opened?

“One way of putting it,” Maithris smiled and cocked her head. “You’ve brought so much with you, so many changes, and now a little gift nobody even knew you had.”

“Ah, wait a bit.” I raised my hand to stall that train of thought. “You can’t be sure of that.”

“No, of course not,” she said, gravely serious.

I breathed a little easier.

“So of course, I suppose sometime we should maybe experiment some more? A?” she chattered slightly, sobered instantly when she saw my face. “Just a joke,” she assured me.

And I gave a small shake of my head, trying to clear it. “Sorry. I didn’t mean... It’s just not what I was expecting to hear.” I smiled back at her. “It’s been a night of surprises.”

A faint peal of thunder and she looked out at the rain, then back at me: an eerie silhouette in the gloom. “A,” she sighed. “That it has.”

Momentary silence, the stage given over to the sounds of the night. Somewhere outside, in the night beyond the courtyard, a wagon wheel rattled on stone; water sluiced off the roof and guttering, then: “Come on, I’d better finish your back. I think you should lie down, on your belly.”

“Sorry,” I said and gingerly stretched out while she dampened a cloth from a small vial.

“Mai?” I asked after a short time.

“A?” She dabbed a wet cloth against the scratches lower down, wiping away drying blood.

“Could you... Please, don’t tell anyone about... about what happened?”

Even her hands were still, then she said, “If you don’t want me to... is there a reason?”

I sighed. “I’m... Rris find me unusual enough... To have some other difference, some other reason to try and take me apart to find out how I work. To have curiosity seekers chasing me, the questions... That’s something...” I shook my head; “Please? Mai?”

“You know, they might find out about it eventually.”

“Eventually,” I nodded slightly. Maybe then I’d have an idea what to do.

“All right,” she said, her voice a low husk. “Between us.”

“Thank you.” It was all I could ask.

“And Mikah?”

“A?”

A hesitation, then she asked, “What happened tonight. Did you enjoy it also? I mean, besides this...”

I smiled, reached back to touch warm fur: “Mai, you’re the best thing that’s happened to me in a long while. I... I enjoyed it.” I hesitated, then ventured, “And maybe next time we could be more careful?”

A soft sound, maybe a laugh, then fingers touched the nape of my neck in a gentle caress. “A night of surprises indeed.”

I didn’t really mean to fall asleep there, while rain fell and the Ris doctor, my friend and lover, ministered to my sore back. I don’t know exactly when I went under, but I think I remember a sensation like a kiss on my cheek, and a vague memory of a low, sad voice:

“I’m so sorry.”

—v—

Light woke me.

I yawned and blinked into early sunlight suffusing the room, a beam shining through a small window. God, my back was sore, with burning lines scored across my shoulder and the small of my back stinging; I was stiff, lying on an unfamiliar floor under a thin blanket and... and a Rris was asleep in my arms.

Oh, yes.

Mai's head was nestled up close, her eyes closed and mouth open a bit, exposing thin black lips and harsh breath. For a while I watched her sleeping, then touched the fur on her muzzle, just a fingertip; she made a small sound and fur brushed against me as she moved, then settled again and didn't stir as I disengaged her arms.

Outside, the sun was breaking through pendulous clouds hanging over a Shattered Water washed clean by a night of rain. Around the courtyard below Mai's window water glistened, droplets beading and falling from eaves, the air feeling renewed. Tiles and cobbles and plants shone slick with moisture, the morning sunlight waking a faint mist from stone: a ghost of rain that hung in the cool air. I shivered slightly as my bare skin pebbled, leaned forward to rest my hands on the rough wooden windowsill and the splash of light washing across it, feeling the warmth across my knuckles. Somewhere below, a door slammed and I heard Rris voices; just before the couple crossed the courtyard still engrossed in conversation. They didn't look up, which was probably just as well.

"Good morning," a muzzy voice behind me said.

I smiled, "Yes, it was."

“Huhn.” A rustle of sheets. “How’s your back?”

I rolled my shoulders and stifled a wince. “A bit sore,” I lied and turned to see her looking me up and down, an appraising look. “Different in the light, isn’t it,” I asked, wondering if she was realising what she’d done: what we’d both done.

“A. I was just... you look so odd without a tail. Nice rear though.”

I shook my head: “Is that all females ever think about?”

She laughed, then flowed to her feet in one sine-smooth motion and it was my turn to stare as she stretched, reaching for the ceiling: an inhumanly exotic sculpture under that fur, every muscle on her body as clearly defined as if they’d been chiseled from stone, her tail flicking. Michelle Pfeiffer, eat your heart out. Just for a second, before she relaxed and worked her shoulders, then cocked her head to meet my stare, “What?”

I smiled in a somewhat awkward manner and started to gesture: “I was just thinking how odd you look with a tail.”

She laughed and came closer, pirouetting to flick the limb against me. I caught it loosely, the sensation of pelt whisking through my fingertips as it twitched back and forth and Mai leaned back against me, “You don’t like it?” She growled over her shoulder.

“I think I do,” I said, and gently tried tying a knot in it.

“Hai,” she protested, turning and pulling it out of my hands at the same time, fetching up with her hands planted on my bare chest and I looked down in time to receive a small pounce and a nip on the nose. “Hey!”

I caught her and pulled her closer, ignoring the twinges across my back as she leaned against me and laid her head on my chest. We stood like that for a while, just holding each other and watching the dawn breaking over the city outside. It was too soon when she rumbled, “Mikah?”

“Hmmm?”

“I really think we should think about starting back.”

I sighed, “I suppose you’re right. They might be getting concerned.”

“To say the least. Huhn, I’ve really got to wash,” she said, glanced down between us and sniffed, then jabbed me lightly with a claw, “And you could do with a bath yourself.”

After last night, after a night of sweating... not surprising. There wasn’t any plumbing in that place, hence no baths, sinks. Mai left me for a short time to fetch water from the building pump, returning with a pitcher from which she filled a crockery wash bowl. It was cold, probably not too safe to drink, but adequate for washing. We did what we had to, and again the Rris lack of inhibitions regarding sanitation made me distinctly uncomfortable as Mai cleaned herself, then offered to tend to my back for me.

It was a half-hour or so later, while I was shaking out my still-damp clothes, that we heard the commotion beyond the door. Metal rattled, banged against walls on the staircase, Mai was already moving toward the door with her ears down and claws out when it was thrown open and armed troopers burst in. A tableau: Mai facing off a squad of armed and surprised soldiers with only her claws and teeth, the guards staring at me standing there with my clothes in my hands.

—v—

There'd been a small army waiting outside. Guards escorted us out of the shadows and into the morning sunlight of the street where curious neighbours rubbernecked from windows and doorways. Mai stalked ahead of me in a furious huff, her fur bottled and claws rattling on the cobbles as we were led to the carriages. The guards kept their distance.

"I'm sorry," I said to Maithris as the carriage rattled and jolted through cobbled streets. "I didn't mean to get you in trouble."

She waved her hand; an aborted slash at the air turned to a shrug and then a grab at a handhold, "Not your fault. It's... Mikah, what they did was simply beyond call. Bursting into someone's home... Those... those..." she trailed off with a hiss of disgust and went back to staring out the window.

I leaned back and watched her. Last night seemed a long way away, veiled behind a curtain of darkness and lust. Now I stared at her and... I'd... with this?

Back at the Palace there was arguing, the catfight noises of a heated Rris altercation as Mai dressed down the officer in charge. When Kh'hitch turned up she calmed, but was still seething.

"Sir, it wasn't her fault," I started to say but Mai stilled me with a touch on my arm. The advisor made a small gesture to my escort and I was lead off back toward my rooms while the sounds of arguing faded behind me through echoing marble halls.

I was worried about her. They wouldn't do anything? Shit, she wouldn't do anything? I'd never seen her this angry before and hoped she wouldn't push someone too far. What we'd done... shit, what we'd done...I guess running off like that wasn't such a smart move, but surely it didn't warrant such a panic. I mean, we were allowed to go off by ourselves... weren't we?

Maybe we weren't alone. For all I knew the entire contingent of that tavern could have been plainclothes. And then our 'tails' had lost us in the rain and panicked. Things snowballed from there.

In the shelter of my room I closed the door, leaned against it and shook my head, then plucked at my shirt: a warm day, but my damp clothes were hanging off me like wet sacks and beneath those my back stung. I moved my shoulder and winced. Shit, and if someone saw those, Mai would be in even hotter water. No, I'd have to be careful. I sighed and went to find something drier to change into.

More waiting. I sat and stared out open windows, watching windblown clouds above the palace gardens. And my mind was in another time, another place: a small room a night ago.

What'd happened then... I felt that I should have had some remorse about that, a twinge of guilt; what was strange was that... I didn't. The first person I'd been able to get close to for so long, someone I'd been able to hold, someone whom the darkness had reduced to a warm friend in the night. Was this going to change anything? Would it change how she looked at me? Our friendship? She'd said it was her job to look after me, to keep me happy. Was she just doing her job?

It was a thought that frightened me, and one I desperately wanted not to be true. But could I be sure? She'd seemed to enjoy herself, but compared with what? How could I tell if that had been real? Well, there was my back; she'd lost control enough to forget her claws and do something that could have serious repercussions...

And that.

The first time. Shit. I leaned back and closed my eyes, able to see future history books: and in the year (what was the year?) Michael Riley discovered the orgasm...

She really hadn't know? Okay, so I knew there were enough human women who'd never actually experienced one, but to never even know...? Other Ris physicians had questioned me at length about sexual habits, but those were analytical kinds of sessions, far removed from the heat of the act itself. There were things they'd never asked me, things I'd never volunteered, and that was one of them. Now, if they found out, there'd be more poking and prodding, more questions asked about both sides. I'd thought I'd come to understand them, and now this started to undermine the foundations of that belief. What else was there? What other things that I took for granted were completely alien to my hosts? And vice versa.

A scratch at the door disturbed my thoughts. Mai, I thought as I started to get up, then froze as it opened onto another figure: Hirht. My heart lurched, the possibilities tumbling around me. Was Mai in trouble? Was I in trouble? “Sir,” I ducked my head. “I wasn’t expecting you. Please, Mai didn’t mean anything...”

“Mai?” the king asked, then cocked his head and slowly closed the door behind himself before turning back to me. “Huhn, Miathris. Of course. A very interesting female that one. She’s making a great deal of noise about what happened.”

“There’s nothing to make a fuss about.”

Hirht levelled a hard look at me. “You vanished. Nobody knew where you’d gone. I think that was quite enough to make a fuss over.”

I shook my head. “Just because your people following us loose track of us, you assume there’s trouble.”

And his face set, the muscles locking but his pupils flinching wildly. “You were deliberately trying to evade them?”

I gave him a small, restrained smile. “Actually, I didn’t know anybody was following us, until now.”

I saw Hirht’s jaw tighten as he mentally kicked himself, “Ah. Nicely done. It’s

strange how people keep underestimating you.”

“Sir, I’m not wanting to... to fight with words. It’s just... ” I sighed and shook my head, trying to find the words to explain what’d happened. “I’m doing my best to learn to live my life again. Mai is the closest I’ve come. There was no trouble, I was never in any danger.”

“You can’t be sure of that. You haven’t forgotten what happened at the river, have you?”

“No, sir. Not anytime soon. But... ” I stopped and rubbed my face. “I mean, there was no sign we were in trouble. It was simply a decision we made, and I don’t see a way to check with you every time we have to do that. I know you were concerned for me, I just think there might have been some... over-reaction. “

“A,” he said. “I think that’s what the doctor’s upset about. And I agree; things could have been handled a little more discreetly, but at the time all we knew was that you had vanished. “

“Where is she, anyway?”

“Huhn,” he growled and gestured at the door, “I left her with Kh’hitch. He has a way of dealing with situations like this. Although, he’ll certainly be fighting his own reflection with that one.”

She'd stormed the Palace, turned the system around, faced down nobility to get her way. A, Kh'hitch would certainly be batting in his own league there. "It'd be a fight worth seeing."

"A," he curled his hand in a yes, then cocked his head. "A, indeed it would. There's a lady who knows what she wants, and when she wants it..." He looked past me, out the window and his voice was a lot quieter. "Ah, the rain can wash away a lot, can't it."

I followed his gaze, to the verdant wilderness of the Palace gardens, lush from the heavy rain. "Yeah," I murmured in English, "Or it can bring other problems."

He didn't ask for a translation, just made an acknowledging noise and a small gesture that meant nothing to me. "A. Well, you understand that we have to take some steps to ensure your safety. I don't think it would be in anyone's interests to change that. However, I will grant you what happened this morning was a little excessive. There will be a few changes."

"I'm sure Mai'll be pleased to hear that," I smiled a bit, then swallowed. "Sir, I never meant to cause trouble. For everything you've done... I just want to say, thank you."

He flicked a hand, a small, dismissive gesture. "It is all we can do. You're a guest at our hearth. Still, for someone who doesn't mean to cause trouble, you're very good at it."

"I'm sorry."

“No. Not necessarily your fault. The tallest stalks are always harvested first...
“He sighed and stared at me for a few second, then shook his head. “And now, I’d best go throw some water on that doctor. Until later, Mikah.”

“Sir.”

—v—

It was a long morning. Restless hours spent waiting, sitting, pacing to and fro on the carpet before I heard the voices out in the corridor. I was standing when Mai came in, smiled at me before closing the door behind her.

“You’re all right?” I asked anxiously.

She stopped and looked surprised. “Me? I’m fine.”

I stepped toward her, hesitated. “You were so... upset. I thought you might make someone angry.”

And she chattered a little, then came over to meet me in the middle of the room and reach up and caress my face: a fleeting stroke of fingertips against my cheek. “Worried, were you?”

“Well, for them, yes.”

Another laugh. She’d calmed down; relaxed, her fur brushed back into shape. “I had a few words with the advisor. They’ve agreed not to let something like that happen again.”

I touched her, stroking down a piece of fur on her shoulder. “It wasn’t really their fault. I mean, they thought I was in trouble. They were trying to help.”

“Huhn,” her ears flickered and she caught my hand, holding it in hers as she studied it, a claw poking against my palm. Then she met my eyes again, “Mikah, what they did... it was uncalled for.”

“It upsets you so much?”

She tipped her head and there was pain in those eyes. “It’s my home,” she said plaintively. “Invading it like that... it’s a violation.”

“I think there were larger things at stake than privacy.”

Mai opened her mouth, then caught the words before they escaped and looked down at our hands again: my larger, pale-skinned digits cradled among her fur and dark pads and claws. The eyes flickered again, meeting my bemusement. “Mikah, the hearth is very important. The home, it’s a private place. The idea that others can intrude on that is... uncomfortable. To actually do so is extremely rude. You understand?”

Maybe, in an academic sense, but not as this Rris did, not as she felt it in the bone. But what she'd said did go some way toward explaining their architecture, and if that instinct could influence their cities so strongly, it had to have considerable sway over them. I just nodded and she cocked her head; muscles in her face twitched. "Just words to you, aren't they," she said.

"I... think I know what you mean," I replied. "My kind are... similar in some ways."

"Ah, a start," she smiled and patted my hand briefly before releasing it and reaching up toward my shoulder. "And how's your back doing?"

"Much better," I said, the small white lie compounded when I said, "Just stings a little. I can hardly notice it."

And her ears tilted in a gesture that might be analogous to raising eyebrows. "A? That much better?"

"Yes."

"Huhn. Surprising. You'll be working tomorrow, it won't cause any problems?"

Schiese. And she watched my face as I remembered my schedule and forced a smile: "No. No problems."

Sunlight was visible through chinks in the wood, beams of light cutting through dust in the air. The bulk of the ship nestled amongst its framework of wood and ropes and chains. The hull and deck were polished, engine hatches open where pipes were continuously being re-routed and shifted. Sounds of activity filled the workshop, hammering and sawing and Rris voices, the throbbing pulse of a steam engine underlying it all. Over at the drill press the Rris craftsman carefully adjusted the piece of steel sheet, then reached up to grasp the handle, his fingers flexing around the wooden grips. I saw his tongue flick around his lips before he pulled down and the bit lowered, metal touched metal and screamed: curls of steel and a wisp of bluish smoke drifted up. The transmission whined and he let up a little, then bore down again and metal protested, the bit slowing, then punching through with a squeal. The Rris gave a triumphant yip, pushed the handle up and cut the power. He held the result up: half inch of steel with light spearing through the hole bored through it.

All around, watching Rris workers started back to work, chattering in animated conversations. Perched on a stack of lumber at my side, Chaeitch gave me a satisfied grin, then bounded down with a clattering of claws and the tools in his belt. I joined him as he examined first the plate, then the bit in the drill press. A twist to remove it then he held it up to the light and stroked the pad of his index finger across the cutting face. “Ah, not bad. Your opinion?”

I took it off him and tried it myself, then took a closer squint: a little blunter and nicked. “Better than the last lot.”

“A,” he agreed and cocked his head. “It’s still in one piece.”

True, the last batch had been a touch... brittle. This was better, but there could still be improvements. The drill press was doing its job though: the cast-iron frame of the device was bolted to a cement slab in the workhouse floor. The power came from a spinning metal shaft run through from the engine room, geared up through a transmission. The steam engine providing power to the workshop was the same type that'd gone into the textiles mill, the same type as the one in the steamboat. A half-dozen new technologies gone into producing that drill, a piece of equipment that would've been impossible six months ago.

Equipment Chaeitch already had designs on. A whole list of designs in fact. As we left the noise and bustle of the workshop he turned the bit over and over in his hand, already ruminating over modifications. The chuck mechanism for one: a key would be more secure, but that was beyond our current capabilities. Chaeitch had three other alternatives lined up, ideas he bounced off me as we headed for the relative quiet of his office.

"Hai! Chaeitch!" I heard from the end of the hallway. Rraerch's claws pattered on the wooden floorboards as she caught up; elegant in a pleated beige kilt, white linen vest and her feline features pursed in a smile. "Congratulations on the textile contract. The Guild's chasing their tails over the additions."

"They're... satisfied?" I ventured.

The Rris chittered and the female flicked her ears and and gently said, "A. Mikah, they're satisfied."

"I've just got some old bottles in from Cover-my-Tail," Chaeitch mused, tossing the drill bit in the air and catching it between thumb and forefinger. "I think this might be as good a time as any to open one."

“Chiathra Vineyard?” Rraerch’s ears perked up.

“Of course.”

“Then how can we refuse? A, Mikah?” she laughed and hooked my sleeve with a claw to draw me along.

The window in Chaeitch’s little office was as grimy as ever, imparting a sepia tinge to the sunlight filtering through. Sounds from the workshops were muffled but still audible, a low background noise in counterpoint to the clink of glass as Chaeitch set out wide Ris-style glasses and a bottle wrapped in wicker with a red wax seal on the neck.

“The Guild is very happy,” Rraerch was saying as I sat on one of the cushions. “So much so that they’re willing to commit on engines for other mills. They have been asking about the looms. How long until those’re ready?”

“Ah,” Glass rattled as Chaeitch poured. “Difficult to say. Maybe a month before we get the burrs out. There’re still a few of those, but things are promising. Mikah’s library also mentions a loom that’s capable of producing pictures. I don’t think that’s an immediate possibility, but it does give me some ideas. Here, Mikah. Try this. I think it’ll be to your taste.” He pushed a filled glass my way.

I thanked him and tried it. Mellow, an unusual highlight: smokey, touches of spice. “It’s good,” was my verdict.

“It should be,” Rraerch smiled and lapped at her own drink. “And Mikah, how long do you think?”

I twirled my drink between my fingers and chuckled. “Hard to say. Chaeitch is the one who does the impossible. If I say a time he’ll only do something to cut that in half.”

Laughter from the Ris. Chaeitch tipped his glass toward me and said, “Don’t try to undersell yourself.”

“A, you...” Rraerch started to say as she clapped a hand on my back.

I couldn’t hold back the yelp of pain, the flinch that slopped wine onto the floor. The Ris both froze, staring at me with shocked eyes. “Mikah...?” Rraerch ventured.

“No... It’s nothing,” I gave a tight smile. “Sorry I spilled...”

“What did you do?” Chaeitch asked her. “You forget your claws?”

“No...” she looked confused.

“No,” I interjected. “No. It wasn’t her. It... No.” I was digging myself deeper.

“Then what’s wrong?” Chaeitch asked. Rraerch had laid her glass aside and was leaning toward me.

“Nothing,” I started to protest and she laid a hand on my arm. “Mikah, don’t.”

Chaeitch’s ears started to go back. “If there’s a problem...”

“No. It’s...”

And Rraerch caught the tail of my shirt and just yanked it up to expose my back. I heard the shocked hiss escape her: “Mikah.” I twisted to try and knock her hands away and ended up wincing as skin pulled and she pushed me back, rucked my shirt up a bit higher. “What happened?”

“Nothing. I just slipped.”

“Marks like that? Nothing? Rot it, what happened?” I felt a fingerpad tracing across my back.

“Shit! It doesn’t matter!” Irritated, defensive, I squirmed again and this time she let me go. “They’re from claws, aren’t they,” she asked from behind me. I saw Chaeitch look up at her.

“It’s not serious,” I insisted. “Don’t worry.”

A silence. Perhaps she made a gesture behind me where I couldn’t see it because Chaeitch reacted, his face twitching before he glanced away. Rraerch took her seat at my side again, picking up her glass and watching me over the rim while I was busy slowly tucking my shirt back in.

“They’re claws.” A statement of fact. I looked at her and she flicked her ears. “How’d you get them? Someone you’re protecting... your lady friend?”

I sighed and sagged. “It was an accident,” I said.

“It was her?” Chaeitch looked disbelieving. “How’d something like that happen?”

“A,” Rraerch added. “She’s always so protective of you. Why’d she go and do something like that? Something to do with that fuss the other night?”

“What was that about?” Chaeitch inquired. “I heard the guards were turning the town over. That was to do with him?”

“Isn’t everything these days?” Rraerch chuckled, taking a sip of wine.

“Hey, it was noise over nothing,” I protested.

The industrialist snorted. “I heard you and your lady vanished and the Palace was...was...” she trailed off, sitting up straighter with a peculiar expression crossing her features. “She didn’t [force/rape] you?”

“No, it wasn’t like that...” I started to say, then realised what I’d done. Too late. She cocked her head, incredulity fighting laughter. “You did. You had sex with her, didn’t you?”

And I slapped my hand over my face, rubbing my eyes. One night. One bloody night. That was how long it stayed a secret. And Rraerch was chittering out loud: “You did, you actually did. And she...” She curled her arms around, miming an embrace and laughed again.

“True, Mikah?” Chaeitch leaned forward over his desk, his ears perked up. “Just good friends?”

“It was... we were,” I tried to find a way out of it, then sagged and shook my head. “My back was an accident. She didn’t mean it. Please, don’t make a fuss about it. We really don’t need that kind of attention.”

“That kind of attention,” Rraerch chuckled. “Ah, you must make an interesting couple. But why’d she do that to your back?”

“We were... learning,” I fudged, not giving them any more. No. The exact circumstances behind my behind were something I wasn’t going to go into; not there and then.

“It must’ve been a painful lesson.”

I flashed a quick smile. “I think I frightened her more than she hurt me.”

Jaws spasmed in laughter, then a thoughtful expression cross Rraerch’s face. If she was going to say something she was forestalled when Chaeitch said, “You had fun?”

I hesitated, not sure whether to answer, then snorted a laugh and said, “I think I did.”

“You think? What was she like?”

That was over the top. I levelled a glare at him and he laughed again. “Sorry I asked,” he said and lapped at his drink.

“One thing,” Rraerch mused. “I’d have thought she’d have treated you like fresh eggs. She knows how thin your hide is. Why’d she do something like that?”

I looked down at my cup, then back at the Rris, “Please, is this something we have to talk about?”

“You don’t want to.”

“I’m sorry. No.”

They were a little taken aback, glancing at one another. “Apologies,” Rraerch said. “It was just... surprising. You did enjoy yourself though, that’s the important thing.”

“And we couldn’t have chosen a better time to open this,” Chaeitch added, raising his cup, and at our bewildered looks he crowed, “Your first time! May there be many others!”

I had to shake my head: exasperation and amusement. Why me? I wondered while Rris chattered laughter.

—v—

There were still mysteries in my life, even if I didn’t realise it at the time. With so much going on around me there was no way I could keep track of everything; the present was the most important moment and niggling little details tended to get lost in the past. From day to day I was vaguely aware there were things going on behind the scenes, things I only caught glimpses of: the powers-that-be working in the wings, readying the stage for their plays.

Those machinations I was vaguely aware of, but what could I do? I’d known there’d be bickering and backstabbing, the arguments that’d been so prevalent at

early meetings with foreign dignitaries, the tenseness that'd underlain the veneer of civility at more recent meetings. Shyia had warned me; I'd been expecting them, I lived with them. But there were other questions, loose threads from the past still lying tangled and buried under other pressures. All it took was one jog to uncover them.

I remember the day: a warm evening riding back from the workshops, a dusting of misty mare's tails high in a sky already touched by gold. Rraerch was sitting opposite, lost in her own thoughts as she stared out the window, her hand hooked around one of the straps as she swayed back and forth in time with the motion of the carriage. For a while I watched her: that feline profile, the salt-and-pepper fur around her muzzle, darker streaks through the fur of her cheek tufts and neck ruff, yellow-amber eyes focused on something beyond the window. A decent sort. She treated me like a person, albeit their kind of person. There was tension there, the times when she was nervous of me and the involuntary flinching when I made a faux pax: moving too quickly, too close, my laugh... But she talked freely with me and laughed at my jokes, or at my attempts at humour, and seemed to like me. I felt comfortable around her, someone I could like in return.

The carriage jolted through a particularly overeager rut, knocking my still-tender back against the seat and jerking me back to the present. I winced, then shook my head and went back to watching the city passing outside. Buildings swung into and out of view through the window as we turned a corner onto one of the larger streets where the traffic thickened, both vehicle, animal and foot. Shopfronts and stalls were open with hawkers shouting and displaying their wares for the crowds of Rris going about their business. I sat back in the anonymity of shadows and watched them as heads turned in curiosity while the carriage passed.

It was at an intersection turning onto one of the city squares that we stopped, letting a procession of wagons laden with goods pass ahead. The building across the way was an expensive looking place with wrought iron gates around the

courtyard. An interesting pattern to the iron, a geometric repetition that reminded me of Celtic work. And then I saw the pair of Rris standing off to one side, engrossed in animated conversation, a hand waved in emphasis, one of them glancing my way, a glimpse of a green stone bracelet .

And somewhere inside a cold hand clenched around my guts while something clicked into place. That Rris. I knew that Rris. I was sure it was that same Rris from the market, just as I was certain that I knew that Rris from somewhere else. Another glimpse of that face before a wagon rolled between us.

“Mikah?” I looked around to see Rraerch was peering curiously at me. “Is there something wrong?”

“Rraerch,” I beckoned urgently and she looked dubious then scooted over to my window. “Look,” I said, turning and pointing. “Over by the gate... Those Rris...”

And the crowd parted and now there was only one Rris standing there looking annoyed.

“Her?” she asked, squinting. “I’ve seen her around the Palace... I think. Aide to a military official of some kind or another.”

“There was another... ” who was nowhere in sight. The carriage started off again and I dropped back in my seat, the pain in my back dulled to a minor twinge.

“Well, she’s gone now,” Rraerch said and cocked her head, studying my face. “It was important?”

“I... I don’t know,” I shook my head, looked out to where the fountains of Wilder square were glittering in the evening light. “I think it is.”

“You don’t know?”

“It’s a feeling. Like I knew the Rris, but I don’t know from where.”

“A,” she regarded me gravely for a few seconds, then her expression lightened and she patted my knee. “I’m sure it’ll come to you.”

—v—

Running again. Between trees with trunks and limbs as white as bones, scarlet autumn leaves crackling under my feet. Running from something, to something, I wasn’t sure which and only slowed as the branches thinned and there was a building there, an old barn. A peaked shingle roof, weather-bleached wooden walls, the planks warped and twisted. I didn’t want to open the door, I wanted to run again, but I moved forward and my heart was racing as I touched dry wood and hinges squealed as the door opened.

Darkness inside, nothing but...

The inhuman shape exploding from the shadows, gaping mouth and eyes burning, twisted limbs spread with clawed hands reaching for me, a glitter of green rock around a wrist as I screamed and flung myself backwards to scramble away...

And awareness lurched, dumping me into darkness, sprawled naked on the carpet with my pounding heart the loudest sound in the room, huddled against a wall with a trail of bedclothes strewn across the room behind me and rugburn on my bare skin. The middle of the night, with warm air and the mullioned windows throwing a black laticework across the pool of moonlight flooding the room. And I curled up against the cold wall, shaking uncontrollably as I remembered...

I never noticed the door opening, the next I knew there was a distorted figure crouching over me and reaching out with a clawed hand. I cried out, recoiling, and the hand jerked back. "Mikah, don't. Please."

I flinched and blinked up at the figure. "Mai?"

"A."

Of course. Who else... "I'm sorry," I said in a small voice.

There was a low sigh of breath, a rustle of fur as she settled beside me and a warm hand laid on my arm, gently stroking. "It was only a dream, Mikah. Only a dream."

“Mai,” I choked and was still shaking when I twisted, caught her hand and squeezed. Her face was a mask of shadows in the gloom, inscrutable. “I remembered.”

A hesitation. “Remembered? Remembered what?”

“Him,” I tried to explain, tried to see her face. “I know where I saw him...”

“Him?” The silhouette of her head tipped. “Mikah, slow down. I don’t understand.”

I stopped, then awkwardly struggled to sit up, Beside me, Mai watched quietly as I took a breath, trying to collect my thoughts, looked down at our entwined fingers. “In the market, in the town, the Rris I saw. I thought I knew him.”

“A.” A hesitation. “That one.”

“I did.” I searched for her eyes again, a vain effort in the darkness. “From Westwater, the barn. They said there was no-one there. He was.”

“You’re sure? I mean, you have trouble recognising Rris...” I saw her ears go back and she let that sentence hang.

“Mai, I... Faces, I have trouble with. I know that. This was... it was the way he stood, the shape of his body, the feeling, the...” I fumbled with words, tried

to mime a bracelet around her wrist, then had to settle with, “I’m sure.”

A slow exhalation, my arm feeling the feather-touch of her breath. “Then... I believe you. But ... Mikah, it was just a glimpse of someone you saw the best part of a year ago, I don’t know that others will. You understand?”

And I did. I sagged, a hand touched my shoulder and a single finger stroked down my arm. “Come on, back to bed, a?” she tugged gently at my wrist, helping me to my feet. I acquiesced meekly, letting her lead me back to sit on the edge of the bed where she patted my shoulder again. “Wait a bit.”

I put my head in my hands, hauling a deep breath, trying to pull myself together while crockery rattled in the bathroom. Shortly there were the soft footfalls on carpet and the mattress distorted as another weight settled beside me. Furry hands pressed a cool metal mug into my own and withdrew without a word. I cupped it and took a sip: the smell of pewter, cold water. I needed it; half-drained the mug then looked down at the metal in the moonlight.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She made a low noise, a chuckle? “About what?”

“This, waking you up, everything... I’m sorry”

Now she laughed and laid her head on my shoulder, fur tickling my bare skin, “Ah, don’t be. That’s why I’m here.”

Almost involuntarily my arm went around her. “But I don’t want to be trouble...”

“Mikah, if you need anything, if you want to talk about anything, I’ll be here.” Her voice was low, a rumble I could feel through her body. “You understand?”

“Thank you,” I said and found I was scratching her ruff, fingers ruffling through the longer fur as I might pet a cat.

“Huhnn,” she grumbled. “Why’d you stop?”

“Sorry,” I said again and she looked up at me and there was a flash of white teeth and a nip at my chin, then a rough tongue touching that spot. “Don’t be,” she said again, softly.

I hugged her, turning to pull her closer, holding her, feeling her heat, her heart beating, the dusty scent of her fur. Something real, an anchor, a face I knew, someone who was there when the darkness came for me. I just held her for a time; for a long time, hanging onto that solidity while the emotions turned to exhaustion. Darkness and moonlight on fur, contrast, a rhythmic shifting of muscles as she breathed, a rhythm I lost myself in. I guess I dozed off: the next I remember I was laying back in bed, cool night air brushing me, the sound of fabric rustling, Mai leaning over as she spread a sheet across me.

I fumbled after her hand and caught fur, just lightly holding on: “Mai? I saw him.”

“I know,” a low voice assured me, an alien in the night. “It’s all right.” And a peculiar hand stroked my forehead to brush hair aside.

That early morning before I slept again, I remember the bed shifting, a warm body climbing in and moving close. I groggily stirred, snuggling closer to warmth and a half-dreamt memory of care and security. Strong arms were around me, holding me as I slipped under the veil of sleep again and this time the dreams didn’t follow.

—v—

I woke to bright morning sunlight, the drapes swaying in a summer breeze. For a while I lay quietly, staring past the faint discolorations in the cream paint of the ceiling as memories of the previous night gradually came back. God, it’d seemed like a dream and I might have been able to pass it as that if it wasn’t for the slumbering figure beside me. A bundle of dusky tawny-grey fur curled on her side, a light cotton sheet covering one leg, the other sprawled on top of that. Her face was calm, cradled in the crook of an arm, her open mouth revealing a flash of pink tongue as she breathed slowly.

Gently I touched, fingers tracing through the longer fur of her ruff, of her cheek tufts. Someone who’d wake in the middle of the night to rush through dark corridors because some guard might have told her I was having a bad dream. Someone who meant so much to me, someone I’d loved and who’d loved me in return, someone who was my fingerhold on sanity. And looking at her, at the alien features relaxed in sleep, it was impossible not to wonder: Love, between two so different? Or... East is east and west is west ... was it that? Was it two biological systems following their inbuilt drives, two mismatched gears trying to find some way to mesh in an alignment that would eventually end up damaging them both. Just urges, each utterly misreading subtle subconscious

cues from the other.

And I realised I was stroking her fur again.

“You stopped again,” a breathy voice rumbled. A gentle stirring and an eye cracked to a slit of amber and black as I pulled my hand away.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Huhn,” she growled softly, stretching a leg. “You didn’t. I woke earlier, but... well, you’ve got a comfortable bed.”

Watching me watching her. For a second her amber eyes were on mine, then lowered and she reached over to stroke a single finger around the scar tissue on my shoulder. I touched her hand, catching her attention to say, “Thank you for staying.”

Her face pursed in a smile and she moved her hand and pressed her palm against my chest: a pressure of fur and warm leathery pads. “You looked like you needed someone to keep the night away. I was here.”

“With teeth like those, I think you can keep anything away,” I said and she made a soft growling sound, a gentle pricking of claws against my chest. “You tease,” she said, half-accusingly, and grinned at me.

“Reminds me... are you hungry?”

She chittered. “A. I think I could eat a bison.”

“I don’t know if they serve those. I’ll ask, a?” I smiled back and rolled out of bed before her playful swipe could connect, grabbing a sheet to wrap around myself out of an old habit of modesty. The guards in the hall outside were accustomed enough to my eccentricities to only exchange glances before the ranking one volunteered, “Sir?”

“Ah, would it be possible to have two breakfasts brought this morning?”

A hint of emotion behind the guard’s facade? “I think that would be possible, sir. There’s something she’d prefer?”

Amusement? Was he taking the piss? I wasn’t sure. “I don’t know. I’m not really an expert on Rris food. Something she’d like.”

“Yes, sir,” the guard bowed and the last thing I saw as I closed the door was them exchanging glances. I leaned back against the door and sighed.

“Something wrong?” Mai was sitting crosslegged at the foot of the bed.

“I think they’ve been talking,” I shook my head, then shrugged away from the door and started for the bathroom, throwing the sheet back on the bed as I

passed. “I hope they got their giggles,” I muttered to myself in english, irritated as I crossed the tiles and leaned over to flick the faucets on.

“I wouldn’t put too much stock in what they think.” Mai came to lean against the door frame. “It’s just talk.” She cocked her head at the water spilling from the wooden spout, then at me, “You always bathe in the morning?”

“I need it. I worked up a sweat last night. You want one?”

She tipped her head the other way and looked slightly amused. “Mornings aren’t a usual time to bathe. You noticed I’ve got fur?”

I trailed a finger through the water and smiled at her. “Oh, is that what that is?”

A chitter, “It takes a while to dry and brush.”

I went over to her, the tiles cold under my feet as I touched a shoulder and looked down at yellow-amber eyes. “Is that all? Hey, we’ve got time today. And I’ll do your back if you’ll do mine.”

She moved closer, leaning up against me and loosely wrapping her arms around me. Fur tickled. “That a promise?” she grinned up, flashing white teeth.

“Only if you don’t bite,” I returned.

“Huhnn,” she growled. “I don’t know if... ” and she cut off with a squawk when I scooped her up and dropped her in the bath amidst a squalling, kicking of legs and splash of water spilling over onto the tiles.

I leaned on the wooden side of the tub and smiled at her. “I do your back now?”

A good thing it was a generously-sized tub. It was a rambuncious bath, with a lot of splashing and water overflowing onto the floor. She showed me how to use some of the brushes that’d been laying around, things with bristles coarse enough to scratch my skin that were perfect for her hide. Washing her back was an experience, possibly comparable to washing a large dog, although this was one that did mine in return. I felt her hesitate at first, then moving the wash cloth ever so gently around the scabs of healing punctures on my back. I tensed, desperately silent as she touched the back of my neck and doubtless felt the tension there. Perhaps she was feeling the same as I was - wanting to say the right thing but neither sure just what that was.

Later we sat in cooling water, Mai watching me with lidded eyes. “Mikah? What you said about biting... Is that what your dreams are about?”

I flinched, a sharp and painful memory still vivid in my mind’s eye. “Why do you say that?”

She waved a shrug and pointed at my cheek. “When you have those dreams, often you cover your face. Just there... And when you wake you’re terrified of me. I just thought that with what you’ve been through, the memory doesn’t want to die.”

Water splashed when I gently slapped the surface and Mai just waited patiently, letting me take my time. “It’s that,” I eventually said. “Sometimes. Sometimes other things. Mai, last night... I know what I saw. It was the same Rris. I know it was.”

“I can’t imagine how it could have been,” she said. “But if you’re so sure, I’ll ask for the matter to be tracked down.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“It’s no trouble. I just hope something comes of it.” A. I also had no wish to make her look like the fool I was. I wondered what she really thought of the idea. Perhaps she thought I was paranoid, if they had such a term. Still, she smiled and stood up, water cascading from her fur in a surprisingly long-lived waterfall. She looked down at herself, patting sodden fur that clung to her inhuman curves in a way I found disquietingly fascinating. “Now, I think I’d best start drying off. I’ve got something I think you’ll be interested in.”

“A? What? Another of your surprises?”

She chuckled and shook her whole body, sending a cloud of water droplets flying to patter against me and the rest of the room. No wonder it was tiled. After that, her fur was a damp mass of spikes that she started patting down with her hands. “Just have patience,” she said. “Now, where’s a towel...”

The carriage's iron-rimmed wheels squealed on the cobblestones as it turned a corner, sending its occupants sliding on the upholstery. We grabbed for the hand holds to stop ourselves slipping across to the other side of the car. Mai hissed, "Leather! Fabric would have been fine, but no, they have to be [something] and use leather. Why don't they just grease the [something] seats!"

I listened to her half-hearted mocking tirade against the coach's designers and grinned into my hand while the carriage rocked and jolted its way through the narrow streets in the southern quarter of the city. I recognised the area: not too far from the Thieving Cormorant, or Mai's place for that matter. And she was still smugly coy about refusing to tell me where we were going.

There was a lot of activity outside when the carriage finally stopped. Through the window I could see Rris street vendors bustling by, carrying trays or pushing carts laden with their wares. The air was filled with the hackle-raising sound of many Rris voices raised in competition with each other. Mai patted my leg, "We get out here."

'Here' was a narrow, winding side street taken over by the morning market. Shops spilled out into the thoroughfare, the traffic of furry figures bustling around stalls and awnings and shop windows. The smells of cooking food, garbage and animal dung hung in the air between the walls that rose above the street to where eaves almost closed overhead. That familiar ripple of stunned silence spread away from Mai and I as we made our way up the cobbled street, the usual babble rising behind us. The owner of a stall backed away with its eyes wide enough to show the white around them when I stopped, my eye caught by its... his wares: carved wooden bowls painted in bright geometric patterns. I almost touched one and the stallowner dropped his jaws in a primal hiss, one hand coming up with claws extended.

“You won’t do much business with an attitude like that,” I said and had the dubious satisfaction of seeing the Rris freeze with a comical dumbfounded expression before Mai caught my arm.

“Stop teasing,” she chided as we continued and the commotion picked up behind us.

“Hey, he started it.”

And she slapped my arm, chittering. Our destination was just up around a bend in the road. Mai led the way into an ubiquitous dark tunnel passing through to the central court. This was smaller than the cloistered atrium in her building had been: little more than a light well with doors around the ground floor and off a second-floor balcony above us. The staircase up to that balcony was stone, worn blocks that looked a lot older than the rest of the run-down building around us. Perhaps part of some old structure long overgrown by the rest of the city.

Mai stopped at a door and slapped her palm against it. For a time nothing happened. She leaned out over the balcony to yell up, “Eser❖t! You mange-taken rat! Travellers seeking lodging.”

Eser❖t... I knew that Rris.

Another pause, then a muffled voice and clattering of claws before the door was opened to reveal a steep staircase and Eser❖t blinking out at us. He was wearing an apron that at some time in the past might have been sacking. Now it was spattered with psychadelic smears of paints and other colorful material and

getting grubbier as he wiped his hands on it. “Huhn, you could have just knocked,” he said to Mai, then past her to me: “Ah, Mikah. This will start the neighbours talking.”

“Well, we could have wrapped him in a carpet,” Mai said, “But I wasn’t so sure he’d like that.”

“You thought right,” I said.

Eser♦ squinted at me, then snorted. “There’s no point giving them more morsels to worry over. My threshold is open, please.”

I didn’t recognise it as ‘come in’ until Mai started following Eser♦ upstairs.

—v—

The loft room was almost a stereotypical struggling artist’s pad.

A cluttered space directly under the peak of the roof. The sloped ceilings were plastered, the cream plaster discolored in places, completely broken away in others. In one corner was a disarrayed mess of blankets that I guessed served as a bed, a iron-bound chest similar to Mai’s tucked into a corner. A windowed cupola looked to the south, the wooden shutters cast back over a vista of sky, tiled rooftops and chimneypots and providing ample light for the table and easel set up before them. The subject was a rather spartan still life: an old chair and a bucket standing on a coarse-woven drapery cloth. Stacks of frames with stood

against the walls, some with canvass already attached and being stretched ready for use, others just bare paint-spattered wood. Charcoal sketches were tacked to the sloping ceiling: pictures of skylines and roofs and still-life arrangements of geometric odds and ends and Rris models. The few vertical spaces carried paintings, often completed versions of the sketches. Among them were scenes from the city, the skyline, a craftsman (person?) at a table littered with tools and curls and offcuts of wood, the docks, a ruined tower bathed in twilight... all in the Rris stylistic motif.

The breeze blowing in through the open windows was cool, but not unpleasant. I could foresee the place being freezing in winter. A canvass was set up on the easel, paints on the table alongside. On the canvass a chalk preliminary had already been sketched out: a faint tracing depicting the old chair and bucket with the window behind them. The smears of test color along the frame edge were still wet. And a pair of Rris watched as I looked around, one of them with his ears spasming in his efforts to keep them up.

“Familiar to you?” Mai asked me.

“It brings back memories,” I said, looking over the material on the table. Rocks and powders, various roots and plants and oils, pestle and mortar. Literally making his pigments from scratch. The brushes looked expensive. Back home a good horsehair brush could set you back forty bucks, were they as expensive here? Off to one side were a few sheets of rag paper covered with charcoal sketches, similar to the images stuck up on the walls. The charcoal sticks lying in a small wooden box looked handcarved.

“You know what those are?” Eser[?] asked, watching me intently.

I gave a quick smile: “Charcoal. I’ve used them. I haven’t had to make my

own paints though.”

A snort and he looked at the mess on his hands. “You aren’t missing anything.”

I gestured at the sketches. “May I look at those?”

A hesitation, then he said, “Go ahead.”

Nice paper. I noticed that as soon as I touched them; the rag had a weight and texture you didn’t find on mass produced stuff. The drawings weren’t bad, if busy. Several sketches were jigsawed onto each page: He obviously hadn’t wanted to waste paper, trying to make as much use of the space as possible. A study of a cornice was bunted up against a sketch of a stevedor straining under a load of fishing nets. No fixative, so lines were a little smudged. And the perspective was odd: that pinched field of vision peculiar to Rris artwork, an alien point of view.

“These are good,” I said and Eser♦t visibly puffed up. “He shows that he has taste,” he said to Mai.

Modest, too. I smiled slightly and laid the sketches out. “These are for a painting?”

“A.”

I studied the sketches, then the rough laid out on the easel. “They’re... realistic? I mean, this is what they really look like?”

Now his fur bristled again, although not with pride. “This isn’t the daubing of an apprentice. Of course it’s realistic. Would this be in such demand if it wasn’t?! “

“I didn’t... That wasn’t what I meant. It’s just that your art... I mean Rris art, it looks different to me. I think we see things differently.”

“What?” Now he looked confused.

“Like your pictures?” Mai ventured, then at Eser♦’s confused expression elaborated. “I’ve seen pictures done by Mikah and his kind. They’re... odd. You find the same with ours?”

I’d never considered how they saw my pictures, the clips on the laptop. “Yes.”

“Hhnnn,” Eser♦ watched me. “Odd? In what way?”

“Why don’t you show him,” Mai suggested and at our look nodded toward the paper and charcoal. “If that’s all right. We can pay for any materials.”

And Eser♦ gave me a narrow-eyed look for a second, then flashed a predatory grin, “Ah, it might be interesting.”

It didn't take long for him to shift his present canvass aside and set another one up. I looked at the subject, the old chair, the cloth and the backdrop of the city through the windows behind, and frowned. I frowned: it needed something, but exactly what I wasn't sure. I bit my lip and looked around the sparse loft until I saw what I needed.

She noticed my stare, cocked her head and said, "What?"

—v—

Mai sat in the sunlight, eyes half-closed in the warmth. Her tail flicked lazily a couple of times, then she scratched at her shoulder and shifted. It didn't matter: I'd already sketched in a basic impression of her.

The charcoal was as awkward as it's ever been. The lumps were much coarser and messier than pencil, but it felt good to be able to get my hands dirty again. Eser♦ watched as I worked, roughing out the basic composition and construction, then proceeding to add the detail. He asked a few questions as I sketched in the construction lines, but for the most part he just watched, occasionally giving voice to thoughtful growls.

And for the most part I forgot he was there, just concentrated on Mai and lost myself in the play of light and shade, the relationships of space and angles. It's the fundamental secret of drawing, the trick that so many people miss: the act of actually seeing what's there. It's not just looking at the scene, but seeing it as a whole, with the way the elements interact with one another, comparing proportions and scales and textures. It's an exercise I find akin to meditation, a time when I'd lay out the illustration board on my desk, put on some non-vocal

tunes and pick up a pencil or stylus and create something.

A time that was in the past and a world away, but I felt an echo of those moments that afternoon in that loft studio. Just for a few moments, before reality snapped back and I was drawing a grey-furryy bipedal lynx dozing in a chair. Hovering at my shoulder, Eser♦t asked another question about the perspective.

Perspective, worldview, relativity... it was all a matter of perspective. To them, my work appeared odd. Not exactly distorted, as far as I could tell, but arranged in a way that just seemed... unnatural. That was as close as Eser♦t came to describing it to me. The lines didn't flow where he expected them to. And the detail I added: he thought I was making it up when I sketched in a weathervane on a distant rooftop.

Mai stirred and slit an eye at him, "Why not trot on over and have a look then?" she asked. "It'll be there."

The Rris artist looked a bit put out. He opened his mouth, then frowned and snapped his jaws shut, huffed something to himself and looked askance at me: "You can really see that far?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"My eyes are different. I mean, they're good at different things than yours. I

see still objects further than you can, I think I see better small detail and color.”

“Color?” he asked, looking puzzled. “How can you see better color?”

And that trail led off into a whole other neighbourhood of questions, and that led off into a session of mixing paints. I never realised there was so much involved in simply making a primary color, especially from scratch: Grinding and pulping and mixing powders. I’d seen chemists go through less to fill out a prescription. The end results were the primaries and a range of other hues. Eser♦ watched as I mixed a palette, just a sample batch.

“Hold,” he told me. “Why’re you doing that?”

“What?” I looked down at the palette, not understanding.

“The colors. You’ve mixed three blacks there.”

Three blacks... “No,” I said. “They’re different.”

“Different?” He furrowed his brow. “They’re black.”

No. They weren’t. There was a black, then there was an ultramarine and dark violet, ranging around Pantone two-seventy or two-eighty. I could see the difference, but Eser♦ insisted they were black.

“Try this,” Mai suggested. “Paint some paper with each color. Cut them into pieces, put a mark on the back and see if Mikah can find the piece with the mark.”

Eser♦ squinted at me, then grinned and reached for a knife.

About ten minutes later he stood back and looked at three pieces of paper lying on the paint-spattered table, his ears laid back. I hadn’t got a single one wrong. “All right,” he sighed. “Either there’s a trick there, or you can see something I can’t.” He touched the pieces, one after another. “What does it look like?” he asked.

“What? The colors?” I tried to grab the words, but wasn’t sure I knew them. In either language. “I don’t think I can answer that,” I admitted.

He looked at me, then ducked his muzzle and snorted. “Ah, foolish question. Shave me... new colors. Ah, what I’d give to see them.”

“There are plenty I can’t see. Anyway, Rris see better in the dark than I do. Also smell and hear better.”

“Anything else you can do that we can’t?” he asked.

“You’d be amazed,” Mai chittered.

And Eser♦'s brow furrowed, then he asked me why my face was changing color.

—v—

Ris... people... stared openly as we left Eser♦'s building. Nothing new. It was almost possible to ignore them as Mai and I walked through the narrow streets and alleys that were so prevalent in this quarter of the city. Pedestrians moved out of our way, females grabbing their cubs as we passed, a few questions shouted out after us. We both ignored them.

“You enjoyed that?” Mai asked me.

I looked down at my hands, the stains on them. “A. It’s been too long since I held a brush.”

“You’re quite good. I think you’ve got Eser♦ worried.”

I let slip an involuntary grin. A passerby recoiled. “I don’t think I have the time to compete with him.”

“A? And I think the artists Guild might have something to say about it.”

“Would they let me join?”

She hesitated and turned to study me, “Is that a joke?”

I felt slightly insulted. “I was just wondering.”

She blinked and scratched at her neck. “That... I don’t know what they’d say. I’m sure there’s nothing written against such a thing. I’m sure we could ask.”

And it didn’t take a lot to read between the lines. Doubtful, the answer to that was, very doubtful. “I’m sure their expressions would be something to remember,” I said quietly and Mai almost laughed, then maybe caught something in my tone and ducked her head. Around us, her kind stared at me and shifted out of our way. I felt an familiar pang and sighed.

Overhead, far above the tiled roofs, the rectangle of sky visible between the wood, brick and plaster walls rising above us was turning to the pink that heralded the end of an interesting day. A lot of those not-so-important questions had been answered and those revelations might go some way toward helping me understand my hosts.

I glanced at the alien female at my side.

Or perhaps vice versa.

We ate out that evening. There wasn't any shortage of stalls, peddlars, and shops where one could buy food, and Mai knew the good places. From a small shop with a distinctly pregnant Rris behind the counter we brought pastries, similar to spring rolls with a soft outside of dough and a mixture of steamed meat, vegetables and spices inside. Mai asked the shopkeeper what herbs were used before buying and I didn't recognise the names, but Mai thought they were safe enough. They certainly tasted fine to me. I polished off three of them.

A couple of blocks from there, among twisting streets and alleyways, Mai led me through a small lopsided doorway into an old stone building. Huge flagstones paved the floor, ruts worn in them from the passage of time and countless alien feet. Overhead, barely, blackened ancient rafters braced the ceiling. Off to the left were barrels laid on their sides. I'll call them that, despite the fact they'd be big enough for Mai to stand upright in. She told me to wait there, then ducked off along a dim hall.

I waited, a bit uneasily. The place smelled of old wood and smoke and alcohol. The barrels were sealed, without a tap, the words pokerworked into the front unfamiliar. A Rris pattered out of the shadows, froze with an audible gasp when it saw me and bolted. I listened to claws spattering off into the distance, cut off when a door slammed.

I sighed.

Five minutes and Mai was back, with a dusty black bottle in hand and a spring in her step. "All right?" she asked.

"Fine," I nodded and looked at her new acquisition: "What's that?"

She held the bottle up to the light, cradling it in both hands. There was a crest on the glass. “I thought we could do with something to drink.”

Oh, differences. You couldn’t just run down to the 7-Eleven for a coke. Water was cheap, and dangerous. Wine was probably the safest drink around, but to actually buy it from the vinters... “Isn’t that expensive?” I asked.

“A,” she said, then waved a shrug. “I thought... well, this is supposed to be a good vintage. I heard that you had a taste, so I thought you might be interested.”

“Mai...” I looked at her anxious face and chuckled, gave a slight shake of my head, “it wasn’t necessary.”

“No,” she admitted. “But I wanted to.”

I reached out to carefully touch her shoulder and she didn’t flinch, just smiled. I remembered the shocked expression on a fleeing Rris and stroked the fur under my fingertips, just a couple of times. “Thank you,” I said, then looked around. The area seemed vaguely familiar. “Where are we going?”

“I thought my place would be closer.” She didn’t look at me.

And a flash of what’d happened last time. “Oh.”

Getting darker now. The shadows lengthening and melting together. No

streetlights, so some avenues were black as pitch under the eaves of overhanging buildings. I stuck close by Mai's side, trusting her to be my eyes in the gloom. Occasioanlly we passed Rris who'd hurry on their way and from the surrounding buildings came the faint sounds of people going about their evening business. In the hearts of those buildings, through gateways and brick tunnels, I could see lights flickering. Rris homes: sheltered, intensely private, turn a blank wall to the world.

Mai's building was the same: a dark facade broken by the slits of small windows high up in the walls. Lights glimmered at the end of the tunnel, just a couple of small oil lamps that flickered in the breeze. Barely enough light for me to see my hand in front of my face as Mai opened the door into shadow. Her room seemed... different that night, and it wasn't just the fact she had a new mattress there. Maybe it was the silence of the place: it was lacking that underlying backdrop of drumming on the roof, the hiss of drops on the tiles outside the window. The air was warmer, without that cleansed freshness that the rain had brought with it that night.

It was a clear evening. Through the window and above the rooftops the stars were becomining visible as the final twilight died, the light faded over Shattered Water. Mai and I sat in darkness, leaning back against the wall as we sipped at a surprisingly good year and watched the heavens, talking. Not about anything in particular, just a quiet, comfortable conversation.

"You know what they are?" came up, Mai waving her mug toward the pale specks far away.

"The stars? A," I nodded and sipped.

She waited, then chittered and nudged me. "Go on?"

“Oh. Oh, they’re suns. Like our one, but a lot further away.”

“Suns?” She looked at the glittering flecks again. “You mean there’re other worlds like this?”

I looked at the silhouetted profile of the Rris beside me. She caught the movement and glanced at me at my expression, and her ears went back. “Huhn, of course. I forgot. Sorry.”

“No,” I sighed and turned back to the night sky. “Don’t be. I don’t know if they’re... quite the same sort of thing.” I raised my mug again and realised it was empty. I didn’t know I’d drunk that much. Mai passed me the bottle.

“You really miss it,” she said as I poured. It wasn’t a question.

I put the bottle down in easy reach and sipped, pondering. “I don’t know that I miss it. Not the world itself,” I told her. “The people, a place where I’m not... what I am now. A place where I can be myself, live my own life, my friends, Jackie; those I miss.”

“Huhn,” came the low response. Beside me, the silhouette raised its mug but didn’t drink. I saw her finger toying with the rim. “Your female friend. You had cubs? You’ve never mentioned.”

“Kids?” I shook my head. “We’d been considerering... joining.” Their

language has no word for marriage, never has and never will. “I never asked her. I mean... there was no reason not to, I just never... I guess I never got up the courage.”

“Courage?” The Rris looked at me and ventured a chitter. “She was so terrifying?”

‘Was’. God, that tense sounded so... so final. “Not her, the idea. The commitment.”

There was a moment of silence before she ventured, “I don’t understand. Mating... you were afraid?”

“It’s slightly different from your kind.”

Another moment’s thought, then she hissed softly, “Ahh, your kind, you stay together for life, don’t you.”

My laugh was a single, half-hearted chuckle into my mug, then I shrugged. “For the most part. It’s still a big step.”

“A, spending your life with one person. It would be.”

For a while we sat in silence, watching distant stars. Beside me Mai was quiet, lost in her own thoughts, her eyes a faint liquid glimmer in the starlight. I drank,

the wine slightly sweet and warming from the inside. Strong too, I could feel the buzz that lay like a muzzy blanket under my thoughts. I watched the distant lights and thought back to a time when rain had poured outside that window, and there was something I had to know.

“Mai?”

“A?”

I swallowed and pressed on: “Last time we were here... I mean, what we did: why’d you do that?”

A soft exhalation. “Why?” she asked.

“Please, don’t,” I pleaded. “No games.”

“A?” I saw her lean back, her head canted back to stare up into the darkness of the rafters. “I thought... well, you were frightened, upset. You just seemed so... vulnerable. I didn’t want to leave you like that.”

“It was sympathy then?”

Her head turned, eyes flashing a spectrum sheen of colors as light flickered and left them in shadow again. Then a cut of her hand through the air: “No. It wasn’t that. Not just that.”

I cradled my mug, staring into the dregs as I remembered the Ris back at the vinters, all those others. “I know Ris don’t find me attractive. People still run when they see me. I don’t understand why you’re different.”

A laugh, and then a leathery hand laid on my arm: a touch that just tickled the hairs, then a gentle smoothing. “I’ve spent a little more time with you. I’ve seen that there’s a lot under that surface. I’ve said you’re not my ideal of a male... not on the outside.” A hesitation, then a chuckle, “Well, most of you, anyway.”

I gave her a hard look.

“Sorry,” she chittered. “It’s just... I never expected such... such an experience like that from you.”

I felt the hot prickle crawling up my neck and shrugged abashedly, hiding the flush behind the mug. “It was... a night of surprises.”

“A,” she said and I know there was a smile on her face. The hand moved and a single fingertip traced delicate sworls in the hair of my forearm and she leaned closer: “And maybe we could be a little more careful?”

I caught the hand, lacing my fingers between hers and raising it between us: moonlight glinted off the tips of razor crescents peeking from her fingertips. “Do you think you can?”

Her ears flicked and she bobbed her head. “I hope you don’t mind, but I borrowed these...”

Her other hand plucked something from her belt purse: a small bundle like a deformed spider that the moonlight resolved into... my gloves. I stared at them, at a loss for words, then looked past them to her face that might have been amused in the dimness. “How’d you get those?”

“This morning.” Her voice was a husky growl. “I didn’t think you’d mind.”

And I stared back into eyes as black as the shadows, visible only through the slight glisten of moonlight they reflected, and a thought started to tickle the back of my mind... and was lost when the Rris darted forward and planted a nip on my nose. Another on my chin and I laughed and caught at her, feeling fur and muscle under my palms while hers were fumbling with my shirt.

—v—

A moonlit face twisting and tossing in the dimness: fur whipping, her jaws gaping, eyes screwed shut while her hands clenched at me, the feeling of soft leather raking across my back while I pulled her close and moved with her. The noise clawing out of her, a low rumbling growl that rose, increasing with that wire-taut tension, peaking in a ululating yowl that vibrated throughout her body and seemed to fill the universe...

And sagged, panting rapidly and holding tight, moaning something small and meaningless. And as I kept moving slowly, a hammering I’d taken to be the pounding of blood, of my heart, continued.

Someone in the room below was pounding on the floor, the moonlit dust on the floorboards bouncing slightly with the bangs. I looked down at the heavy-lidded eyes of the Rris below me and she blinked slowly, then chittered. That set me off. I collapsed against my lover, rested my cheek against the warmth of her fur as I laughed uncontrollably. Gentle hands brushed sweat-slicked hair away from my face.

—v—

My whistling echoed through the marble halls: an off-key rendition of ‘On Top of the World’. My guards hung back a bit as we walked. Every so often we’d pass Rris who’d stop and stare openly. At me or the noise that was so out of place in those corridors, I didn’t know, and I really didn’t care.

It was a glorious morning. Sunlight streamed in through the Palace windows, reflecting off marble and polished metal: statues and carvings and ornaments. Outside the sun was bright in a clear sky, promising a fine day. For all I cared it could’ve been sleeting down and blowing a gale: I felt better than I had for a long time.

Hirht and Kh’hitch were waiting for me in a sunlit second-floor office, a pollen scented breeze blowing through. The two high-ranking Rris looked up from the papers spread out on the low table as I entered and both of them cocked their heads:

“Greetings, Mikah,” Hirht smiled. “You’re in a good mood?” It was a question, and I didn’t exactly answer it.

“It’s a good day for it,” I shrugged, gesturing past them at the blue sky through the window.

“We don’t often see you smiling. It’s a change for the better.” The Rris king studied me for a second, then nodded toward a cushion at a vacant place: “Please, be seated.”

I did so and he laid a finger on a paper, sliding it toward him to blink down at the figures scratched there. “Now, things are... excited. Extremely so. I know the Guilds are chewing one another’s tails for access to some of the innovations you’ve introduced, as are other countries.”

Some of my good cheer evaporated. “That will cause trouble?”

His muzzle wrinkled, v’s marching through the fur between his eyes. “Huhn, you’ve already caused more upset than a spark in a gunpowder store. They’ll want more, there’s no doubt of that, but I think they’ll pay for it. Nobody seems to be willing to start something serious. Some of your ideas have opened quite a few new possibilities. Losing those, and the profits attached, are not a thought they’d clutch to.”

A bit of a relief. Perhaps the Rris knew me well enough to tell that because Hirrt watch me for a second before continuing:

“From from what I’ve heard the projects are doing very well. Aesh Smither is well pleased with the results. I’ve been informed the current project underway in

the workshops is nearly ready for trial runs. Within the next couple of weeks if there're no setbacks. In the meantime, you wanted to see more of our land."

Kh'hitch leaned over his paunch to move another piece of paper across the tabletop. A map of Lake Eerie - or their facsimile - Shattered water and the immediate environs. "Chaeitch has been investigating the practicallity of using his engines to move things on land," Hirht explained. "There are some trial engines and the trails they need at Blizzard's Coat, under evaluation by the Mining Guild there. They haven't been all we hoped for."

I nodded. Those I'd heard about. The king glanced at my face, then back to the map.

"Chaeitch feels the new engines, and your knowledge, will make a difference. He thinks it's be best if you saw for yourself what's been done there. So, you will be going on a short trip; no more than ten days."

Will be going on a trip... My leash had been lengthened, but it was still there. I tried to think of it as a proposed business trip. And as he'd said, it would be interesting to see more of the Ris world. My travel arrangements and itinerary involved a boat down to the Blizzard River. Blizzard's Coat had grown up as a sort of way station between the upper Lake Windswept and lower Lake Taitied. Now it was prosperous port, receiving goods and traffic from the local surrounds. Any shipping making the transition past the Blizzard Falls had to be routed through the port facilites there, making it the gateway from the upper to lower lakes. As such, it was a bustling port and a rapidly growing town.

"Your boat will be leaving the day after tomorrow, the weather willing. Chaeitch will be joining you, along with a compliment of guards and a Royal deputy. Anything you may want to take - clothes, food - will be provided, just

ask.”

Now Kh’hitch leaned forward. “Still, there is the question of your... friend. Do you wish to take her?”

As if she were a possession. I felt more than a touch of annoyance at that. “I don’t know,” I responded tersely. “Why don’t I ask her if she’d like to go?”

Kh’hitch just cocked his head and watched me through alien eyes. I didn’t even know if he’d picked up on my rancor, especially when he simply said, “Of course.”

—v—

Two days later I stepped out of a carriage, the weight of my pack hanging from my hand. They’d been worried about the weather: they shouldn’t have. The morning sun was already hot on my shoulders as I stood and looked around at the bustling on the docks all around me. Moored ships moved restlessly, shifting and creaking, the forest of masts with their canopies of ropes and sails and penants swaying ever so slightly in the breeze. My Rris escort gathered around me, keeping their distance but obviously uneasy at the attention I was drawing. On the shore and shipside, eyes were turning my way, and when the carriage moved off with a clatter of wheels and hooves on the cobbles, I started feeling very exposed.

“Mikah.”

I turned toward the shout to see Chaeitch stalking toward me from the direction of the warehouses and buildings, cutting across the foot and vehicle traffic rattling up and down the docks. It was a relief to see a familiar face. “You’re ready, I see,” he said as he approached, cocking his head to study me. “Clothes of your kind? You certainly stand out.”

I looked down at myself. “They’re comfortable,” I said, a little defensively. Well, they were. My boots, jeans and a t-shirt. The Rris tailors could copy them, but my own clothes just felt... I don’t know... made for me. And as for the clothes Chaeitch was wearing - a lightweight linen vest and a small kilt - I didn’t think they’d suit me.

“Those are words?” he squinted at the t-shirt. “What does it say?”

“He’s never told me,” another voice spoke up and we turned to see Mai approaching, a small carpet bag slung over her shoulder. Her face pursed into a smile at my unabashed grin, “It’s some sort of joke,” she said to Chaeitch. “He’ll have to explain that sometime.”

“I’ve told you, it doesn’t make sense in Rris.”

“Ai,” Chaeitch raised his hand. “Sorry to interrupt you, but there are people waiting for us.”

I offered to carry Mai’s bag and she simply gave me a curious look. “It’s not heavy,” she said and kept walking. For a second I stood there feeling stung, then a bit of a fool for expecting courtesies I’d grown up with to mean the same to them.

The boat was what you'd expect the government to have access to: a three-master, sleek, black-laquered hull with clean lines and rigging, a vessel that looked built for speed and not cargo capacity. Sailors at work on deck stopped what they were doing to stare as we approached along the pier. I flexed suddenly sweaty palms on the strap of my pack where it was slung over my shoulder and a hand patted my arm. I looked down into Mai's reassuring face.

I was glad she'd said yes.

—v—

Midday sunlight sparkled and glittered on wavelets whipped up by the breeze that made the green sails overhead billow and snap. High above the masts, birds wheeled in the bright sky, their cries audible through the creaking of timbers and ropes, the slapping of water against the hull of the Kestrel, the shouts of the Rris sailors. Off to the right, starboard, lay land. Here the forest was broken by cleared land: farms, hamlets, a couple of villages. To the west, away in the distant lakeward haze, the far shore was almost imperceptibly drawing closer as the lake narrowed into the Blizzard River.

It wasn't going to be a long trip, nowhere nearly as bad as the one that'd brought me to Shattered Water. Blizzard's Coat wasn't far: about fifty kilometres from the capital. We'd been given a small, stuffy cabin belowdecks, but Mai and I stowed our gear there and spent most of the trip sitting in the sunlight on top of the central cabin. Talking, relaxing. She gave me a lazy impromptu lesson in the names of various parts of the rigging, and I let her try my sunglasses.

“Peculiar,” she chittered, holding them in place and tilting her head to survey our surroundings. They really didn’t fit properly: her muzzle was too broad for the nosepiece. I lounged back against the mast and smiled.

“An understatement,” said a voice at my shoulder. Chaeitch joined us, sitting crosslegged on the warm wood of the cabin roof. Grey skin showed in the shaved sigils on his arms and I wondered if he’d have to worry about sunburn.

“Finished?” I asked him.

“A. Thankfully. Huhn, politics: unpleasant but necessary.” He brushed at the fur of his forearm, smoothing it out.

“What’s Hechic like?” I was referring to the deputy, our government representative.

“Ah,” He waved his hand in a shrug, “He knows his business, but that would seem to be what he lives for.”

“Not a barrel of laughs then,” I said and both Ris barked sudden amusement, drawing a startled glance from a passing sailor.

“Another of your kinds’ sayings?” Mai asked when she’d stopped chittering.

“Hey,” I shrugged. “We’ve got a lot of them.”

“A,” Mai took off the glasses to bob her head in an exaggerated nod, handed them back to me as she said to Chaeitch, “Just when I think I know him, another surprise gallops over the hill.”

And he glanced at me, flicked his ears in an expression that might have contained amusement: “So I’ve heard. “

He wasn’t...

She gave him an odd look. “You’ve heard?”

Now he smiled again and gestured at me. “I work with him. It seems like every day we uncover something new.”

He was. The bastard.

“Familiar feeling,” Mai agreed.

“Hey,” I protested, “I am still here, you know.”

“Uhn,” she mock-growled in return and twisted, flopping backwards to lie with her head in my lap, blinking smugly up at me. “It’s hard not to notice.”

I stroked her cheek, then scratched my fingers through her warm fur: like petting a giant cat. Chaeitch cocked his head at the familiarity, but Mai stretched out in the sunlight and rumbled, “I could get used to this.”

“This doesn’t seem too new to you,” Chaeitch said and caught my look. “I mean, this,” he gestured at the shipboard activity around us.

“Huhn,” she moved my hand to scratch at a point just behind her ears. “Oh, I saw plenty on the trip to Shattered Water.”

“A, I didn’t think you were local,” he said. “Where’re you from?”

“Meddling Times Tae’sashi,” she said. “In the southern reaches. Not a big place, that’s why I came to Shattered Water. I had some ideas... anyway, I quite filled my eyes with ships on that trip.” She gestured at the masts and sails billowing overhead. “Still, this is an improvement over the fishers and coal barges.”

Chaeitch chittered. “A royal schooner... I should hope so.”

—v—

We reached Blizzard’s Coat at about eight o’clock that evening.

Well before what I'd known as Goat Island, the ship broke away from the main channel, into the artificial breakwater of Blizzard's Coat's upper docks. The town clustered around the harbor, the stone quaysides lined with warehouses, stores, silos and storeyards. A steam-powered tug hauled us into dock, the toy of an engine stuttering and puffing smoke from the funnel as small paddle wheels churned, the crew calling directions as they slotted the Kestrel into a vacant berth among other vessels of all manner and description.

Someone was expecting us. I could see the cluster of Rris waiting on the dockside as ropes were thrown out and made secure. Official-looking types, in bright clothing and fur dye with jewelry sparkling in the evening light. There were guards there as well, waiting with musket longarms crossed over their chests. Behind them on the quayside sat a pair of open-top carriages with mounted troopers on llamas stationed around them.

Hechic was the first of the passengers off. A short Rris with russet fur and three silver earstuds through his left ear, flanked by a pair of guards he strode down to meet the reception committee. There was a short exchange before our own guards escorted Mai, Chaeitch and myself down the gangplank. The waiting Rris stared at me. One took a step backwards and I could see guards' fingers flexing on their weapons. Hechic murmured something to the Rris waiting in the center of the group and that individual's ears twitched as we approached.

"Your lordship," Hechic was saying as we approached. The title 'lordship' isn't entirely accurate, but it's the closest I can come to their term which denotes a male of rank with overtones of physical as well as social domination. "Your lordship, these are Chaeitch ah Ties of the Ties Workshops and the special guest you were informed of. His name is Mikah, a... h'mahn, and an honored guest and client of the Palace." This last he said as if driving home a point. Whatever his motives, the other got the message and inclined his head slightly:

"Welcome to Blizzard's Coat. I trust you journeyed well."

Hy'itchshaetie ah Metari, the town's lord mayor. I remembered that from the briefing I'd received back in Shattered Water. His family was an old one, well established, wealthy enough for a Metari to hold the title for several generations. A good mayor, by all accounts: stable, just, protective of his territory and ruthless in pursuit of his goals. I followed Chaeitch's example and bowed, just a slight bend at the waist. As a representative from the king, Chaeitch was technically of equal ranking, and the papers he carried guaranteed cooperation from our hosts, but he still showed polite deference to the mayor.

"Very well," he replied amiably. "We couldn't have asked for better wind or weather. Made excellent time."

"Good to hear," the mayor replied and cocked his head at me. "Now, is everything I've heard about this one true?"

"That would depend on what you've heard, sir," I said.

Metari flinched, a jerk of his head and flaring of nostrils. "Ah, you do talk. I hadn't been sure whether or not someone was playing games."

I didn't smile when I said, "I'm almost used to it."

He blinked, cocked his head, then turned his gaze on Mai standing at my side. She hastily bowed her head and the mayor twitched an ear and then turned back to Chaeitch, as if she was nothing to be concerned with. "I suggest you start your work in the light tomorrow. For now I can offer you a roof, a meal and

somewhere to sleep.”

“And they’d all be most welcome,” Chaeitch replied. The mayor turned a shoulder to me as he fell in beside Chaeitch, escorting him toward the waiting carriages. I hoisted up my pack and started to follow when Mai laid a hand on my arm, stopping me and peering up at my face. Her expression... anxious, worried... I wasn’t sure, but I understood what she meant. And in reply I just shrugged, then patted her shoulder and fell into step with her behind the other two.

And as the carriages rattled along cobblestoned docksides, the escort cutting a swathe through the evening traffic and activity, the evening air carrying scents of fishing nets, water, and the elk drawing the carriages, I caught a first glimpse of what we’d be working on. The rails were rickety looking things, very narrow gauge, laid out onto the docks. Through the open gate of a yard I saw a couple of flatbed cars shunted aside; they didn’t look as though they’d been used in a while. Nearby was an engine: a boiler on a flat rail car, pistons powering driving wheels that must’ve been taller than I am. Barely harnessed power straining to be unleashed it wasn’t. A trio of Rris were standing around. I saw one take a hammer to some component, the ringing of metal on metal carrying until we were out of earshot.

—v—

We were treated very well. Like visiting royalty.

Our lodgings were in the Chistri Einter House. Loosely: an exclusive guest-house, not quite similar to a hotel. It was a sprawling old stone building near the city hall, a foreboding exterior facade with an interior that’d been remodeled recently. The windows were glazed, there was indoor plumbing with hot water,

and the floors had a newer feel than many of the panelled walls. We were housed on the third floor under armed guard, each with our own rooms. 'Plush' would go a ways to describing mine, with patterned russet velvet wall coverings, elaborately carved wood and leather furniture, a fur-covered bed big enough to hold a hockey match on in the bedroom. In the main room glazed french doors opened onto a balcony overlooking the green of a park. Mai - as my 'servant' (something I objected to but she insisted I let lie) - had a single small room adjoining mine. It was small and sparsely furnished compared with my more than sufficient suite, but she proclaimed it luxurious. I guess when compared with her little room near the Cormorant, it was.

Chaeitch lolled his tongue when he saw the interconnecting doors.

During our stay we didn't spend much time at the House, but at least it was a comfortable place to end the days. The rest of our time was filled with the reason we were there in the first place.

An armed escort lurked in the background as we went about our work. The lines on the docks were basic things: narrow gauge steel tracks pegged directly to the ties. There were about a dozen kilometres of line, running from the upper dock yards down to a yard near the docks below the falls. When the engines were working properly they could haul an amount equivalent to about fifteen wagons - about ten tonnes - but they were something less than reliable. They'd just been a trial, a joint project between the Government, Ties shops and the Mining Guild trialing the use of steam power to haul goods. So far it'd met with mixed results and the main drawbacks seemed to be the power and reliability of the engines.

Looking at them, it wasn't too surprising. They were the old model of engine, the types that'd been state-of-the-art when I first arrived, but they simply didn't have the durability or sheer horsepower to make them practical. Every one of the three engines we inspected showed signs of wear, from leaking seams to loose

rivets and bolts. There'd have to be changes there: in the boilers, the pistons, the axles and wheels... rebuild the whole thing. It be easier in the long run.

And the tracks would have to be upgraded, and that in itself posed an interesting little problem. Future demands would doubtless be much greater than the present time, requiring wider gauge and stronger tracks and foundation. If we built to such specifications they'd be able to handle larger cars, but would also need a whole new class of engine to haul them. Possible, but it'd mean a lot of work would have to go into getting the engines up and running as quickly as possible.

Alternatively, we could work with a narrower gauge track for the meantime and upgrade the line as need be. Chaeitch favored that approach, saying that it was necessary to demonstrate to the providers of the funds just how effective the rail system could be. Then there'd be plenty of time to change. He had a point, but I could see the current gauge tracks slowly spreading out, a bit at a time; people always saying 'later', until things reached a point where replacing all the lines and ties and sleepers and embankments would be a major undertaking.

Mai was at my side, looking faintly bored as Chaeitch and I followed the Mining Guild representative through the yards, examining the sleepers, places where the ground hadn't been prepared properly and the lines had subsided slightly. It really wasn't very interesting. I saw her stifle a yawn and let the others go ahead down the line so I could whisper to her, "I know. You didn't have to come."

"No, no," she protested. "It's... " the hesitation was all I needed.

"Not your idea of a good time, a?" I provided and she looked sheepish, a drooping of her ears that made me laugh. "I don't blame you. Why don't you

head on back? I can fill you in on all the fascinating details later.”

She chittered. “I’m sure. But, this is an improvement on sitting around waiting for you, and at least I can see some of the town.”

“Sorry it’s not the most exciting parts,” I said, gesturing to the goods yard with its wooden fence and the battered cars we were walking beside. “Still, maybe we’ll have a chance to see the falls while we’re here. If they’re anything like the ones in my world, they’re supposed to be quite spectacular.”

“I should think so,” she said. “They did name the city after them. Perhaps some evening, after your work is finished.”

“I’d like that,” I said. “If our keepers let us.”

“Speaking of whom,” she said and gestured at the others, who’d gotten some distance ahead of us and were waiting beside an engine shunted off onto a siding. Chaeitch beckoned.

“No rest for the wicked,” I sighed and we picked up the pace a bit, and as we rounded the last of the flatbed cars I looked out across the yard and over the rickety wooden fence to the buildings overlooking the yard. For a second I was mildly amused that they’d bothered to post guards on the roofs, and then the silhouette registered.

... Crouching, braced against a chimney stack with the gun raised to a

shoulder. The longarm foreshortened because it was aimed directly at me...

Like the world was moving in slow motion. I was turning and Mai was rounding the last car as I screamed at her and started to run and she was looking puzzled as I hit her in a flying tackle, bodily hurling her back behind the bulk of the flatbed car and there was a smash of splintering wood and a flatter crack following that. We hit the cobbles with a force that knocked the breath out of me even as I tried to cover Mai and she was struggling back, trying to do the same. More gunshots were sounding out and more bodies hit us: fur and muscles and armor piling around. And I huddled on the dirt and cobbles under the carriage and held tight to Mai while chaos reigned around us.

Shouted orders. The gunfire petered out to be replaced by more shouting and voices. The weight smothering me shifted as the bodyguards got up and then there were flashes of pain as clawed hands grabbed at me and hauled me to my feet amidst a shield of alert Rris soldiery. I saw Mai, standing beside a car with her arms wrapped around herself, looking dazed.

"Mai!" I shouted and guards laid hands on me. I shrugged them off, ignoring claws raking across my arm as I pushed through to her and grabbed her shoulders: "You're all right?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she said in a distracted manner, then looked up at me, down and her eyes widened. "You're bleeding!"

"Uh?" I glanced at my arm: the four marks where a guard had been overzealous were bleeding freely and I wasn't feeling a thing. "Oh, just claws."

Eyes that were just glistening black pools stared at me, then back to the rooftop where soldiers were already appearing and her muzzle twitched, baring a flash of white teeth. She snorted and turned back to me, suddenly steady as a rock once more. “Let’s see that,” she said, catching my arm. “Huhn, looks familiar. Idiots.”

“He’s all right?” another breathless voice asked. Chaeitch was wild-eyed, panting as he ran up with his own escort. “Rot, what happened to him? Was he hit?”

“I’m fine,” I lied: it was starting to hurt. But there was something else that had begun to itch more than the wound...

“Just a scratch,” Mai assured him. “I think it we should get him somewhere I can clean it though.”

“Good idea,” he said and looked around at the surrounding buildings, his tail tucking between his legs as if he were suddenly feeling very exposed. “Good idea.”

—v—

That incident pretty much put the lid on the carefully laid-out schedule that’d been prepared. I was sent back to my quarters under heavy guard, with armed soldiers at the door, down the hall. Mai showed up to help tend to my scratches and we sat in a patch of sunlight in the main room of the suite while she dressed them.

“You sure you’re all right?” she asked after a while. “You’re quiet.”

“Oh, sorry. I’m managing.” I watched her hands dabbing gauze at my arm, “Just thinking.”

Her hand faltered for a second, then she gripped the swab again and looked up at me. “They’ll find him. I’m sure they will. This will pass.”

“Maybe.”

Her eyes widened, just a little, and I flinched a bit when a furry hand caught mine. “Mikah, it doesn’t mean it’ll change. It’s too early to tell.” Her expression was alien, just fragments of emotion I could scrape with my fingertips but never fully grasp, but I could see anxiety, perhaps fear.

I was taken aback. “I don’t understand.”

Now her tufted ears flickered and slowly laid back. “Please, don’t. The guards might be there, but it’s not a prison. I know you’ve fought for life before, so it has some value for you. Please, remember what you fought for.”

And I stared back, not knowing what to say. She was concerned, thinking about the changes that’d eventuate from this attempt on my life: the extra security, guards, restrictions... something that hadn’t occurred to me. And she was scared to death at what I might do, remembering what I’d done in the past.

And that realisation sank in, settling like a lead weight on my other problems. I looked into her eyes, at a window into another soul that I'd so wanted to touch, and I could only make a promise I'd already broken once. "I'm not going anywhere," I managed a smile.

She returned it, a look of relief easing the bunched muscles beneath her facial fur. "I'll hold you to your word. A?" A single claw jabbed at my hand by way of emphasis.

"A."

—v—

Predictably, our visit was cut short.

Dawn arose over a city still swarming with Mediators and garrison troops hunting for the perpetrator. I wished them luck: I doubted they'd find anything. In the meantime, our little group was ushered back to the Kestrel under heavy guard. We set sail while the dew was damp on the grass and the sun was still a red eye over the rooftops and smoking chimneys of Blizzard's Coat.

I followed the high towers until they were lost in the trees and haze of distance, then made my way around to the bow. Cooler that day: a clear sky but brisk breeze that pebbled my skin while I watched glittering wavelets breaking against the bow and thought about things I didn't want to.

“You’re quiet,” a rough voice rumbled.

I looked around: Chaeitch. I felt muscles twitch. “Just thinking,” I said, smiling tightly. Mai was... doing female stuff.

“Ah?” he rested an arm against the gunwales, his fur rippling in the breeze. “About what?”

“Oh,” I stared at him, watching closely. “Tell me, how far away was the shooter?”

And the doors closed. Almost imperceptible, but it was there. “You’re worried about that?”

“How far?”

“Ah, I’m not sure. I would say... perhaps seventy meters?”

“About what I thought. Good shooting for a musket. Very good.”

“A professional...” he started to say and I cut in : “You’re making them, aren’t you.”

“What?”

“Chaeitch, please. Don’t. That range... it was too accurate, and it didn’t sound like a musket, and the bullet struck before the sound and I know you’ve been milling rifled barrels and searching my laptop for information on weapons.”

His ears went back. “You knew?”

“I knew. That was why Hirht let me out of the Palace? Just so you’d have a chance to look for ways to kill each other? Every time Mai and I... Oh, Christ... she didn’t... that was why she did it? Just to get me away from the laptop?”

He studied me for a second, then turned back to gaze out over the water, his tail tucked. “No,” he said, exhaled loudly. “No, she knew nothing about it.”

I felt... relieved. “So, you’re making weapons. And one of those almost killed me. Almost killed Mai.”

And he just waved agreement. “I know,” he said morosely. “I don’t know how it happened, but I’ll find out.” A hesitation, then he added, “You knew about your machine? You could’ve stopped us, couldn’t you.”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Why didn’t I? If I’d put a password lock on the thing, this wouldn’t have happened. Not yet, anyway; not with a rifle, anyway. “You might not have asked so nicely,” I said.

A second for that to sink in, then his head snapped around with his eyes black pools ringed in amber. “You think we’d do that?”

“I really don’t know what to think.”

“But that we’d try to... to coerce you?!”

I raised my hand, then let it drop onto the railing. “I don’t know. Hirht... I don’t think he would. But once I asked someone, a Rris, what would happen if I didn’t cooperate. He said things might not go so well.”

Chaeitch’s ears laid back. “That wouldn’t happen.”

“What would happen,” I asked, “if I left? If I just went out there,” I gestured toward the passing shoreline and the wide world beyond, “somewhere?”

He looked, then back at me, then away again. “I... don’t know.”

“You’d come after me,” I said, answering my own question. Saying what he didn’t want to. “I’ve been hunted by Rris once. It wasn’t enjoyable.”

Wide eyes turned back to me. “You fear us so much?”

Fear... Caution, with every Rris I ever met. Trying to fathom out just what each was thinking. Never able to instinctively read the emotions, to feel the empathy that’d come naturally with humans. “I don’t know. I can’t read you as I could my own kind, like I’m standing outside a conversation looking in. I don’t know what Rris are thinking, who to trust. Everyone seems to have their agendas.”

He looked away again, obviously uncomfortable at the reference. I hadn’t meant it like that, to insinuate that he... oh, god. It was a long, awkward time of silence, both of us watching the water until another voice ventured, “Something going on?”

Mai strolled up with a clicking of claws on the decking, her head tipped to the side. “Nothing,” I said. “Just talking.”

“Ah?” She pushed in close, bumping up against my side. I could feel her warmth through my shirt. “About what?”

“Oh, the world, trust, friendship.”

For a while she didn’t respond, then while Chaeitch watched, she put an arm

around me and leaned her head against me. “They can be difficult to find, a?”

I returned the familiar gesture, hugging her to my side. “A.”

—v—

“I don’t know how I can apologise,” Hirht said. “An incident like this... it’s simply unthinkable. I can assure you we will do everything in our power to find out who’s responsible.”

About what I’d been expecting. I sat back on the cushion in his big marble office and looked out the expensive windows as I asked. “Any ideas yet?”

The Rris king looked uncomfortable, stalking back and forth; looking for all the world like a caged big cat. “As yet, no. Embassies deny all knowledge of such action and all have sent condolences and offers of their support.”

“Ah.”

“Mikah, I’m truly sorry about this.”

“Sir, I suppose I should learn to expect things like this. It sort of comes with the territory, I’m an obvious target for anyone who doesn’t like me or changes, a?”

“A,” he murmured and stopped his pacing to look out at the Palace grounds. “If you wish... your security can be increased.”

That was most likely what Mai and the Shattered Water officials had discussed on our return. “More guards, bars, that sort of thing?”

He snorted. “Not so simplistic, but following those tracks.”

I nodded. “I think I’ll take my chances.”

“You’re sure?”

“Quite,” I said. “I take it Mai’s already discussed this with you though.”

“Maithris, a,” the Rris king sighed. “We spoke. She was concerned about your health, your reaction to this incident.” He turned, regarding me. “She was quite... emphatic about it. After last time, I did feel it was prudent to take her advice.”

“She can be persuasive,” I agreed, smiling a little.

“That she can,” he rumbled and I caught the tip of his tail twitching and curling around on itself. “That she can.”

“And you don’t like it.”

His amber eyes locked on me and the tail froze, his slip hastily brought under control. “No. I can’t say that I do,” he said. “You’re a very valuable commodity. Losing you would be a disaster of extraordinary magnitude. Now your life’s been threatened, and she tells us that our very efforts to protect you could be more dangerous. It’s not a situation to set my heart to rest.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“Sorry, sahhh,” he hissed. “Trouble stalks you, doesn’t it.”

I just ducked my head. “Sir, I don’t mean to.”

“I know. Red tie me... how much is true? The doctor said you don’t think like us and I don’t pretend to fully understand what that means. But I try to skirt the safer side of a situation and that necessitates following her advice. There will be more security watching you, but they’ll be keeping their distance. Your schedule... that won’t change.” The Rris studied his feet, then exhaled: a deep sigh before he raised his head to fix me with an amber stare.

“Mikah, I’m listening to the doctor, but is she right?”

I hesitated, trying to frame my reply. “Sir, I... I don’t know. She knows me... she tries to understand me. I don’t know just how well, probably no more than I

can fully understand Rris, but what she did... ” I sighed and started to make a Rris gesture, then closed my hand tight. “She saved my life. I know I couldn’t go back to the way things were.”

His irises flinched, expanding and contracting in a heartbeat. Then he extended a hand and tipped it. “No. No, that won’t happen. You are friends, aren’t you.”

“Sir, she’s taught me more about your kind and your world than books and lectures ever could.”

“A,” his eyes twitched away for a split second again. “A, I suppose it is for the best. Thank you, Mikah.”

My dismissal. I ducked my head respectfully. “Sir,” I bade him and stood. I could feel him watching me as I left his office: a prickling between my shoulderblades.

—v—

It was chilly that early morning. My breath fogged as I stood at the quayside, my hands in my pockets as I watched the Rris workmen going about the final preparations. Their own breath formed brief clouds as they carted sackloads of coal, loaded them down into the fuel hatches. Cool weather, but most of the laborers were stripped off: furry bodies of all shades of brown and fawn and grey. The revealed bodies were like studies in the Rris form, inhuman muscles rippling under the hides, the proportions all wrong to my eyes: long legs, short arms and small hands. I caught snatches of the conversations they carried out

while they worked, fragments of exchanges about the work, home life, jokes, mutters about me, the ship...

Ah, the ship. It had a name now. The Rris working on it had taken to calling it something that might translate as Ironheart - in reference to its metal guts - and the name stuck. Ironheart was nestled up against the quay at the foot of the workshop slipway. At twenty-five metres from stem to stern it wasn't a small vessel. The laminated hull was low, sleeker than most Rris waterborne craft. The majority was constructed from wood, varnished and treated to emphasize the grain. Trimmings - the rails, scuppers and waterline - were painted black, in counterpoint to the polished metal of brass fixtures. The steersman's cockpit was set at the stern, just fore of the twin metal smokestacks with ornate tops. Like a modern cabin cruiser, the cockpit was just behind and above the central passenger cabin positioned amidships, while fore of that was the cargo hold.

Chaeitch was on the forward deck, talking with someone out of sight down an open hatch. Too far to hear what he was saying, but he gesticulated a couple of times, then vanished belowdecks.

"The time for telling, a?" A Rris voice at my shoulder asked. Rraerch glanced up at me when I looked around. "It's a good-looking vessel."

"If looks were everything we'd be home free."

Her muzzle wrinkled. "Home free?" she asked.

I thought it over, then admitted, "I don't think that translates very well."

“A,” her ears flickered. “One of your famous sayings again. Well, so far everything is performing as expected. Barring unpleasant surprises, I think this run will go well.”

Over on the ship Chaeitch re-emerged, still talking with someone down below. “You shouldn’t discount unpleasant surprises,” I said.

Rraerch glanced my way, followed my gaze and her ears went back.

Just under an hour later Ironheart cast off from its moorings and slipped out into the current. Morning sunlight glinted off the stack, tinting the smoke that puffed out slowly at first, then in a darker cloud. I could see crew moving about on deck as she smoothly swung around; a figure I recognised as Chaeitch raised an arm in farewell. I hesitated before waving back. A pause, then the water under the stern churned and she picked up speed, moving downstream past a lone fishing boat.

Rraerch stood by my side and together we watched as first the ship and then the smoke were lost beyond the breakwater.

“Now, we wait,” Rraerch said.

I nodded. Rris workers were beginning to drift back to their jobs.

Furry knuckles brushed my arm, making me look around at Rraerch.

“Chaeitch told me what happened.”

“You knew.”

“A,” she glanced away. “I’m sorry. That really bothers you so much?”

“Bothers me? That you lied to me? or that a weapon you made against my wishes almost killed me?”

“Huhnn,” she rumbled, a low exhalation, and her ears tipped back just a little. “That wasn’t intended. Never.”

“Intentions,” I said dully, my hands in my pockets. “Good intentions lead to bad places. I trusted you. I wanted to trust you. Now this.”

“You must’ve known that at some time...” she didn’t finish, instead hissed and gave a quick shake of her head. “Mikah, I’m sorry. I can’t undo what’s been done.” Another hesitation, then: “I have to ask: you won’t help us, and that I can sympathise with, but will you stop us?”

There was a familiar tension in my guts again. I looked out over the river, toward the far shore, the boats and buildings there, then toward a pair of guards stationed on the waterfront. “I... I can’t get involved in that. You understand? A target I would be a... ” I stammered to a halt, swallowed and looked at her, feeling my heart knocking. “And you... if I did, what you do?”

And she looked back at me and her her nostrils flared, eyes blinking before her expression melted into shock. “We wouldn’t do anything. You understand that? Mikah, we wouldn’t hurt you. On that you can trust me.”

—v—

The squad of guards outside my door stiffened to attention as I returned. “Hi,” I said as usual and as usual received a perfunctory ‘sir’.

Inside, went over to stand in the window and look out at the late-afternoon sunlight spilling across the meadows and trees of the Palace grounds, vented a profound sigh of weariness. I shucked off my boots, one at a time, letting them lie where they fell, then just dropped facefirst onto the bed and tried to relax. It’d been an exasperating day: my meeting with the Woodworkers Guild had been incredibly frustrating and now my neck muscles felt like knotted wood. I had a tension across my shoulderblades, and the ache went deep into old scar tissue.

When I heard the door open - my dinner, same time as usual - I didn’t turn over. “Just leave it on the desk, thank you,” I mumbled into the eiderdown.

The door closed again and I sighed, trying to dredge up the wherewithal to go and eat something.

And I almost screamed when a furry figure sprawled across my legs. I twisted around to look down at grinning teeth and a flash of mischevious eyes. “Surprise?”

“Christ,” I collapsed back, breathing hard as my heart settled back down to merely twice its usual rate. “Mai, did you have to do that?”

“No, but it was amusing.” Clawed fingers walked up my back and her hand rubbed. “How’re you feeling?”

“Oh, just a bit tired. Long day.”

“Ah,” her hand pushed a bit, prodding my muscles. “Huhn, you’re tense.”

I sagged under the impromptu massage. “Hmmm?”

“A,” she said, kneading hard enough that claws poked through my shirt. “I know something that might help you unwind. You interested in some entertainment?”

“Hnn? Now?” I raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know that I can be very entertaining at the... Ai!”

She retracted the claw and chittered. “Not that sort! A play. I thought you might like to see one.”

“A play? A Rris play?”

“There’s only one kind,” she reminded me and leaned forward to speak next to my ear: “You feel like going?”

“Does water flow downhill? Of course. Where? When?”

She laughed again and patted my back. “In town. It starts in a couple of hours, and if you’re wondering we’ll be able to get food there.”

I had time to wash and change into a clean pair of Rris-made pants and one of my shirts. Mai studied me thoughtfully, then pulled my head over and raked claws through my hair. “Better,” was her verdict. I still wasn’t used to not having handy mirrors.

A carriage was waiting for us outside, draught llamas in the traces, the armed escorts riding their own animals. As we clattered off down the drive I looked at Mai sitting opposite: “You had this all planned.”

Maithris looked away from the window and flashed me a quick glint of teeth, copying one of my smiles. “A. I thought you’d say yes.”

“Lucky guess.”

She smiled smugly in her own way.

The carriage made for the south-eastern quarter of Shattered Water: an area

not too far from Mai's home, but considerably more affluent. The stores there had glass in the windows, the goods in them were finer, more expensive; the Rris on the streets were better dressed, and there were fewer beggars in the alleyways between buildings.

We stopped in a small square with a fountain in the center: a squat pillar with a bronze raptor's head gushing water set into each face. As I climbed out I couldn't help but notice I had the undivided attention of every Rris around. How many Rris in Shattered Water again? I wondered how long it would take for them all to get used to me. Not a likely prospect.

The building Mai led me toward wasn't small. The outside was a two-story facade of visible wooden beams and whitewash peeling from plaster and bricks. A few glazed windows up near the roof caught the late afternoon sun while a small crowd was gathered around the double doors at the entrance. They parted as Mai escorted me through and into the now-familiar corridor through to the heart of the building.

"Ma'am!" a voice called and a Rris hurried toward us down the hall with ears back. "Ma'am, you can't..." the Rris said and trailed off as it got a good look at me and the jaw dropped. "Rot me... it... It's you. It is. Rot me!"

"Is what?" I asked and the Rris simply stared.

Mai made a throat-clearing noise, then waved a hand to catch his attention. "I'm Maithris aesh Tereme. Choyiath said we'd be expected."

"A... yes Ma'am. As you requested." The Rris looked me up and down again

and uttered a small hiss. “Remarkable. They just got it ...”

“Our seats,” Mai interrupted and the Rris flinched. “Of course. Please, this way.”

‘What’s that about?’ I whispered to Mai as we followed. “Got it what? What’s he talking about?”

She flashed me a glittering grin that promised mischief and pulled me along.

Upstairs. Along a dim corridor with a scratched wooden floor. An archway opened onto a room that our Rris guide ushered us into, “Your seats, Ma’am. If you need anything, just ask.”

I was looking around. The room was a U-shaped gallery on the second floor overlooking the atrium. Perhaps it’d once been a balcony around the edge of the courtyard, now it was opened out, floored in polished wood, roofed over, and provided with an ornate balcony rail. Carved wooden screen doors were folded back from where they’d normally cover the balcony, chairs and tables set out with a good view looking down into the courtyard.

There were tables down there. Rris sat at them and moved among them, eating, talking, carrying food and drinks. The low rumble of Rris conversation drifted up as a muted background noise. All the tables were arranged to focus attention on the far side of the atrium. There the far wall of the courtyard had been rebuilt, forming a thrust stage covered by a peaked wooden roof. While the front of the stage was visible, upstage was hidden behind patched curtains of a faded blue with gold trim.

“Have a seat,” Mai invited, gesturing to one of a pair of wicker chairs at a table. I settled carefully, making sure the chair would hold. It did, and there was a good view of the stage. There were a few other Rris up on the balcony, none too close. I also saw the guards surreptitiously taking up their positions near the door. I wasn’t surprised.

A nervous Rris appeared to gingerly place a tray on the table and retreat with a clicking of claws. I examined the contents of the tray: platters of thickly sliced meat, heavy bread, wedges of cheeses and a bottle of wine. Some of the meat had been cooked to something approaching what I found acceptable.

“Help yourself,” Mai bade me with a sweep of her arm that turned into a grab at a piece of cheese she popped into her mouth.

I was hungry. I did.

Peculiar experience to add to my ever-growing list: Wine and cheese with an alien on a warm summer evening while waiting for a play to start. Mai laughed when I mentioned it and said she could say the same thing.

Down in the courtyard, gas lamps were being lit around the peripheries of the stage. The crowd was beginning to settle down, relatively speaking. And then a yowling cheer went up from the audience as a single Rris wearing shorts and fringed bands on wrists and ankles walked out on stage and began speaking. A narrator, I realised, relating the storyline to the audience, who weren’t going to take it sitting down. There was laughter, shouting, replies to rhetorical questions thrown their way. Audience participation... couldn’t really do that with TV.

Hearing what was being said was a little difficult for me. The acoustics might've been ideal for Rris, but they were less than that for me. Nevertheless, I was able to get the gist of what was happening: The Narrator was setting the story, what had happened and what was going to happen. When finished, after an overly-elaborate bow that drew chitters, the Narrator withdrew and the curtains went up... across.

The stage was set up like a cross-section of a house, with platforms and dividing walls creating different rooms. A wealthy town house, occupied by a successful merchant, servants, and a host of other characters who came and went.

It was a comedy, or perhaps a farce. I learned that soon enough from the chattering laughter rising from the audience. I even managed to understand a few of the jokes myself. The plot... well, that stretched my grasp of the Rris language to breaking point. As best I could understand the merchant's daughter had an interest in the son of a rival, something the merchant wasn't entirely happy about. He asked the girl's mother to speak to her about it and it turned out she quite liked the idea. Meanwhile, the merchant's current house-partner was also spending time with the daughter's paramour. A comedy love-triangle, or the nearest Rris society could come to such.

There was a lot of running around onstage. Actors ducking from mock room to mock room, hiding behind props. There were soliloquies from various characters describing what they were plotting, what they were going to do next. The audience cheered and laughed, shouted suggestions and replies toward the troupe as the story picked up momentum.

And I walked in.

I nearly fell out of my chair. Down there on the stage was a Rris actor hidden behind an elaborate mask of what was obviously meant to be my face. A golden-blond mane, jeans, long-sleeved shirt, peculiar boots and shaven hands completed the picture, and the picture painted was... grotesque. I stared, looked at Maithris who was regarding me with ill-hidden amusement, looked back to the stage, and blushed with a heat I felt to the roots of my hair.

On stage, the merchant's histrionic reaction of surprise mirrored mine. My character mimed ill-disguised boredom while waiting for him to settle down. Mai chattered, her laughter drowned by the audience.

It... I... my character offered some unspecified knowledge, promising great returns for the investment. The merchant agreed, and from then on my character made other spot appearances: scaring other characters, paying more attention to paintings than important guests, making grammatical faux pas that had the audience in stitches, and generally playing complete counterpoint to the pompous dignity of other characters.

I started to realise I wasn't being portrayed in such a bad light. But some of the mannerisms were so clearly mine that... I cast a suspicious glance in Mai's direction. Whatever their source, it was disturbingly accurate: a glimpse of the way Rris saw me. And the rest of the play added to my growing encyclopaedia about the Rris.

No marriage, no mating for life. The Merchant looked after a daughter had by a previous mate. They stayed in touch as they went on with their lives, but there were no fixed ties, no permanent commitments. A solitary, polygamous people. I know there're human cultures with similar mores, but with the Rris it's not simply a matter of environment and society dictating their lifestyle, it's hardwired into their psyche.

Less inhibited as well. I'd known that beforehand, but I still didn't expect to see a sex act on stage. Simulated, of course: it was the wrong time of year for that sort of thing. Still, it was a joke that seemed to appeal to the audience: a Rris couple going at it hammer and tongs in a room while next door the merchant was discussing business. Short and sharp, the two furry bodies reminded me of big cats in rut.

And the play ended with the succesful merchant meeting up again with an old lover, his current mistress running off with his daughter's paramour, and his daughter running off with my character. I wasn't too sure if I approved of that conclusion, but if the howls that went up when the curtains went down were anything to judge by, the audience liked it.

—v—

"You had something to do with that?" I asked the smirking Rris sitting opposite once the carriage was under way.

"Not I," she said, leaning back out of the flickers of illumination coming through the window so her face was in shadows. "That play's been running for about a week. It's been very popular. I thought you might be interested." A hesitation, then she asked, "You're not offended?"

There'd been awkward moments leaving the playhouse. Patrons had seen us and for a second thought I was the actor in costume. Then they realised their mistake and hastily fell back.

“Hai,” someone called out. “Where’d you find a creature like that?”

“Oh, she followed me home,” I replied. “So I kept her.”

Jaws dropped, ears sagged like dishcloths, just before the exclamations started up. The guards closed around us as we pushed through the growing crowd toward the carriage. There was a considerable mob gathered to gawp as we clambered in, and I’m sure I saw a few of the cast still in costume among them.

And a few minutes later, rattling through darkened streets, I reflected on her question. “Offended? No, I don’t think so. It was... amusing. Interesting to see how Rris perceive me,” I cocked my head. “They seemed to know quite a bit about me. They had some help?”

There a pause before she answered. “I really didn’t have anything to do with it. Servants maybe. People who’ve seen you around town. You liked it?”

I couldn’t help myself, I broke into a broad grin. “I liked it.”

In the flickering shadows she might have looked pleased. It was difficult to tell. It was going on half-twelve before we got back to the Palace. On the way we talked; about the play, about some of my work, what Mai was doing, a painting Eser♦ was working on. All too soon I found we were in the hall outside my door, the everpresent guards watching us from their posts. She asked if she could come in for a while. For a while, I agreed.

“A good evening,” I sighed, closing the door behind her. “We’ll be able to do it again sometime?”

“Sometime, most certainly,” she assured me, reaching for the ceiling in a sinew-crackling stretch. “You’d like to see that play again? It’d be interesting to see what they come up with.”

“It changes?”

“Of course.” She shook herself off and looked at me oddly, then at the laptop. “Ah, I see. No, the troupes change the plays. There’s a different ending every few days. If someone thinks up a new joke, or there’s something they think might be interesting or fun, they add it.”

“Why, thank you,” I grinned.

She cocked her head, then caught on. I dodged a mock-swipe and she spent a second smoothing her fur down. “You flatter yourself.”

“Someone has to,” I responded.

She chittered and moved a bit closer, to gently cuff my chin with her hand as her eyes regarded me. “Ah, you’re not so bad to look at. Someone might almost be able to get used to you after a while.”

“Oh. Insults. Just what I need,” I said and she laughed. I also grinned, then scratched at my neck and frowned. A warm evening: I’d worked up a bit of a sweat. “I think I need a wash.”

“Again?” Mai cocked her head. “Why don’t your hands sweat like a proper person?”

“At least I don’t have to worry about heat stroke,” I retorted. “I’ll just be a minute. You really don’t have to hang around.”

She looked thoughtful, then grinned a peculiar little grin. “No. No, I’ll wait.”

So I went through to the bathroom to strip out of a shirt that’d been worn for too long and splash some water on my face. I chatted with Mai through the door as my jeans joined the shirt and I gave myself a cursory rub-down with a Ris washcloth almost coarse enough to hurt. My skin was pebbling in the cooling air as I wrapped a scratchy towel around my waist and went back out to say goodnight.

And was somewhat surprised to find the lights had changed: were lower, with the oil lamp on the desk adding a flickery orange glow. The drapes were closed, waving and rustling gently in the breeze from the open windows behind them. More surprised to find Mai... Mai was waiting for me. Waiting on the bed, legs tucked up and tail curled around, breeches folded beside her, and lambent eyes watching me. She growled, low and slow like distant thunder.

“Uhh... Mai?”

A single fluid blur of fur and muscle and nothing else as she flowed to her feet and slowly moved toward me. A sinuous movement, hips swinging as she moved: step by careful step, amber eyes locked on me, as a cat might stalk prey. Fingerpads touched my neck, traced down. Claws tickled my skin. My hackles stood straight up. “Mai?” I squeaked.

She growled softly, like a predator.

“The... guards?”

“Won’t disturb us,” she rumbled back and I was abruptly aware that her finger was at my hip, hooking under the towel. A quick tug and...

Cloth puddled on the floor.

Mai was moving around me: slowly, provocatively, running her fingers over sensitive places. I shuddered, my skin tingling with the touch as I turned and she moved closer, suddenly nipping at my chin and neck, pushing gently with claws extended. I retreated from the little pinpricks, moving back until I ran out of space as the bed appeared behind my knees. I sat and she didn’t stop, moved closer and pushed with both hands and suddenly I was flat on my back.

A predator crouched over me, snarling softly as she moved up. Amber eyes gazed into mine, the pupils flexing as she studied me, then she lunged and nipped my nose. A pause before she finally cracked and started to chitter.

“Had your fun?” I asked quietly.

“No,” she grinned back and a hand started moving, claws gently raking across my skin. “Not yet.”

I gasped, responding to the sensations. “What...” I started to say, and she interrupted with another nip, then rasped a sandpaper tongue over my cheek. A low voice growled, “My turn now.”

Hands on my chest as she sat up to straddle me. Squirming, small sounds from both of us as the sensations engulfed me. And as the heat built, I reached out for the inhuman woman pinning me, just touching fur before she caught my wrists and pinned my hands back to the sheets. Harsh breath panted and glowing eyes meeting mine as she moved, rocking to and fro, setting the pace even as she teased me. I dug fingers into the bedclothes, grasping handfuls of cloth as we gasped together, our pulses merging.

Movement. A motion that was the same for two so different; that tension building in both of us. Her eyes wide as she panted and mewled louder and faster, then threw her head back and yowled like a siren. Clawed fingers skimmed across my chest, the claws scratching just deep enough to...

A soundless scream through my system, muscles stretching for a release that came like a light washing the world away, and when it returned I was laying limp with a dead weight sprawled across me. I closed my eyes, listening and feeling the pounding of two hearts slowly settling.

“Mikah?” My name was spoken in a low rumble I felt through my bones.

“Huhn?”

“You all right?”

I cracked an eye to meet an amber gaze regarding me carefully. “Oh, I think so,” I murmured, feeling the warmth where we were still joined. “What was that about?”

She laid her head on my chest. “From your plays. You don’t remember?”

Those films she’d seen... I chuckled. “A. I remember. Why?”

She rumbled, a claw tracing across my skin. “Oh, felt like it. Wondered what it felt like to take charge. I’ve never been able to ride the male before.” She chittered a little, then asked, “You’ve done this before?”

Jackie, lying where Mai was now... that was another time and another place. I smiled and touched Mai’s face. “Yes. A bit different with you.”

“A bit different for both of us,” she amended, fingers rubbing my chest, toying with my hair. Then almost casually she asked, “Ah, your hand coverings. You have those?”

“We’ll need them?”

She growled softly, “Oh, yes.” And then nipped at me, lathing a rough tongue across my chest and nipple. I twitched, ticklish. She saw, started nipping again. I struggled, not extremely hard, and very quickly our play turned to another kind of rolling around.

It was early morning before exhaustion finally got the upper hand. The last thing I saw before I closed my eyes was Mai: already sleep, curled up at my side. Somewhere, deep inside, I felt... safe.

—v—

“You want it WHEN?”

“There’s a problem with that?” Kh’hitch asked, the lay of his ears indicating displeasure.

I looked at the advisor in disbelief, then took a deep breath. “Sir, in fifteen minutes I have a meeting with Haekira who’s interesting in lifting equipment for lumber. Later there’s Mi’itchi’s Trail’s ambassador, the Mason’s Guild and Chitri Foundries. Directly after that there’s the work on the lathes, the engines for Hunting Well, the forging techniques for the Inlander Line, some suspension ideas for a wagon merchant and Rraerch had something she wanted to discuss. Time might be the only problem.”

Amber eyes flickered, looking me up and down. “Khorasch did say it was important.”

I sighed. “They all say it’s important.”

“You don’t think you’ll have time.”

“Sir, you write my schedule. If you can fit him in, you’re going to have to use very small writing. There’s a whole planet of you and only one of me and I’m afraid there’s only so much I can do.”

The advisor settled back in his cushion and slowly stroked the fur on the back of a hand, glancing at the papers on his desk. “You do have time to yourself though. It’s enough?”

Testing. Prodding. A diplomatic way of asking if I was cracking under the strain. I waved an acknowledgment. “Yes sir. Thank you for that. It helps a lot; gives me time to think.”

“Time to think,” Kh’hitch repeated and his ears flickered, a small tic. Then he said, “Very well. A week. I’ll tell his lordship. The embassy won’t be happy about it though.” He looked back to the papers on the desk and clicked his teeth. “Now, there was also that matter the doctor told me about: that person you saw. You said you recognised... him? from Westwater.”

“Yes sir.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“It was the first Rris I saw. He tried to kill me, and then I was accused of a murder I’m sure he was involved in. I don’t think I’ll forget that.”

“And you don’t think it’s strange that the first Rris you saw should turn up here?”

“Yes sir, I do. That’s why I mentioned it to Mai.”

“She did say you do have trouble recognising Rris. And this was someone you haven’t seen for some time.”

“Him, I remember,” I said slowly, starting to feel annoyed that no-one would take me seriously. “I remember the Rris who tried to kill me. I remember his clothes, the way he stood, moved, the patterns in his fur. And he wore a bracelet.”

“What?”

It was a word I had a lot of trouble pronouncing. I had to clarify what I meant before he understood. “It was... very not-ordinary. Green stone. I haven’t seen others like it.”

“Ah. And you saw him with another?”

“Yes. They were talking about something. I don’t know who it was, but Rraerch recognised him.”

The advisor studied me for a few second, then snorted. “Someone will look into it. Now, I suggest you hurry if you want to keep your other appointments.”

Dismissed. I offered a perfunctory bow before retreating from his office.

Cooler weather. As my guards followed me through the halls of power I looked out windows overlooking the Palace grounds and saw the patches of gold and red amidst the greenery. I stopped and stared as I remembered the last time I’d seen autumn colors. A year. I’d been here a year. It was a realisation that refused to settle; just buzzed around in my head without touching any nerves. Hard to grasp: only twelve months, twelve months that’d gone by in a lifetime.

“Sir? Is something wrong?”

I blinked, looked around at Rris features beneath a gleaming metal helmet. The eyes flickered and the pupils went black, the nostrils flaring. I shook my head in a gesture they didn’t understand, then settled my laptop strap more comfortably and started walking again.

The doors closed after the Guild Members, their voices fading off down the corridor. I heaved a sigh, then closed up the laptop.

“You all here now?” Rraerch asked.

“Sorry?” I looked at her, across the room at the top of the horseshoe of desks from where she’d been overseeing the meeting: acting as a buffer between me and the Guild Members. Now she was leaning forward, elbows on desk and chin resting in cupped hands as she watched me.

“You here now?” Rraerch repeated. “You seemed... distracted. Something more interesting than the meeting?”

“Oh.” I looked back to the grey oblong that was my laptop. “Just thinking.”

“Must’ve been important.”

Slightly irritated, I could tell that. I’d been woolgathering in her time. “I’m sorry. I’d just...” I shook my head and studied the opposite wall, where sunlight fell across white-satin wallpaper. There were abstract trees and plants embroidered in it, highlighted by the oblique lighting. Frescos on the ceiling looked down at us. “Just time. I’ve been here a year now. “

“Ah.” I just heard that one little sound, then silence in the large, bright conference room. She was watching me intently. “A whole year. You’ve been

counting the days? How's it been?"

I ventured a tight smile that I didn't really feel. "It seems longer."

Yellow-amber eyes flickered, she looked a little startled. "That bad?"

When I shrugged, it was human-style. "I really don't fit in here. Every day there are... difficulties. What happened earlier, I can look forward to a lifetime of it. It's a sobering thought."

The Rris merchant watched me. Alien eyes in that salt-and-pepper speckled muzzle, the thoughts in an inhuman mind beyond. "But, that's just a few people. I mean, not everyone's like that."

"What did you think when you first saw me?"

She hesitated.

"If I recall, you looked like you weren't quite sure whether you wanted to go out the window or hide under the table."

She chittered, then clamped her mouth shut and looked guilty. "Sorry." Another abrupt little chitter, "I think that sums it up."

“And when everyone you meet acts the same way? For your entire life?”

A second thinking it over, then the laughter stopped. I saw her ears lay back and she looked at her hands. “I... see.”

“A.”

“Still,” she looked up. “There are people who like you. I like you. Cheaitch thinks you’re a good person. I know a lot of people around the Palace have grown accustomed to you.”

“A,” I nodded. “Accustomed.”

“And there’s the doctor,” Rraerch added. “You do get on well together.”

“Yeah, that we do.”

“And she’s been more careful with your back?”

I looked at her, her head cocked and the slightest hint of amusement flickering about her features. For a few seconds I stared, unable to decide whether to be embarrassed or angry at her presumption. And finally just shook my head and gave her a small smile. “We’ve both learned,” I said, softly.

“Ah.” Her ears twitched and she ducked her head, smiled at me. “You see? People can learn to like you.”

“I think Mai’s an exception.”

“That might be an understatement,” Rraerch chuckled, then brushed at the fur on her forearm: “You’re enjoying your time with her?”

“Yes,” I said, then nodded. “Oh, yes. She’s full of surprises.”

“I can imagine. It would seem you have a few as well.”

“You haven’t told anyone?”

Now she waved a ‘no’. “I kept my word.”

“Thank you,” I said, meaning it, watching as she bobbed her head in acknowledgment. I sighed and then asked, “Rraerch, how long can it last?”

“Huhn?” Her muzzle wrinkled: puzzlement. “What do you mean?”

“Your kind... you don’t form lasting relationships. Mine do. And even if you did, she’s Rris while I’m... I’m not.” I hesitated, leaning on the desk as I toyed

with the laptop. “She’s got a life to lead. What she’s doing now, the time she’s spending with me, she can’t keep doing that. There’s going to come a time when she’s going to have to lead her own life.”

Rraerch waved a small ‘yes’. “I don’t doubt it. But that’s in the future, Mikah. A long way in the future. Things will change. You’ll have other friends.”

“Yes,” I acknowledged in a small voice, my fingers tracing the milling lines on the computer’s casing.

She studied me, silent for a few seconds. “You pair for life... your kind, I mean. You want to with her?”

And that observation tore at something inside. I lowered my head into my hands to rub at my eyes, then nodded; very slightly, very slowly. “Yes,” I whispered.

“A,” she exhaled, a drawn-out hiss. Then: “With that...I don’t think I can help you.”

I shook my head and sighed again. “I know. I know it’s impossible. I know that.” I raked my fingers back through my hair: shoulder length again. Frustration, trying to explain emotions to something that simply didn’t think that way. “She’s... she’s a friend... I mean, I understand that up here,” I laid a finger on my temple. “It’s just... I want to. When I look at her I feel... I feel the same way I used to feel about my female friend at home. I know it’s impossible, but I just want to stay with her.” I looked at Rraerch, hoping to see some flicker of comprehension, of empathy, there. But yellow-amber eyes watched me levelly,

as if waiting for something else. I sagged and those eyes flickered: aware she'd missed something but not sure just what.

Anyway, that was the moment the doors opened and a page stepped in, hovering at the threshold and looking uncertain. Rraerch waited a second, then demanded, "You wanted something?"

"Ma'am. Ah Ties told me to inform you that your presence is requested at the workshops."

Ah Ties? Chaeitch? Then...

"Rot! He's back," Rraerch chittered, then she was on her feet in a move I never saw clearly. "Mikah, I have to go. You'd better hurry to make your next appointment on time. I'll talk with you later."

Flashed a wave and then was gone out the door. The Page stared at me.

I sighed, then clambered to my feet at a more sedate pace and gathered up my stuff. I didn't hurry. If Chaeitch was back then I guessed I'd be plenty busy over the next few days.

—v—

Ironheart lay at dock, shifting and bumping almost imperceptibly against the

wharf where pairs of armed guards patrolled. I walked along a deck that'd had its first week experience with the rogours of nature. A Rris sailor was busy scrubbing it down, others polishing metalwork and removing soot where it'd adhered around the smokestack. I touched the wood of the central cabin, feeling solidity and wood grain warmed by the morning sun under my fingertips. I'd helped build this. The thought went some way to satisfying that creative beast inside of me.

"Smooth running," Chaeitch hopped up atop the cabin in a single fluid bound and crouched to grin down at me. "No seizures, no burst lines. Like a fish through water. Fastest vessel on the lakes."

"That good, huh?"

"A," he grinned. "A lot of curious eyes on the docks in Cover-my-Tail."

"You didn't give away too much I hope," Rraerch put in.

Cheitch waved a 'no' as he led the way back to the wheel house and the lower accessway. "We were careful. We let it run a couple of times in open water, but otherwise it's just a odd-looking boat."

Just as well the Rris didn't have cameras. That'd add a whole new dimension to their espionage games. I had a mental flash of a spy sitting on the docks working on a painstaking oil painting of the ship.

Down below, bent over nearly double as Chaeitch led us through familiar narrow walkways built for Rris stature on a survey of the Ironheart's interior. As we made our way through the ship he reviewed the trip, telling us how the Ironheart had performed overall and pointing out potential modifications he'd noted. The cabins, the stores and holds and equipment rooms all had a used feeling to them now, with a patina of smells and stains on surfaces, clawmarks on wooden decking. Back toward the stern, the engine room was a claustrophobic tangle of boiler and pipes and driveshafts. Despite the ventilators it'd be as hot as hell when the engine was fired and I wondered how the Rris firemen could stand it.

The boiler had cooled since yesterday, the outer insulating jacket stained and warped from heat. A reek of smoke and fire, lubricants and overheated metal and wood still hung in the air, condensation dripping from cooling pipes. And it'd worked.

For a maiden voyage the new systems had performed better than I could've ever hoped. Allowing for Murphy and the general perverseness of the universes, I'd have expected something to burst, burn, or blow up, but for the most part things had performed smoothly. There had been a few minor teething problems, and Chaeitch did have a list of points that could be improved, one of them being that the ship wasn't quite as fuel-efficient as we'd been expecting. He thought that could be remedied by using a richer coal. Also, the ship's maneuverability wasn't what it should be, especially at low speeds. Faulty rudder design was his best guess, and that wouldn't be so easy to fix.

We spent a long time going through the boat, poking into this and that, talking. Rraerch left us after about an hour and half, begging an urgent appointment. I stayed: my previous schedule had been pre-empted. As far as the powers-that-be were concerned, this was more important. So it was all business as the Rris engineer and I went through and he listed the modifications he had in mind. When we got abovedecks again, it was to a cloudy afternoon with a cool breeze which was frankly refreshing after the fug below. Chaeitch leaned into it

and panted.

“Warm down there,” I said.

“A,” he said. “And your scent when you’re hot doesn’t help much.”

“Thank you,” I growled and he chittered, then went to perch himself up on the cabin roof. Sitting tailor-fashioned as he watched me. I stared back, then relented and joined him, sitting on the polished wood and looking out across the river.

“I didn’t ask,” he said. “How was your week?”

“While you’ve been off playing around with boats, some of us have been working.”

He chittered. “They’re riding you hard again, a?”

“A,” I said, watching the clouds on the horizon: charcoal grey banks climbing into the sky, glimpses of blue and gold contrasts beyond them.

“It’s not too much? You’re not unhappy with what we’re asking?”

I glanced at him, noticing the flickering of tense muscles around his muzzle. I

smiled a bit, then waved a 'no'. "Don't worry. It's nothing I haven't done before. And the days I have to myself help a lot."

"Good to hear." He looked relieved, then reached into a pouch at his belt to produce his pipe and tobacco. "You've had a chance to do anything interesting?"

"Actually, Mai took me to see one of your plays a few nights ago. That was an experience."

"You liked it?"

"A. It was fun."

"What was it? What was it about?"

I told him while he filled his pipe. He laughed, loudly. "You... they put you in a play? I think I'll have to see that. One of you is difficult enough, but two of you..." he flashed me a grin, imitating one of my smiles.

"Has anyone ever told you you're a funny man?" I asked.

"Sometimes."

“Well, they’re wrong.”

He looked at me. “That’s an old joke where you’re from, isn’t it.”

“Hey, not that old.”

Chaeitch chittered again and fumbled his lighter out of the belt pouch. Steel and flint scraped repeatedly before he got a spark into the bowl of the pipe: smoke curled up as he puffed quickly, then exhaled a cloud and asked, “So, you and the doctor. You’ve had sex again?”

I looked at him: casually smoking and watching the birds settling on the river and asking the question the way I might talk about the weather. He must’ve noticed my hesitation because he gave me a curious look: “Something wrong?”

“I... um... no,” I stumbled, then took a breath. “No. I mean, nothing wrong. Yes, we have.”

“A.” He rocked back and forward a little. “That’d be fun. Any time of the year, without drugs. That stuff’s expensive.”

I hesitated, weighing options, then said, “Chaeitch, do you mind if I ask you a question? About Ris females.”

He made a low sound. “You’re having some problems?”

“No. Not problems.” I hesitated and realised I was wringing my hands. I clenched them into fists and pressed them hard against my legs. “Do they... have they ever...” I fished for the words Mai had taught me, then sighed in frustration. “You feel that sensation when you... finish? You know it?”

“You mean orgasm?”

“Yes, that’s the word.”

He leaned his head back, squinting up. “A. I know it.”

“Do your females feel that? I mean, when you’re with a woman, has she ever orgasmed?”

Chaeitch took his pipe out and held it in both hands as he gave me a strange look. “Of course not. How could they?”

Semantics again. The Rris word held connotations that applied to male plumbing. I stumbled on through territory I wasn’t all that familiar with. “Not that. Not exactly. When you’re mating, they never feel something like what you feel?”

He waved a shrug and took another drag. “I’ve never heard of anything like that.” Then his ears went up. “You mean you have sex differently?”

“Ummm, sort of,” I hedged. “I’m just... With Mai, I’m just trying to understand her a little better.”

“A.” Now he looked thoughtful. “Mikah, did something happen? Something go wrong? She didn’t tear you up again?”

“No. No. I was just curious.” Still a dubious expression. “Really,” I said.

“If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure,” I repeated and he waved another little shrug and subsided. “There is something though,” I ventured.

“A?”

“What do Rris females like? I mean, as gifts?”

He blinked, looking more startled by that question than he had been when I asked him about sex. “Gifts?”

“Yes, gifts. You know, presents?”

“A. I know. You just surprised me. Why?”

“I’d like to give Mai something. It’s something my kind do; a way of showing ... affection. I just have no idea what she’d like. Wine? Confectionary? Flowers?”

He cocked his head and favoured me with an indreclous look before he laughed out loud.

“What?” I asked, stung.

“You...” he started to say, then chittered again and muttered something under his breath. Still chuckling he stretched one leg, then the other and got to his feet. “Come on,” he said, lightly swiping my boot with his claws. “Let’s go get some food. We can talk about that on the way.”

—v—

The gardens were a changed place. The cool avenues and glades of sun-dappled green were gone, stolen by the seasons, repainted by nature’s hand into a landscape of golds and yellows and siennas and reds. Leaves drifted down from shedding boughs, cluttering and carpeting the paths, coloring the streams with tints of tannin. The occasional stand of evergreens held their own against an encroaching army of opposing colors.

I ambled along at Mai’s side through ankle-high drifts of fallen leaves, my

coat collar turned up against a chill breeze that stole wisps of breath from our mouths. Mai simply garbed in her breeks, vest and shirt and a perceptibly thicker pelt that was ruffled as the wind ran fingers through it. The nights were noticeably colder, with touches of frost on the windowpanes in the mornings. Winter rolling around any time now, not something I was especially looking forward to. Ice and snow, wind rattling the windows. No central heating. The Rris just didn't understand how cold I got.

"Should be first snow soon," she said, sniffing the air. "Probably in a week or so."

"Summer never lasts long enough," I sighed.

She chuckled. "Maybe we could get some more clothes made for you. Something a bit better suited for the cold."

"I'd like that," I said, remembering the last winter with a shudder. Ahead, the path turned to cross that small stone bridge across a creek. "Still, autumn's a beautiful time of the year."

"You think so?" she said, glancing down at the stream: tinged brown and lined with leaves and sticks.

"A. The colors are spectacular. And the air seems... cleaner."

Far overhead, beyond the branches, a v-formation of birds were headed south.

“Cooler too,” Mai said. “That’s a pleasant change after hot days.”

“Strange. During summer people yearn for cool weather and in winter they wish summer would come around.”

She chittered. “Among your kind also? Maybe there’s more between us than I thought.”

“Hey , I quite like not having much between us.”

Mai aimed a playful slash at my arm. I was ready and caught it and held it fast. She looked down, then at me again. “Mikah?”

I just held her hand still as I slipped the bracelet over her wrist and fastened the clasp. She froze, eyes twitching wide and when I let her go she pulled away, turning her hand over to examine the silver links. “What is it?”

I jammed hands into my pockets and shrugged, smiled wanly. “A gift. After everything you’ve done for me, I wanted some way to say thank you.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“No,” I said. “But I wanted to.”

She touched it again. A simple silver chain with a simple motif on the plate: two entwined figures. The same figures I'd seen in the Living Hall. When Chaeitch had taken me to the shop I'd wondered if I'd be able to afford it. Turns out I could've bought the whole shop if I'd wanted.

"I didn't know any other way to say it," I told her. "I'm sorry if it's..." I just trailed off.

Hesitation, as her amber eyes flickered from me to the figures on the bracelet and my heart sank. Twice the fool. The way I felt could never be the way she felt. It couldn't be.

Rris have no word for love.

Not in the human sense. Not in the sense I was feeling. Affection, high regard, esteem, admiration... those terms might come close to conveying their sense of the word, but I don't think english has words to describe their emotions properly. That couple in the Living Hall, they'd been the closest to something I could identify; and to the Rris, what they'd had was unnatural. And now I looked at Mai's eyes and couldn't see what she was thinking.

She moved closer to lay hands on my chest, looking up at me. "Don't be. Thank you, and... I think I understand." Her hands described small circles, claws scritchng lightly against my jacket. "You have your own feelings, don't you. Something I can't really grasp."

"Mai, I know... I know you can't feel what I want you to. I know this up here," I tapped my temple, "but my body... It's like I'm sitting up here driving a

wagon that has its own idea of where it wants to go. I feel things I know are impossible.” I sighed, then touched her face, letting my fingers play through the long speckled tufts on her cheeks. “I sometimes dream of you being human.”

Her eyes flickered, her hands toying with the fringes of my beard. “Maybe if you were Rris. Then perhaps... Well, things might not be so complicated.”

I sighed. “If wishes were fishes...”

Mai chittered a small laugh at how ridiculous that sounded in Rris and a falling leaf autorotated down, spinning about its own axis before settling on her shoulder. I plucked it off, running it up to tickle the tufts of fur in her ears. She ducked her head, dodging away and chittering again. I twirled the leaf around in my fingers: dry, yellow and brown and brittle, tatters of desiccated material around a skeleton of veins. Intricate, complicated, branching and spreading out...

“I think I could do with a little less complexity in my life.”

Mai ducked her head, her ears tipping back. “Then I suppose this isn’t the best time to tell you,” she said in a small voice.

“I’m not going to like this, am I,” I said.

“Huhhnnn, it’s not so bad. Another reception, two nights from now. Royalty, nobility, ambassadors... all the usuals. They want you to attend as well.”

I picked at the leaf, tearing little bits off. “I have to attend?” I asked, remembering what’d happened the last times. Had they told her? They must have.

“They’d wanted me to make sure you’re willing. His highness thinks it’s important that other countries see you’re well and happy. They’ll be used to you by now.”

They had. I just nodded.

“You’ll go?”

I ran my fingers over the leaf, feeling a universe of veins. “If it helps you, I’ll go.”

She reached up and caught my hand and gently squeezed. I didn’t resist, both of us crushing the leaf until fragments fell and were scattered by the wind, her fingers twined in mine.

Still holding hands, we walked off into the drifting leaves.

Much longer evenings now, with a distinctive chill in the air. I sank down lower into the steam rising from the surface of the bath, sighing as I let the heat soak some of the tension out of me. Outside, the shadows were lengthening, a final glow from the sun turning the sky the darkest blue. In the bathroom the orange light from the single oil lamp cast leaping shadows on the wall, leaving the room in a twilight that was as restful as the warmth seeping into my bones.

I could've stayed there for hours. Unfortunately, that wasn't going to be an option.

"Mikah?" The call heralded the sound of the front door opening. "Are you... You're not still in there?" Mai appeared at the door, silhouetted against the brighter light from the other room.

"We've got time," I mumbled.

"Not much." Mai moved a bit closer. I caught shadowy flashes of brushed and combed fur, black and brown breeches with gold embroidery and matching armbands: clothing that must've been provided for tonight. She came across to the bath and perched herself on the rim, caressing my water-slicked shoulder with a leathery palm. "We've still got to groom you into some semblance of respectability."

"Maybe we could ask them to put this off until another night," I suggested drowsily.

"Mikah!" multiple pinpricks jabbed my shoulder.

“Ah! All right, all right,” I relented and hauled myself out of the tub. Mai tossed me a towel from the pile and as I dried off she watched me intently. Close enough to make me a little uncomfortable.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Huhn? Ah, I was just thinking: you look so different, but you have your own grace. Especially when you’re wet: Rris look drowned, you look... interesting.”

“I thought we didn’t have time for that,” I grinned.

“We don’t. Now hurry up,” she said and headed through to the other room, pausing in the door to turn and say. “I don’t want to remind you not to do that with your mouth tonight.”

I sobered. No, I didn’t want to do that again. I finished drying off and threw the wet towel aside, wrapping a fresh one around my waist. Mai was spreading the contents of her grooming kit out on the desk and a set of clothes were laid on the bed. “They should fit,” she said.

Dark green velvet pants, a white shirt with bloused sleeves and a lightweight black vest over that. They were comfortable, cut to fit me, and made me feel like a folk singer.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mai snorted. “You look fine. Now come here: I have to

prune that hedgerow you call fur.”

“Hey, nonny nonny,” I muttered.

“Ah, sit down,” she hissed and I seated myself where she indicated, wrapping the towel around my shoulders. Claws tipped my head back and forth, raking my hair back, then the comb started tugging through it. I winced as she bulled through knots, then relaxed when the going got easier. She worked quickly, brusquely: combing out my unruly mane, then bringing out the scissors to tidy up the loose ends.

“Well, you look presentable,” she proclaimed with a few final snips at my beard. “You ready to go?”

“No. But we’re going anyway, aren’t we?”

She patted my shoulders, also brushing away a few errant strands. “You’ll be fine. Just be polite.”

I’d heard that before. But I’d never had Mai at my side before.

She stayed close as we walked the Palace. Through marbled halls ablaze with lights from chandeliers and candelabras and sconces. Servants scurrying to and fro, carrying trays and changing wicks while guards stood at their posts, like inscrutable furry statues with light reflecting from the polished steel of ornamental weapons and armour. As we approached the wing housing the halls

where the reception was being held there was more activity. There were nobility in the corridors; Rris in their splendid and garish costumes and finery stepping aside to stand stare as Mai and I passed. I heard the gossiping start up behind us but never bothered to turn and look.

Standing at the top of the sweeping staircase I could hear the sounds drifting up: disjointed strains of music surfacing above the white noise of many Rris talking. I swallowed and looked at Mai who flicked her ears, then together we started down, step by parquetry-inlaid step down into the crowds.

—v—

A swirl of furry bodies and colors under the bright flickering lights of a dozen chandeliers in the big room, the static snarl of voices reverberating in the big room. The Rris moving around me were a kaleidoscope of colors and regalia: red and ceruleans, golds and silvers, jewelry and armour. Feline heads nestled into voluminous ruffs; glittering eyes behind token masks; a vest made of thousands of tiny diamonds of polished silver; dyed and shaved fur... over a hundred in that room, circulating in random patterns across the green and white tiles. The french doors across the far side were open to the balconies, but the cool breeze was offset by the heat of furry bodies and open flames.

I'd been through this before, and I hoped this time would be better than that. I stood out; being head and shoulders above most of the room didn't help. Dotted around were a few Rris whose ears might have come up to my eyes - giants among their kind - but for the most part I could easily see over the crowd. And of course they could see me.

Eyes everywhere watched me, conversations hesitating, veering off in new directions as Mai and I entered. She kept going but I saw the way her ears started

to lay back and then stood rigidly: she was nervous but held it in check. And that probably did more to help me keep going than anything anyone could've said. At least I'd been through this before. I patted her shoulder in what I hoped was a reassuring way.

And the sharks were starting to circle. I'd already spotted several of the Rris I'd been dealing with, ambassadors and merchants alike, starting to drift in my direction. A chance for them to try and pump me a little more, off the clock. I casually caught Mai's arm and steered her in the direction of least resistance, toward the buffet table. Not that I had any real hopes of being able to dodge them all.

"Mikah." A stocky Rris in a turquoise doublet materialised in front of us. "I'm pleased to see you could make it."

"Ah Mhyra," I ducked my head. "It's an occasion I simply wasn't able to miss."

"The guild has been trying to get an appointment to see you but there seems to be some difficulty."

"I know, sir. I'm afraid I really can't do anything about..."

Another Rris noble wearing a vest decorated with elaborate lace brocade stepped up. "I've heard about you. Is it true you know the future?"

“No. Sir...”

“Sir?”

Damn! “Ma’am, I’m sorry...”

There were more gathering, a barrage of questions coming my way. Mai looked from me to the Rris surrounding us and her ears went back in fury as someone pushed between us. “Mai,” I snapped and shoved the offending Rris out of the way, an outraged yowl going up. Golden hackles started going up.

“Hold!” Someone snarled and the commotion died as Hirht and a pair of armed guards parted the crowd. “Mikah, causing a commotion already?”

“I’m sorry, Sir,” I ducked my head and Mai stepped forward. “Sir, it wasn’t...”

The Rris king gestured, a single raised finger, and she fell silent. As did the Rris around us. “Good folks,” Hirht addressed them, only raising his voice a little, but it carried. “These are my guests. I expect them to be accorded the respect that such entails. Mikah can talk to you, but I doubt he can manage all at once. Now, Mikah, doctor, walk with me.”

We fell in beside him. He was wearing an odd, long jerkin of maroon velvet with dark leather trim engraved in painstaking detail. A ceremonial dagger hung from a belt supporting a pair of green breeches; he tucked a finger into that belt as

we walked toward the cooler air spilling in through the french doors. The crowd parted around us, the sounds of conversation starting up again and Hirht said, "Making ripples again."

Again I apologised. "Sorry."

"Don't be." He sighed: a sound halfway between an exhalation and a growl. "You don't do these things, they just seem to happen to you."

"Succinct way of putting it, sir," Mai said.

He cast a look her way. "We didn't anticipate quite that sort of reaction. Unforgivably rude. I have to apologise. It shouldn't happen again."

"You can guarantee that?" I asked as we reached the doors. The crowd had thinned considerably, possibly because of Hirht.

His expression went to that stony impassiveness that Shyia had used. "I wish I could. Just try to behave yourself. If there is an incident, whatever you do, don't hurt anyone."

Mai bristled and hastily ducked her head, hiding her expression from Hirht.

"He has a way of snatching attention, doesn't he," another voice spoke up.

I turned with the others: A Rris noble adorned in pale cotton garments halted a few paces behind us, watching with interested eyes. The features were familiar and it was a second before I realised that I'd spoken with this Rris before, under very similar circumstances: Lady H'risnth.

"An understatement, good lady," Hirht said. "You're finding everything satisfactory?"

"Oh yes." She waved her hand in a gesture that encompassed the bright room with its glittering occupants. Her escort took their place behind her: four large guards with armour but no visible weapons. "Music, food, and entertainment." I didn't miss that the last was said with a pointed glance in my direction.

"I apologise for that," Hirht said again. "I trust you weren't inconvenience by that little incident."

She cocked her head. "For a while I thought there might be a repeat of last time."

The King of Land-of-Water didn't flinch, but there was something sardonic in the way he ducked his head. "Something we're doing our best to avoid."

There was something I was missing. I wondered what sort of political play was going on behind the scenes between these two.

“Doubtless,” she said with a smile and turned to eye me. “Mikah, from what I hear you’re doing a lot better. Your friend here ... Maithris wasn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mai said.

Lady H’risnth looked her up and down. “Huhn, a doctor. Odd that no-one’s ever heard of you before.”

“Not so odd, Ma’am,” Mai said. “Meddling Times isn’t such a big place.”

“A. And some of those theories you’ve put forward... You’re causing quite a stir.”

I looked down at Mai who looked uncomfortable. I was about to ask ‘what theories’ when Hirht stepped in: “Doctor, that reminds me: there were some things I wanted to discuss with you.” He touched her arm and sketched lady H’risnth and I a small bow. “If you’ll excuse us...”

The Lady waved her hand in a fluid little ‘yes’ and Mai took my hand to squeeze it. “I’ll find you later, a? Be good.”

“Of course,” I smiled and she swatted my arm before moving off with the King. I saw him saying something to her before the crowd closed around them. Rris eyes watched us, Rris circling like glittering sharks with the King’s public warning and lady H’risnth’s presence keeping them at bay.

“Interesting woman,” H’risnth mused, her head cocked.

“A. She’s always surprising me.”

“I can imagine,” she smiled slightly, then looked around at the curious crowds shifting around and beckoned for me to follow. The guards fell in behind us as we stepped outside onto the terrace. Oil lamps were mounted at intervals along the balustrade, their flames dancing in the cold breeze that set the trees in the Palace grounds to swaying against the deep blue of the clear night sky. The milky way was a wash against the vault of heaven, a light as cool as the wind washing over the landscape. There were fewer Rris out there: a few groups and couples quietly talking.

Our shadows stretched across the terrace, thrown by the light spilling from the doors behind us as we walked over to where steps led down to the grass meadows surrounding the Palace. H’risnth stood at the top of the steps looking out across Hirht’s lands. “You’ve been busy recently.”

“Ma’am?”

“A very interesting ship paid call to a couple of our ports.”

I didn’t say anything, not sure of where I stood in this matter.

She glanced my way, looking amused. “I’d have thought you’d have an opinion. You did have a lot to do with it.”

“I don’t know if I can talk about it.”

“Ahh,” the silhouette of her head bobbed. “Mikah, we already know. We were consulted. Land-of-Water needed our permission to use western facilities.”

“Oh.”

And Lady H’risnth ducked her head again as a small chitter escaped her dignity. “Sah, Mikah, I’m not trying to trick you or cause you more trouble. I just wanted to congratulate you.”

Seriously? I tried to read something in her expression and found only sincerity. All I could say was, “Thank you, Ma’am.”

“The least I can do,” she said and looked out at the silhouette of trees in their stately dance, the stipple of stars across a dark sky beyond them. “I’ve wondered: are there others of your kind here?”

“I don’t know for certain.” I waved a small shrug. “I doubt it.”

“Huhn,” shadowed amber eyes flared momentarily as she studied me in the lamplight. “Are you happy here?”

I took a breath and the reply caught in my throat as I tried to honestly weigh up my life. Eventually, I just gave a small smile: “I suppose it’s like any life: it has its ups and it has its downs. There are times when I’m happy. Yes.”

I could feel her eyes invisible in the gloom watching me, never wavering. Then she said, “I think I can only wish you the best. But Mikah, if there is ever any reason, there’s a place across the lakes where you’re welcome.”

Then she patted my arm and turned away. I watched her silhouette stalking back to the bright lights and music, her guards falling in behind: two by two. I shivered a little: a mixture of cold and tension. Go back in? No, not just yet. I huddled down a bit further and tried to put my hands into nonexistent pockets, then settled on clasping them behind my back.

“Hello?”

Another petitioner. I turned, preparing myself for more shop talk, then stopped and stared. The Rris who stood watching me wasn’t anyone I knew: slightly built, and most shocking of all, the yellow-amber eyes were surrounded by naked skin.

A parody of my own face: naked skin and a beard-like fringe of fur. A white tunic bore a remarkable resemblance to one of my t-shirts, right down to the abstract geometric design printed on it, and Rris manufactured bluejeans finished above clawed digitigrade feet. I’d seen the style before, but never this close, not so I could see the grey, dimpled Rris skin on the face, the neck, the hands and arms. “Hello,” the Rris said again. “You’re not an easy person to meet, you know.”

“That’s not something I have much control over,” I shrugged. “Do I know you?”

The Rris blinked, looked puzzle then amused. “I don’t know. Do you? I’m Heasch. And your name is... Mikah, isn’t it? Red tie it, but it’s difficult to talk to you. I’ve been trying for a while but they say you’re busy. You know you’re taller than I thought. Is that usual for your kind”

I stared, nonplussed. Talkative person. “I... I’m about usual height. Do you mind if I ask... your fur,” I gestured at the shaved face and hands and the Rris flinched a little. “Why’ve you done that?”

“It’s amusing,” Heasch said. “I’d have thought you’d be quite used to it.”

“On a Rris it looks... different,” I hedged.

“A?” The Rris looked down, then slowly reached out and touched my hand. Fingerpads and bare skin stroked over mine, caught my finger and flexed it. “Doesn’t feel like yours. You don’t have claws.”

“No. I don’t... Look, I...” clawed hands were moving, pushing up my sleeve to stroke the hair on my forearm. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“You do have fur,” Heasch chittered and looked up. “And there’s more in other places?”

“What?”

“Would you like to meet later? I’d like to find out if these things about you are true.”

“Ahh...Wait. Things? What things? What’d you mean?”

Claws scratched lightly at my skin and I suddenly had a horrible flash of enlightenment. “What things?” Heasch growled in a tone I’d heard in darkened rooms. “You can have sex anytime. You do it differently, and the women seem to get something extra out of it.”

I stood there with my mouth hanging open.

“Mikah?” Heasch peered up at me.

“Where... where did you hear that?” I croaked.

“It’s true?” she rumbled. “Can you show me? It sounds like it’d be fun to find out.”

I looked down at our hands: my pale skin held in her grey ones. Without fur her hands looked smaller, the differences in joints and proportions more apparent. Oh, God, Mai? She didn’t...

I jerked away. "How did you know?"

She cocked her head and her lip fleered up, just the tiniest flash of teeth. "I have my sources. And you never answered my question."

I pulled away a step. "I'm sorry, but no. I don't think so."

"And if I were to insist?"

Now I stopped and stared. Her eyes were glowing in the lamplight: her pupils dilated to flare with all the fury of a bad snapshot. "I'm sorry. I'd still have to decline."

She closed the distance between us again and reached up to touch my shirt, stroking up to my neck. "Huhn, some prey to chase. You know, I'm quite used to getting my way."

"I'm sure you are. " I caught her hand and claws came out, turned slowly where I could see them. "But I'm not used to being a toy."

"You seem to enjoy it enough with your commoner friend," she rumbled. "You find claws quite interesting, don't you. And fur: quite different from your hide, a? You like to be ridden by females?"

I felt a flush creeping around the back of my neck. “I think that’s our business and ours’ alone.”

“Really?” she flashed a small smile. “Perhaps you should re-evaluate your position.”

“What do you mean?”

She favoured me with another small grin and withdrew her hand, pretending an exaggerated interest in watching as her claws retracted.

“She’s not disturbing you, Mikah?” I startled as another hand touched my arm and Rraerch stepped up to my side.

“No. No,” I told her. “Just discussing the nightlife.”

“A,” Rraerch eyed the other female: her tail lashed against my leg. “Heasch, I do believe your father was looking for you.”

The other’s ears laid back, then she looked at me and bestowed a small grin on me before she bowed decorously and turned to stalk off into the crowd. I sagged as I let a pent-up breath escape: “Thanks.”

“Anytime,” Rraerch said. “What was that about?”

“Something I don’t need,” I sighed, and leaned against the cold stone of the balustrade. “Rraerch... You and Chaeitch, you haven’t told anyone about Mai and I?”

“I certainly haven’t and I sincerely doubt Chaeitch would,” she said. “Why?” Then her head rocked back and she glanced toward the lights of the ball room, where Heasch had retreated. “Huhnnn,” she rumbled a low growl of comprehension. “She knows.”

“Yeah,” I nodded slightly. “She knows.” Rraerch said she hadn’t talked and I believed her. Chaeitch? Had he talked about it? But he’d sworn he wouldn’t.

“She was teasing you about it?”

“She was...” I trailed off and shook my head. “Yes. She was teasing me. Who is she?”

Rraerch waved a small shrug. “Offspring of a local merchant who made money investing in profitable caravan routes. She stands in line to inherit it, but from what I’ve heard she seems to prefer chasing after other past-times.” She stopped and again looked over her shoulder at the lights, turned back:

“Is that what she was doing? Chasing after you? It was, wasn’t it.”

“A,” I said. “Look, it wasn’t just that. She knew things... she just knew things

that were between Mai and I.” I sounded a small laugh and slapped my palm against the smooth stone, “Well, I thought they were.”

The Rris appeared a little nonplussed. “And you think the doctor might have said something.”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, why’re you so concerned? I mean, you didn’t want anyone to know you had sex together, but is it so disasterous if people find out you have?”

“It’s not just the sex,” I shook my head. “It’s just there’s something I’d rather had stayed between us. There are... other things that might just causes problems I really don’t need right now.” I slapped my hand on the stone again.

“I don’t understand.” She looked confused.

“I know the feeling,” I sighed, then pushed away from the balustrade. “I’d better find Mai.”

I headed back for the doors. A second later there was a spatter of claws on stone as Rraerch caught up and fell in at my side, still looking concerned. Inside, I scanned the crowd, wondering where to start looking for a pair of familiar ears in a sea of furry heads. Rris nobility and merchants gravitated to me like metal filings to a magnet, clustering around with a restrained urgency. I worked my way through the crowd, shedding them with small promises, politeness and

courtesies. It took time, like pushing back water: a few steps further through chatter and glitter and staring faces before another petitioner approached me and I'd have to wriggle off the hook. Slow, but short of standing on a table and screaming her name, it was all I could do.

I wasn't having much luck.

My meanderings through the crowd had taken me back to the buffett tables where I'd managed to procure a glass of wine from among less palatable offerings. Rraerch was nearby, delicately nibbling chunks of raw meat and vegetables from a stick while she talked with an acquaintance. Ris watched as I sipped and I saw a few making sniggering remarks to neighbours: probably commenting on the fact I didn't lap up my drink like a civilized person should. Spiced wine. Room temperature.

At least I had a second to myself. I spent it surveying the crowd, wondering where Mai could have vanished to. I tried to spot Hirht or perhaps the helmets of his guards, but didn't have any luck there either. However, over by some potted plants against the far wall I caught a glimpse of a face that was naggingly familiar, although I couldn't place it. The Ris was decked in the dress uniform of a Land-of-Water military officer: dark green breeches with red piping and a matching quilted vest with a cross-slung bandanna provisioned with hoops for carrying a pair of silver pistols that I took to be ornaments only. The individual in question was engaged in conversation with a pair of gaudily dressed nobility.

"Rraerch," I ventured, and pointed when she glanced my way. "Who is that?"

She followed my finger and her muzzle furrowed. "Her again?"

“Again?” I asked. “Who?”

“That one you were asking after,” she said. “You pointed her out from the carriage. I didn’t think you had such a memory for faces.”

Her? Not so much faces, but the markings in the fur, the demeanour... And the subject of our attention chose that moment to glance our way and see us staring. I saw the officer flinch visibly, then her eyes narrowed and ears went back flat against her skull.

“I thought I knew her, but I wasn’t sure from where.”

“Huhn,” she rumbled and glanced thoughtfully at me. “His lordship asked me about her as well. Haies aesh Tohikish, she’s secretary to Marah ah Cho’tai, commander of the city’s southern militia, a very powerful man.”

Whoever that was, his secretary didn’t look happy to see me staring at her. Haies said something to the Rris she was talking with, then started stalking our way. A pair of Rris fell in behind her: big Rris, in expensive civilian clothing but they had the look of guards about them. As she approached her eyes stayed locked on me, her head tipped to one side, but her ears didn’t come up, not even when she stopped and looked me up and down. Not a large Rris. A slight build and dark tawny fur that just emphasised her unusual eyes: a glacier-ice green. “You wanted something?”

“He was just curious,” Rraerch said. “He thought he saw you from somewhere.”

“He did, did he,” Haies rumbled.

“A, he did,” I said. “Just a question about someone I thought I saw you talking with in town. Wears a green stone bracelet? Maybe been to Westwater in the last year? You know him?”

She didn’t flinch but Rraerch hissed, “Mikah! I’m sorry, Ma’am, but this has been a burr in his fur for some time.”

“A? I assume there’s reason you’re asking about this individual.”

“I just thought this person might know something about a murder.”

Around us, Rris conversations faltered and ears swivelled our way. Haies tipped her head the other way and looked amused. “A murder. Really?”

“Really.”

She actually chuckled, then delicately scratched at her muzzle with a clawtip. “Well, I’m sorry but I can’t help you with that. I’m afraid I really don’t know this... person you’re referring to.”

“Really?” I asked and Rraerch sucked air.

The green eyes flickered the tiniest bit before Haies said, “Really.”

“Strange. I could’ve sworn it was you I saw talking to this person. I know aesh Smither saw you.”

“Truly?” Haies seemed interested in that and Rraerch looked uncomfortable.

“A,” she admitted. “I saw you. I... didn’t see anyone else.”

“A,” Haies expressed a small sound of enlightenment. “Well, that’s understandable. I know that this ape... Huhn, apologies: It’s Mikah, isn’t it. I know Mikah here does seem to be a little unstable at times, to say the least.”

A small chitter went up from those who heard this. I felt tendons in my arms twitch, but managed to stop my hands clenching into fists while we stared at each other. She flashed me a small smile. “I do hope I was of some help.”

“Oh, yes,” I smiled back, painstakingly careful to keep my teeth covered. “Most useful.” Let her chew on that.

A small mocking bow and Rraerch caught my arm, turning me away.

“A moment, aesh Smither,” Haies spoke up and Rraerch turned back. “Have

you had sex with him? I've heard tell that he's quite remarkable in that area."

More laughter and murmurs from our growing audience. I flushed with a heat I knew everyone could see; Rraerch squeezed claws into my arm and propelled me out of there.

"Red tie everything!" she hissed when we reached the outskirts of the crowd. "What were you trying to do?"

"She was lying."

"And you'd just say that to her face, wouldn't you," Rraerch sighed. "Rot it... you couldn't find a better way to make enemies if you tried. Mikah, without some sort of evidence, you're just..."

She never finished the sentence. A flustered Mai burst from the crowd, toe claws scraping on the tile floor as she bumped a noble, sketched a hasty bow and apology and spun to us: "Mikah? I heard there was trouble? What happened? What'd he do?"

Automatically assuming it was me. I guess she had good enough cause. Rraerch glanced at me and took Mai aside; for a few seconds there was a muted exchange of fluent Rris accompanied by sharp gestures, then Mai beckoned to me: "Perhaps we should go somewhere quieter."

Rraerch gave me a resigned look and gestured toward the terrace.

“I think he’s trying to make a habit of this,” Rraerch said.

Noise, music and the distant surf-sound of Rris voices drifted out to us. I sat myself on the bottommost step, my feet vanishing into the long grass of the meadows that ran right up to the Palace. Despite being cold enough to show breath as phantom clouds in the moonlight, the air was actually refreshing after the alien confusion of the reception room. I rubbed my eyes and realised I’d been sweating, now a clammy sheen on my forehead and wetness under my arms.

“It was her,” I told the Rris. “She knows.”

“Knows?” Mai knelt down in front of me and took my hands where they were dangling between my knees, holding them in hers. “Knows what?”

“It’s that Westwater affair again,” Rraerch sighed from where she was standing behind me, further up the steps. “Haies aesh Tohikish, he confronted her about it. Of course she denied knowing anything about it and... and frankly Mikah, I have trouble understanding myself.”

I closed my eyes, trying not to see Mai’s intense eyes peering into mine. “Of course she denied it,” I said. “She was lying.”

“And you want to accuse her of that to her face?”

“Who would they believe?” I asked and caught the expression on her face. “Don’t answer that,” I smiled. “No, I simply wanted to see... I know what I saw; I wanted to know what she’d say. I know I can’t trust her.”

“A,” Mai said, patted my hand then released them. Her eyes glinted, her breath frosting in the air as she studied my face. Behind her, moonlight fell on fields of grass rippling in the moonlight. “A,” she said again, much more softly.

A moment’s silence, then Rraerch ventured: “Doctor, there’s another matter: the sex between the two of you... well, several people have commented on it. And Mikah was approached tonight by someone who could’ve been a little more polite about it.”

I slowly lowered my head to my hand and groaned, “Thank’s, Rraerch.” I hadn’t wanted to get into that, not there and then.

“What?” the merchant asked. “Mikah, it could be risky. You remember what happened to you the first time you laid with the doctor.”

“She knows?” Mai asked.

“A,” I said. “Apparently, so does the rest of the town now.” I sighed a misty breath and looked up at her silhouette. “Why did you tell them?”

A hesitation, then she said, “I didn’t. I…” she trailed off.

“Of course. Lucky guess, right? Mai, she knew details. I thought… you said you’d keep it between us.”

“I know,” she said, and I could see her ears were down. Not anger: misery. “I know, Mikah. I’m sorry.”

I stood, able to look down at her. “I hope you gave them enough details. You wouldn’t want to miss anything, would you. Sometimes, there are moments when I forget I’m a specimen.”

She didn’t say anything, just looked up at me, then away again.

I almost touched her. My hand almost brushed her fur, then I pulled away. No, at that moment I just didn’t need that. Grass swished against my trousers as I turned and started walking. A couple of muted Rris voices sounded behind me, but they didn’t try to follow.

I walked. Through moonlit gardens of wild grasses I walked. I just need some time to myself, to calm down and get my thoughts in order. My breath frosted in the cold autumn air, the hair on my arms standing as I walked and tried to sort out the events of that night in my mind.

Lies. Mai… and that Haies. It had been her I’d seen. I knew it. Rraerch had proved that. And she was certainly trying to cover something. If she’d said she’d

been meeting a friend, explained who that might have been, then I might have believed it. But she'd denied it outright. Denied it, toyed with me, looked me in the eye and all but dared me to call her a liar.

And she was. I knew that, but I couldn't prove it. She knew I couldn't prove it and barricaded herself behind that knowledge. Laughed at me. Taunted me in public, and knew enough about me that her parting remark was a well-placed barb.

Oh, Mai.

She'd promised she'd do her best to keep what happened between us to herself. I'd believed her. Of course there was no way it could be kept completely secret, but what Heasch had said... she'd known details. The Rris could've joined the dots and got a picture of what was happening between Mai and I, but she didn't have to go and color the damn thing in. And the gossip would be spreading.

It was out. It was there. I'd have to live with it. I'd known people would learn eventually, but I'd never really thought about how it'd come to light. Perhaps gossip, talk, maybe a quiet word in private... I wasn't expecting it to be like this: an alien woman coming onto me at a diplomatic function, for Christ's sake.

My watch chimed some ungodly early hour: 03:00, or therabouts. I'd been away for hours. From where I stood in the treeline I looked across at the Palace: the sprawling wings, pale stone, warm light spilling from a hundred windows. I been walking for some time, circling the huge building. Now I was getting cold and an early morning mist was starting to condense in the trees. Time I started heading back, before they sent out a seach party. Not back to the crowd; I didn't think I could handle that. Hirht would be pissed, but that was something I could

deal with later.

What was it about these functions? They never seemed to go right.

I found another door into the Palace: a small postern gate around by the stables. A single gas lamp illuminated a small door and there was an alarming moment when the pair guards posted there started and moved their hands toward their weapons. I guess they'd seen me around before because they ducked their heads and let me pass.

It was an odd, unsettlingly lonely experience wandering around the Palace by night. In deference to Rris night vision there wasn't much lighting, leaving deserted corridors and hallways in shadow. Occasionally an inhabitant would hurry past with a castanet-spatter of claws. I climbed a staircase to the second floor and headed for my rooms, down one of the corridors overlooking the central yard. Ghostly moonlight spilled in through the high, arched mullioned windows, throwing pale cutouts of crosshatched light across marble and malachite.

Mai.

She hadn't denied it. Hadn't offered any excuses. Just apologised and there was that torn expression... Perhaps she hadn't told them. Of course she had. There was no way they could've know...

Times I'd woken from nightmares and there were guards already in my room.

A time I'd been alone; a quick slash with sharp glass and there'd been Ris in there within minutes.

Comments about things I'd done in private.

Oh. My god.

The realisation threw light onto a lot of shadowy problems. And also made me aware that I'd been quite unfair to someone.

—v—

I'd never been there before. It took a while to find: a single door in a corridor of cream satin wallpaper and many other white doors. The servant I'd waylaid to lead me stepped away with ears plastered flat to its head, "Here, sir."

"Thank you," I said and the servant took that as a dismissal. Claws rattled against the floor as the Ris bolted. No scratchplate on the door, I rattled the handle as was the custom.

A pause. Was she in?

The door opened and a tired face peered through the opening, blinked at my chest, then looked up and was suddenly wide awake. "Mikah? Where've you been? You weren't in your rooms..."

“I have to talk to you,” I interrupted.

“A.” Mai hesitated, then opened the door, “Come in.” She hadn’t paused for clothes.

I stepped inside, looking around while she lit a candle. The first time I’d ever seen her room at the Palace. It wasn’t extravagant: a single small room with a glazed window and plain curtains, a bed with a simple wooden frame and rumpled sheets and the imprint of a body still visible on the recently-vacated mattress. A few papers were spread out on a low desk, along with Mai’s notebook. Mai put the candle down on the desk, setting monstrous shadows to jittering on the walls and ceiling as she turned back to me. “So... talk, a? About what?”

“Mai,” I said. “I’m sorry. For what I said: I’m sorry.” I took a breath and let it out slowly. “My rooms. They’re... watched, aren’t they.”

A flinch, and her eyes darted aside. That told me all I needed to know.

“They are,” I nodded. “And you aren’t allowed to tell me.”

“Mikah...” she started, then hissed softly like a deflating balloon and just said, “A.”

“I think I understand.”

“Rot everything. I wish I could’ve told you. They just...” she trailed off again and just made a small, helpless gesture.

I moved closer and touched her, gently stroking the fur of her brow and muzzle: like velvet rubbed the wrong way. “Would you... I don’t want to impose, but I don’t think I could sleep well back there tonight.”

She flinched, pupils flickering as if she were perhaps expecting me to say something else, then a small chitter escaped her. “And I don’t blame you in the least. You know you’re welcome here.”

I leaned a bit closer, to nuzzle the longer fur around her ear. It flickered wildly, she chattered and I whispered, “And there are no other eyes tonight.”

“Huhnnn,” that soft rumble as she leaned into my chest and I embraced her, just holding that warm life in my arms, feeling a slow heartbeat while the candle slowly puddled and guttered. And in the flickering darkness we moved to the bed.

The bed was just big enough for one. Not really big enough for what the two of us used it for.

And last thing that early morning she lay partially atop me and cradled my face in both hands, her muzzle scant inches from my nose. For the few seconds she stared into my eyes I saw something flicker, a brief flicker of pain that was gone before I could ask. Then she ducked her head to nip at my nose before a

rough tongue gently lapped at my eyes.

—v—

A door slammed open. I started from secure and aimless slumber into the cold certainty of morning sunlight while in my arms Mai also flinched awake. A tangle of blood-warm sheets fell aside as I sat up to see an armored Rris in the doorway. Standing stock still and staring at the pair of us, nostrils working to take in the unmistakable scents hanging in the small room.

“What is it?” Mai growled.

The trooper took a second to respond, then blinked and ducked. “I’m sorry Ma’am. It was a problem that... huhnn... it seems to have resolved itself.”

“I see,” Mai said and waited for a second. “If that’s all?”

“Huhnn, yes Ma’am,” the guard bowed again and retreated, popping back in to say, “Sorry, Ma’am, Sir,” and shut the door.

Mai settled back, sinking down beside me. I stroked the ruffled fur on her shoulder, then scratched behind her ear. She subsided with a low sigh and presently said, “Mikah?”

“Yes?”

“You didn’t tell anyone you were here, did you.”

“Oops.”

She leaned against my chest and chittered, “Oh, dear.”

Predictably, I spent a portion of that morning in the advisor’s office explaining why I’d run off that night, what the disturbance during the reception had been about... putting it mildly, Kh’hitch was annoyed about that. I’d been supposed to circulate, interface with potential clients; powerterms I’d expected to have heard from Elliot while wooing a prospective billfold. Instead, my own agendas had surfaced to drag me down and the upper echelons of the Land-of-Water government were non-too-happy that their plans had been interfered with.

So, I just listened while Kh’hitch went on at me. When he’d run out of steam I apologised, quietly and humbly. He seemed a little taken aback, sat and listened with fur bristling, one hand stroking the back of the other. I asked if there was anything else.

No. They let me go back to my rooms.

I stood there in the short-lived sunlight spilling in through the windows. What Mai and I had done last night we’d also done here, and there’d been others watching us. From where? The room was in a corner, so those two walls were out. As was the one to the bathroom. The other wall... what was I expecting? Microphones? Hidden cameras? Peepholes? Perhaps a painting with removable

eyes? There was nothing there.

That left...

It was obvious when you thought about it. A vantage point that could see everything in the room, in both rooms.

Bastards.

For a while I sat at the window seat, watching bulbous clouds tumbling across a patchwork sky, flashes of sunlight briefly warming a chorus line of swaying treetops. Oh, shit. Everything. Watched and judged and noted, alien eyes and minds studying everything I did... everything we did. I sighed, shook my head, then went to pick up a candle, lit it.

I held the flame directly beneath the lens-like glass bauble in the middle of that ridiculous lamp, slowly waving it around, making sure to coat the whole damn thing with a layer of black soot.

—v—

The trio of Rris in the corridor stood aside, watching intently as my guards and I walked past. As we passed by, one caught my eye and raised a hand, claws extended and tongue lolling. There was a low comment, then chattering laughter sounded down the corridor after us. I sighed and glanced at the guard to my left who stared fixedly ahead with a stony expression reminiscent of the one Hirht

kept tucked away.

That hadn't been the first incident. There'd been that noble earlier on. She'd been somewhat more... direct. And that's all I'll say about that matter

I guessed where we were going when the guards came knocking. I was sure of it when we made the first familiar turn off and headed deeper into the halls of power.

The King's office was bright, with sunlight reflecting off the white marble that was so prevalent around the room. Hirht was working, bent over the desk with a pen jotting away at a piece of paper. The scratching was the only sound and he didn't even look up when I closed the door and walked across the room. My boots made muted thumps on the marble tiles as I walked across and stood, waiting. He knew I was there.

And presently he laid his pen aside and looked up. "Ah, Mikah. I hear you've been doing some modifications on the fixtures in your room."

"News gets around quickly here."

"May I ask why?"

"I think you know why." I said, watching him carefully. If I'd guessed wrong, perhaps they thought I was cracking again. "It surprised me a little: I thought Rris valued their privacy."

He cocked his head a bit. "You think you're being watched."

"No," I corrected. "I know I am."

"Please, Mikah," he said, trying to sound placating. "How can you be so sure?"

Oh, please. "She didn't tell me. She didn't have to. I am capable of putting two and two together, you know. When my sex life becomes a topic of conversation, I know something's wrong. My kind may be more... crowd-liking than Rris, but not when it comes to our own lives."

He sighed and leaned back. "For that, I have to apologise. That... that was never intended. Those responsible have been reprimanded."

"And that puts the genie back in the bottle?"

"I'm sorry?" The short fur between his eyes furrowed. "What does that mean?"

"That makes it all better?" I clarified, raising my hand in emphasis. His eyes flickered to the movement and widened, as if he was expecting me to show claws. I let my arm drop to my side: "Christ! There... are times when I want to be alone. To have my privacy. I know Rris need this. I need this."

“Mikah, you know that for your own safety...”

“I have guards at my door and in the corridors and more outside. Surely that’s enough? Outside the Palace, I can understand that. I can accept that. But all the time?”

“You’ll keep blacking out the lights.”

“Yes.”

He hesitated and looked down at the papers on the desk for a second, then took a breath and said, “Mikah, did it ever occur to you that the doctor might have told us what happened those nights?”

“Yes. She didn’t.”

His ears twitched, just a fraction. “How can you be so sure?”

“She said she wouldn’t.”

“‘She said she wouldn’t’,” he echoed and chattered softly. I swallowed my pride and didn’t reply: so he thought me a fool. “You really trust her.”

“Yes.” Hell, I trusted her. I believed her; I believed in her, and nothing he could do would change that.

“Mikah, you’re sure this isn’t just because she has sex with you? You aren’t clutching at the first hand offered to you?”

I felt muscles bunch in a surge of anger and took a deep breath. “Sir, I have to trust somebody sometime. What she’s done for me is more than I could ever ask. I think I... she means a great deal to me,” I finished lamely, feeling I’d said something I shouldn’t have.

Hirht slowly bobbed his head. If he’d been human that might’ve given me some clue as to what he was thinking: understanding, approval, comprehension, even just a hollow placating gesture... As it was, all I could do was make a conscious effort not to try and place a comfortably familiar human label upon alien mannerisms. “Your kind, your relationships are different from normal peoples’, aren’t they. A mated couple stay together for life.”

It was a bit more complicated than that, but essentially... “Sometimes. Yes, sir.”

“Ah,” that bobbing gesture again, then he said, “She does seem like a good person. I hope things work out between you.” He exhaled with a soft hiss, leaned back on his cushion and raised a single clawed finger. “There was one other thing.”

“Sir?”

“What I’ve heard, from these stories circulating, the sex between you and the doctor seems to be quite... unique. You seem to be able to elicit responses that Rris men can’t. What exactly do you do?”

I felt a warm, prickling flush crawling up the nape of my neck and looked away from the king as I rubbed at it, gave a shrug and a smile, “Just sex. Like any normal person would do.”

He didn’t look that amused.

—v—

”... wanted to know what we did in bed.”

“A?” Mai said, looking at the dish before her.

I set my fork down and leaned my elbow on the table, watching her. She poked at her stew, then noticed me watching her and abruptly livened again. “A? What did you say to that?”

“Something bothering you?”

She frowned: “Doesn’t seem like much of a riposte.”

“Please observe how I can’t stop laughing. No, you look a little preoccupied. Problems?”

Her eyes flickered up to study me intently for a second, and I saw the pupils were black pools almost blotting out her pupils before she dropped her gaze and stabbed at a hunk of meat. “Problems? No, no.” She bit, chewed loudly and swallowed. “Just personal affairs.”

“Anything I can do?” I asked sincerely.

A grimace flickered across her features, along with a chitter: a strangled sound that quickly choked off into sudden hiccups. She looked startled and thumped at her chest, which didn’t help much and she subsided with a resigned sigh and another hic. “No. No. It’s... personal. Something I’ll have to work through.” A flick of her ears and she said, “It’ll work out. Eventually.”

“I hope so. You sure there’s nothing I can do?”

Hic. “You know how to cure these?”

I grinned and hastily covered my mouth. “Well, one suggestion among my kind is to drink out of the wrong side of a cup.”

We both stared at the mug of water sitting before her. After a moment she said, “Are you serious?”

Hic.

“Ah, I’m not sure about it myself. Maybe you spend so long trying to figure out just what the other side is that you forget about your problem.”

At least I could help her forget her troubles, whatever they might have been. She stared at me, scattered expressions of disbelief and amusement chasing like clouds across her features, and then she laughed again. The light after the thunderhead has broken, a sound I was learning to love. “You...” she chittered. “You bring wonders with you, concepts of great refinement and thought. And then there’s things like this.”

I shrugged. “We’re like that. Sometime I’ll tell you how throwing a pinch of salt over your shoulder can bring you good luck.”

“Next you’ll be telling me the world was spun from clay by a giant potter.”

I laughed with her. Umm. Yes, well.

—v—

Another couple of days of work. It was a time during which I was pretty

preoccupied and only had the opportunity to see Mai a couple of times. She still seemed pretty down about something. My efforts to cheer her up worked, but they were short-lived.

My work took me around Shattered Water, the familiar places like the workshops and foundries and factories, as well as new places like embassy grounds to visit with various commercial attachés. That was interesting work: the couple of embassies I visited were Shattered Water buildings, but the decor tended to vary to reflect different cultures from far parts of the continent. The embassy from Night-in-Wonder had a series of spectacular floor-to-ceiling bas reliefs carved into a sandstone that must've cost a fortune to transport here. In one of the northern embassies there was an impressive tapestry woven entirely from Rris fur; quite naturally and properly obtained I was told, but of a finer texture and greater length than that from their southern kin. Apparently they had regional competitions to find the best pelt, which were then sold for considerable sums.

You learn something new every day.

The rest of the time was the usual stuff. Huh, looking back I guess that might sound odd: a situation that - to the best of my knowledge - no other human had ever been in and it was becoming mundane. I was taken around a Shattered Water settling into winter. The snows had arrived: a first heavy flurry that left the city blanketed by a clean white shroud, soon churned into a slurry by wagons and animal traffic on the icy streets. Crusts of ice were forming along the river, heralding the fact that the waterways and then the lakes would soon be closed to shipping. I met merchants and nobles and inventors and scholars and industrialists and printers and even a couple of representatives from an Art Guild. The conversations did vary from the standard and repetitious questions to fields I found interesting, such as the shop talk with the Art Guild, to more disturbing talks with xenophobic Rris that set my hackles on end.

So the evening before my next break day, I was only too happy to accept Mai's invitation to go into town for an evening meal.

—v—

In the cold night air my breath crystalised in a cloud that looked almost solid, a momentary vapor lit by the pale light of a moon that was nothing but a feeble glow behind a cloud cover. At my side, Mai was as silent as a ghost. While my boots squeaked in the inches of snow that blanketed the docks, her pads were silent. I looked at her as we walked: hunched down into the collar of her quilted vest while flecks of frozen water drifted out of the night to settle on her shoulders.

"You're cold?" I asked.

She looked up, her eyes catching a light from somewhere and flashing a spectrum shimmer. "Cold? No."

I shook my head. It was cold enough to set my ears tingling, but neither she nor the two guards tagging along behind wore much more than down-quilted vests. "You sure?" I touched her arm and she flinched, still jumpy. "What is it? What's the matter?"

She looked down, then stopped and for a few seconds there was only the sound of the docks at night: water and ice knocking against stone, creaking of timbers from vessels still in the water, some distant shouting and a muffled cough from one of the guards. "I... I can't," she said quietly. "I'm sorry, I have to."

“I don’t understand.”

I didn’t hear the sigh, but I saw it: a soul of moonlit crystal rising from her. Then she touched my arm. “Later, Mikah. Please.”

I wanted to help her, but if she didn’t want to tell me... “All right. In your time. Can you tell me which way we’re going though? Some people do find this a bit cold.”

Her place was further south from here, and she gestured at the cluttered sidestreet cutting through from the docks. “Here.”

Not too much snow in that street. I looked up and saw most of it must’ve been caught by the eaves that also blocked the moonlight, turning the alley into a mass of darkness and deeper gloom. Mai had my arm, leading me on toward the lighter patch at the far end.

A muffled clatter behind us...

One of the guards had probably knocked something. I half turned, but couldn’t see anything. Not even the silhouette of the guards against the lighter patch of the alley mouth. “Mai,” I said, then, “Hai, you two all right?”

No answer. Mai just tugged my hand, “Mai, the guards...”

“They’re there,” she said, leading me along.

“I can’t see them,” I said and there were other noises: soft thuds, a silken scraping noise, and there were alien silhouettes against the light behind us, in front of us.

“Mai,” I said, starting to feel more than a little uncomfortable, and then I caught a pale flash of watered steel and my guts turned to ice. “Mai, get back,” I tried to get in front of her, do what I could to protect her.

And her hand pulled away. Deliberately twisted out of mine and slipped away and left me alone in the dark. I spun in desperation, trying to find her. “Mikah,” her voice came from somewhere nearby. “Don’t fight. It’ll be all right.”

“Mai?” I was confused, now frightened as shapes in the darkness circled me.

“I’m sorry, Mikah,” her voice sounded in the darkness, moving away, through the shapes that encircled me. “I’m so sorry. Please, don’t fight.”

“Mai?” the cry echoed in the alley and there was a sudden impression of movement toward me. I swung wildly and my fist glanced against something before a weight slammed into me and sharp hooks raked across the back of my hand and there was an impact against my head that was almost gentle...

... and I was facedown against freezing wet cobbles, trying to move as clawed

hands seized me and a pain clenched my skull. “Mai!” I cried in utter despair and confusion. “Mai!”

“I’m sorry.”

I don’t know if it was a real voice or just something my terror made up as alien hands and bodies pinned me and clawed hands grabbed at me and ropes burned at my skin. And when I tried to fight there was another pressure on the back of my head and the cobbles cracked against my face...

... a numb remoteness as I was lifted...

...lying on a hard surface that rattled and jolted. Bound hand and foot, gagged on cloth tied in my mouth and everything was black and muffled and smelled of suffocating leather. I started to struggle again and the weight of what had to be a Rris foot immediately stamped my head back to the floor. A distant voice snarled, “Don’t move. You hear me? Don’t move or you’ll regret it!”

I lay as still as my trembling allowed, trying to breath through the stifling smell of leather and my own fear.

A carriage; I was in a carriage. It had to be. I could feel the movement, the change in the vibrations as iron-bound wheels went from a rough surface to a smoother one and then back to the former. Crossing the flagstones of a bridge? I didn’t know, and when I tried moving again to get some circulation into my hands the foot kicked me back again and this time stayed pressing against my head. I could feel claws poking through the leather of the hood, by now drenched with my sweat and clinging with a ghastly clammy sensation that was almost

organic.

And in that slick darkness my mind reeled, trying to grasp, to understand what'd happened? What'd happened?

Mai.

Mai. Oh, god. Mai.

Something within me died like a rose crushed in a fist. Inside my darkness I cried, choking on the grief and the gag.

I don't know how long we traveled, or in what direction. There were no clues, no sights, all sounds muffled into a single blur that was almost drowned by my own pulse which kept hammering through my aching head. I desperately tried not to think about throwing up.

The vibrations from the wheels changed. From the staccato clattering of cobbles to something much smoother that set the carriage rocking. Whatever that surface was, it only lasted a short distance before movement stopped. A pause and then voices, one snapping orders: "Get it out of there."

Hands grabbed me and I was dragged across wood which abruptly dropped away. I was caught, but my cheek banged painfully against the edge and a louder voice snarled: "Careful. It has to be able to talk."

Clawed hands grabbed my arms and legs, lifted. I groaned in pain, my tied arms feeling like they were being twisted out of their sockets. And when I started to struggle a hard knee was driven into my side, knocking the wind out of me. After that I was too busy just trying to breathe to do anything until I was unceremoniously dumped onto a stone floor.

They searched, found my leatherman and searched me again. Then they stripped me, of everything. They had to remove the ropes, but there were enough of them to pin me while they worked, and they weren't careful with their claws. My clothes, underclothes and boots, even my watch were stripped away. Hands grabbed me again and I cried out into the gag as my skin was lacerated while they forced me back and into what felt like a high-backed chair. A shock of cold wood against my skin and then straps were cinched around my arms and legs and neck and when they were tight they finally took their hands off me.

I ached, every muscle rigid and trembling from shock and sheer terror and cold. A dozen claws cuts across my body stung and not a few of them hurt enough that they must've been bleeding profusely. The binding around my neck dug in, holding me immobile as I tried to breathe; the cold air leached the heat from my body; and I tried to understand, tried to make some sense of what'd just happened to me. I could hear voices in the near distance, carrying an odd echo like they weren't in the same room and they were muffled by the hood but they were comprehensible.

"All right. He's secure."

"How long do we have?"

"A few hours. Tomorrow dawn at the latest."

“Right. We try for what we can now. Make sure that Lying Scales teacher is intercepted and taken through. I think she’ll be leverage if he gives trouble.”

“Sir.”

“Now, get what you can.”

Lying Scales? Teacher? My heart missed a beat and I tried to struggle, to scream into the gag. The bindings shifted, but they didn’t give, and then something struck me hard across the face and I froze, head spinning as I tried to get enough air. “Mikah,” the voice growled near my ear, one of the voices that’d been speaking. “You understand me, don’t you.”

I didn’t move.

Something sharp jabbed my shoulder. “Don’t you.”

I tried to nod.

“Good.”

Another voice snapped, “We don’t have time for this. Get on with it.”

“All right. You’ve got it?” the first voice said.

“A,” a third voice said. “Right here.”

“How much?”

“Huhnn,” the third voice sounded unsure. “Bigger than we are. Double it.”

I didn’t know what was going on. Hands caught my right arm and despite the strap, held it tight. And then a pain ripped elbow to wrist and I tried to scream into the gag.

“Rot! Thin skin.”

“Trouble?”

“I... no. Just blood. It’ll heal. Now, put it on.”

Something rubbed along the wound, burning terribly. And I realised what they were doing and tried to break free, to pull away, but it was too late.

“A few minutes,” the third voice said.

I started to laugh into the gag, choking and shuddering under the suffocating hood. And then fingers were working around my neck and suddenly the smothering leather covering my head was pulled away with a wash of cold air and a dazzling light that cut straight to the bruised back of my head.

Just a lantern, hanging from a hook on an undressed stone wall and casting crazy shadows around the dungeonlike room and the half-dozen Rris. Several were gathered near me, all wearing dark clothing - breeches and kilts, quilted and leather vests - most with weapons of various kinds in their hands and their breath orange smoke in the lamplight. One of the Rris in the background had a scribe's kit: pen and paper waiting on a writing board. One at my side had a bloody scalpel in hand and a bag opened to display an array of primitive surgical equipment. I shuddered, looked from there to the bloodied mess on my arm: dollops of dark syrup was smeared in amongst the blood. Oh, god.

I closed my eyes and swallowed hard, then flinched wildly when a finger pressed against my cheek, the claw dimpling my skin. The Rris was behind me, leaning over my shoulder. “Listen closely,” that one rumbled. “We’ve got questions for you. You will answer, and that is all you will do. Do you understand?”

I was able to move my left hand in a Rris, “yes.”

“Good.” The Rris came around in front of me. A male, I was pretty sure, with russet fur, wearing a dark brown quilted cotton tunic and a black cloak draped over his shoulders. He knelt, calmly studying my face with glistening black eyes, then reached up to either side of my head to loosen the gag. I coughed, then sucked lungfuls of air and rasped, “You can’t...”

I never finished the sentence. A furry hand cracked across my face, knocking my head back against the chair. When my vision cleared, the Rris was watching me with that same serene expression. “No, you don’t talk. You don’t speak except when we tell you. Understand?”

“Yes,” I croaked. It wouldn’t be long... probably for the best. If their drugs killed me then they wouldn’t need me, or Chihirae. Oh, god. Things were too complicated. And end to it would be almost welcome.

“Good. Now, we’ve got some questions for you. You’ll answer?”

“I don’t know.”

His lips flicked back: lamplight glistened on his teeth. “What does that mean?”

“It depends...” I worked my jaw: my cheek was bleeding. “It depends on what you ask.”

“A.” He cocked his head, offering me a slight smile. “You’re going to be that way, are you? I think you’ll find you feel like talking shortly enough.”

“I don’t...” I started to say and shut my mouth when he raised his hand.

“Good,” he said. “You can learn.” Then he gestured at one of his cohorts who handed him a leather folio, popped the metal clasp to reveal it was packed with papers. My questioner produced a sheaf of high-quality looking rag paper and held it up in front of me. “This. Can you tell us how to make this?”

I stared, then almost laughed out loud. It was a weapon all right, a pen and ink line drawing sketch of a gun: a blaster pistol from Star Wars. How the hell had they gotten that?’

“Can you?” the Rris demanded.

“No,” I said, then blinked as a wave of giddiness washed over me.

“Really? Now, why don’t I believe that. I think that you know more than you’re telling us. Now, why don’t you tell me? I know you want to.”

The Rris voice droned on, and the lights were doing funny things: the shadows stretching out across the walls and roof shifting. I felt pins and needles, a cold sweat breaking out.

“I don’t know,” I insisted, my heart lurching as a knot grew in my guts.

“Then, this?” Another picture. An aircraft this time: an old F-18 Hornet. The picture swam in and out of focus, the black markings writhing and threatening to skitter off the page like spindly insect, monstrous shapes lurking in the corner of vision. Fear grew, clenching an ice-cold hand around my bowels, the drubbing

of my heartbeat growing in my ears. I knew it was the drug, that poison they'd introduced to my system, but the knowledge didn't do anything to alleviate the terror, the pain as my heart started hammering uncontrollably, the terror that set me panting for air as the room spun and horrors reached for me. Shapes from my darkest nightmares seizing me and shaking me and snarling into my face. I just wanted to run, to get as far away from there, thrashing and struggling and choking as a constriction around my neck grew tighter no matter how I fought and the room spun and my guts clenched, gagging on bile.

Howls and screaming, fighting with muscles taut enough to sprain tendons. Just terror and uncontrollable fear that grew and grew and I don't remember what happened after everything blended into a mash of raw emotions and utter confusion and pain and faded into a suffocating red haze.

—v—

A light flickered in my eyes, then the hand released my hair, letting my head drop to my chest. "Still Alive. Still out," a voice said.

"Red tie me. Ugly son, isn't it. What happened?"

"Don't know. He went crazy or something. Didn't like the drugs, I heard. Nearly choked himself."

A metallic rattling, then a dull thud cut off all sounds and left me in a freezing silence. I waited before cracking an eyelid. Empty room, lit by a feeble red glow.

I was alive. I ached; every muscle ached. I was freezing and thirsty. Someone had thrown a threadbare blanket over me, not that that did much. I'd half woken with three strange Rris poking around me and managed to fake unconsciousness. Not that difficult: I was as groggy as hell and felt as though I'd been through a wringer. It was easy to stay limp as they examined me, roll my eyes up when they raised an eyelid.

When the door had thudded closed and the voices were gone, I tried stirring. I ached, in my muscles and guts and my head. In some places there was the pain of pulled muscles and where I was restrained my skin stung, suggesting I'd cut myself. There was a raw line around my neck where the band that'd held and almost strangled me had been removed. A faint odor of vomit hung in the air, the acrid taste of puke in my mouth. If I'd been sick, they must've cleaned me off afterwards; I didn't remember any of that.

The room was undressed stone with a single wooden door in an alcove opposite. The only light was an unsteady red glow coming from a perforated metal drum nearby: a brazier filled with hot coals. If it hadn't been for the fact that my other side was freezing I might never have noticed the warmth it put out. Just enough to take the edge off the chill. And apart from a soft snapping and tink of hot metal, the room was as silent as the grave. Underground, I was pretty certain of that. Perhaps the room had been a coal cellar once, now adapted for a more restraining role.

And I was still alive. That thought awoke mixed emotions.

She'd done it. She'd known. She'd led me right into it.

Someone I'd trusted implicitly had betrayed me in a way I'd never imagined. Those nights I'd laid with her and trusted her claws and teeth at my throat, and

then she'd led me like a lamb to the slaughter. How long had she been planning it? Had that been what it was all about? just cultivating my trust to the point where she could use it.

And I remembered the times we'd spent together. That couldn't have been all it was. It simply couldn't. We'd had something together. We'd felt something for one another. I know we had...

Or I had.

Those feelings had been all mine. I had no idea what her real emotions had been. Alien. I'd only seen what showed; what she'd allowed to show. And as that realisation sank in the blackness crawled back over me.

It would've been so easy to give up then, just give in to it all.

And that'd mean someone I cared about, somebody to whom I owed a lot would be hurt. I couldn't let that happen.

So I started struggling against the leather restraints again, back and forth until my wrists were bleeding. The straps didn't give, but the wooden uprights securing the left arm of the chair moved a little. I managed to hook my fingers under the edge of the arm and put more effort into it, waggling it back and forth. And with every movement it got looser, nails pulling out until the arm of the chair peeled up and away from the support. The straps slid off easily, and from there the rest was a piece of cake.

Then, all I had to do was get out of a locked room.

—v—

Metal rattled on the other side of the door, then rasped as a bolt was drawn back. I felt my muscles locking up, my heart starting to pound all the faster. The door swung outward on well oiled hinges, admitting a widening sweep of lamp light and a couple of low Rris voices which broke off in mid sentence when they saw the chair and blanket toppled over backwards. An oath sounded, then they moved in, two armed guards taking care to check to the left and right as they came in the door, a third coming in behind them as the others started toward the chair.

Wedged into the alcove above the door I relaxed my muscles and dropped straight down on the last one. The Rris was fast, faster than any human: looking up and actually starting to move before I hit him. He broke my fall, collapsing in a tumble under my weight. As he went down I brought the arm broken from the chair around in a viscous arc terminating in the side of his head. The other two were turning, registering what was happening even as I scrambled for the door.

The heavy door swung closed with what seemed like agonizing slowness as I shoved with all my might. And then a weight hit it from the other side with a shock that jolted me and the movement stopped, a furry hand with claws extruded slashed around the gap. I threw my weight against the heavy wood and the door jolted back a little. Again, and there was a yowl as the arm stopping it closing tried to wriggle back. Again and there was a high screech of pain as it slammed against the hand and then the obstruction was gone and I was able to ram the bolt home.

The door kept jolting under muffled thuds from the other side as I stepped

back, panting hard. It'd hold... for a while. Long enough, I hoped, to let me get a long way away before the alarm was raised. Sucking ice-cold air, heaving breaths that crystalised in the chill as I took stock: I was in a dirty little stone corridor that smelled of oil and coal dust. There were a couple of other doors - closed - and a tight spiral stone staircase at the other end. It was also freezing cold and I was naked.

Grit and grime stuck to the bare soles of my feet as I padded over to the stairs, trying to see or hear something up there. Nothing. I started upwards, my hand convulsively gripping at the broken chair arm, the corners of the varnished wood cutting into my palm. A few turns before I reached a landing where a door stood ajar and the stairs changed from stone to wood.

I peeped through the crack in the door. The room on the other side was a kitchen. I could see wooden beams in the ceiling; a big work table standing on a decorative blue and white tile floor; a huge black-iron range equipped with an elaborate black hood trimmed with polished brass. An open door on the far side of the room led outside: I could see crystal-brilliant snow under a cold sun that threw glare from ice outside and the white tiles on the floor inside. A cold wind blew in.

I was shivering as I touched the door and pushed. It squeaked like nails on a blackboard and I froze, then heard the Rris voices approaching the kitchen from some other direction, suddenly louder as another door was opened.

I took the only other option open to me: scampering up the narrow wooden stairs.

It must've been a servants' staircase; tucked back behind the scenes so the necessary unpleasantness of household duties could be performed out of sight. I

went up to another landing and cracked the door there, peeking through to see a brightly lit corridor and the receding back of a Rris carrying a stack of linen. It stopped then started to turn around and I ducked back.

Herded upwards again.

The staircase ended at the next floor and the door there. My heart was hammering as I touched the door handle, my makeshift club clutched in hands and my stomach tight enough to make me feel like vomiting. The handle turned silently, letting me open the door a fraction. I was at one end of a corridor like the one on the floor below: quite long, high ceiling, doors along the whitewashed walls, a black wooden floor mostly covered by a red carpet running the length of the hall. A stained-glass window at each end of the hall threw shards of yellow and green light down the hall, illumination that'd be replaced by three crystal chandeliers when night fell. But what mattered most to me was the fact the hall was deserted.

The carpet was a relief under my bare feet. It also muffled any sound as I crept along the hall, trying to look in all directions at once and not to break into a run. I didn't know where I was going, I just kept moving; passing by door after closed door and afraid to open one lest I got an unpleasant surprise. The main staircase was up ahead, but going down there would be suicide. I needed a room, somewhere I could hide, get some clothing and perhaps escape out a window.

I never found it. Ahead, a door opened and I saw a Rris arm holding it open. Heated voices drifted out into the hall as the Rris talked to someone back in the room. All I could do was dive for the nearest door which turned out to be a broomcloset without enough room for a Rris, let alone me. The next one... a freezing draught blew down a narrow little staircase leading upwards.

I took it, easing the door closed behind me. The stairs led to the attic.

It was a big, cold, twilight place. A dusty wooden floor was gritty underfoot while overhead a peaked framework of coarse wood supported a gridwork of countless tiles and dried cobwebs. There were mounds of stuff scattered away into the dimness: boxy shapes under old dustcloths. Grimy sunlight spilled in through small dirty circular cupola windows scattered down the length of the roofline. I made a beeline for one of those and couldn't see much more than a grey blur through the dust. It took a while to rub the dirt of ages away.

Not reassuring. The window pivoted open on its y axis and outside was a steep, ice-covered tile roof leading to a three-story drop-off. I'd run out of places to run. The building was a private residence, a wealthy one from all I'd seen. It was nestled amongst a small forest of full grown trees: a mixture of evergreens and the winter wire frames of deciduous. The area called the Rock, I didn't have much doubt about that. That mean I was still in Shattered Water, near the heart of it. In fact, I could see a few distant rooftops and towers under the gray sky, but the trees hid everything else from sight.

Anytime now they'd find I was gone. They'd search. I needed to throw them off the track, hide until there was a chance to make a break for it. Through the window I could see the snow lying on the ground between the trees which blended together to hide the fenceline somewhere off over there. It couldn't be that far, but...

A trio of armed Rris stalked into my field of vision: long white coats with muskets slung over their shoulders, their heads turning alertly. I jerked away from the window and when I looked again there was nothing but a few telltale prints.

I couldn't outrun Rris.

I leaned my head against the sill, trying to think.

Distant howls sounded through the house.

Shit.

Pure terror can clear the mind. I just looked at the makeshift weapon still clutched in my hand. There were flecks of blood on the sharp corners: I didn't think I'd struck that hard, but it really didn't matter. It'd do as a decoy, if I could plant it properly.

I managed to get enough of my arm out the window, prayed nobody happened to be looking out of another window, and threw. The limb spun end over end, hit the ground and bounced before coming to rest near the footprints left by the guards.

And just as I pulled back inside, four or five Rris raced into view. This time they moved more purposefully: running in a partial crouch with weapons in their hands. I watched as two went right past my red herring, then the third did a doubletake and stopped to examine it.

I pulled back, watching through the grimy window pane as the others came back, there was a brief consultation, then they bounded off into the trees. Hopefully, they'd think I was making for the fence. They'd concentrate their

search out there and that might give me a chance to slip away later.

Shaking hard, I retreated into the darkness of the attic to find a place to hide.

—v—

I huddled in the freezing shadows behind a cluttered stack of crates, metal bound chests and forgotten furniture watching the dust swirling in the gray light spilling through one of the little circular windows. A roll of old carpets had yielded several threadbare rugs. They were stiff and dusty and scratchy, but they were something I could wrap myself in, something that trapped some body warmth. And after a few minutes the convulsive shivering eased.

The house was silent, as still as a tomb. As the shadows slowly changed, my mind filled in the silence with the sounds of footsteps; every creak and groan of timbers or faint scuttling of rodents turned into something more sinister. I tried to think of what I was going to do next, some way to get out. I could fashion a rope out of odds and ends in the attic, wait until dark before climbing down three floors and making a break.

What would my chances be? If it turned out to be a dark night I'd be practically blind while my captors would be only partially impaired. They were faster than me, they were armed and knew the territory. Maybe I should wait till early dawn, when I could at least see something...

Whichever way I bit it, my chances didn't look that good.

I sagged and pulled the itchy rugs a bit closer, trying to ignore growing hunger pangs and think of something. There had to be a way. There had to be.

A futile introspection that was interrupted when I heard a sound that made me freeze in dread: a door opening.

And the atmosphere in the attic seemed to change. Abruptly the silence wasn't the absence of sound, it was the silence of someone trying not to make any sound. And over it was the rushing of blood in my ears as my heart started to labor in growing fear.

A floorboard creaked and I tried to press back in my hiding place, trying not to breath, not to exist.

“Mikah?”

The Rris voice raised odd echoes down the length of the attic.

“Mikah? I know you're up here.”

No. A bluff. It had to be.

“You know,” the voice said, almost conversationally, “I can smell you, your fear.”

Oh, god. No.

“Or perhaps you don’t know that, a? Scent-blind, aren’t you. Maybe you can’t smell it, but it’s there, like an arrow.”

The Rris was speaking slowly, almost laconically, and moving closer. I could hear a faint creak of wood and above that a steady tick,clack : unsheathed claws on the floor.

“Come out now. It’ll be easier for you.” The footsteps halted right in front of me.

And in the following silence I couldn’t move. Frozen in sheer terror as the crates hiding me crashed aside, spilling shattered crockery. My interrogator’s eyes flared as he grinned down at me.

“Hello, Mikah.”

Then other figures moved around him, approaching with eyes glowing and clubs raised.

Pain throbbed in pulled muscles and throughout multitude of new cuts, bruises and scratches. I must've cried out because someone cuffed my head hard and the knee in my back pressed harder as they forced my arms behind my back and secured the manacles. Only then did they release me and let me curl up around my pain as best I could on the grimy floor.

I'd never had a chance. Too many of them jumped me, pinning me with claws and weight so they could use their saps and truncheons until I was in no condition to struggle. When consciousness returned I was being held facedown on a stone floor while cold metal was clamped around my ankles, my wrists and neck.

Now, I groaned as new bruises and cuts made themselves felt and the manacles securing my arms behind my back at an awkward angle dug into my skin. I just lay still, horribly aware that I'd failed and that any chance I might've had had fled.

"I thought you were supposed to be smarter than that," a calm voice said.

I ignored it. A hand seized my hair and yanked my head around, forcing me to look up at my interrogator who regarded me with a mild expression. "You aren't going to try that again, are you."

I tried to speak through dried and swollen lips and managed only an unintelligible croak. The Ris cocked his head, then beckoned to another who came forward with a canteen. He was almost gentle when he dribbled some water over my lips then let me sip. Just a few drops before he handed the flask back. "Now," he said. "Better?"

“Why are you doing this?” I rasped, tensing in expectation of another blow.

He raised his hand and let me have a good look as he slowly extruded claws, one at a time, and grinned at my obvious fear. “That’s something you don’t need to know,” he growled. “What you should know is that if you attempt something like that again, we will break your feet and then your legs. Do you understand that?”

And for all I knew he was absolutely serious. I lay helpless, my cheek pressed against the flagstones, and swallowed hard: “Yes.”

The Rris reached down and the clawed hand patted my bruised face. “Good. Then for your own health I’d suggest you don’t try anything foolish.” He stood then, looking down on me. “You’ll get some food later.”

“I’m freezing,” I blurted. He regarded me expressionlessly, then turned and walked back to the door. Before stepping out he muttered something to the guards stationed there and left, the door closing behind him. The guards looked at each other. One waved a shrug and came over to move the coal brazier closer, then knelt to have a better look at me.

Chains rattled as I turned away, trying to find some position that eased the aching as I curled up on the cold stone. And as time passed I tried to think of some way out of this, but under the wary eyes of two guards there was nothing.

When the door opened I dully looked up through my misery in the faint hopes it might herald an improvement in my situation. It didn't seem to be; just another guard coming in and throwing an unmistakably hostile glare my way. I noticed the splint and bandages around one hand: must've been the guard whose hand I'd slammed in the door. On duty again?

The guards with the injured arm exchanged some words with the other two and they glanced at me, then muttered something and pushed past the other on their way out. The door closed with a thud, leaving me alone in the cell with the wounded guard. The Rris stared at me and slowly the ears went down and the other hand went into the cloak to emerge with the sharkside length of a Rris cattle switch. A couple of times the end flicked thoughtfully against the Rris's ankle, then claws clicked on the stones as the guard started toward me.

I tried to squirm away, fear blossoming once again as the guard raised the whip. "No... don't..."

The whip came down across my shoulders and I screamed at the shock of it. Again it hissed and I cried out, fighting the restraints, trying to escape the searing pain. Again and again.

A rough whip intended for buffalo hide. Again and again and again, the hiss and crack of the blows punctuated by my screams. I couldn't escape it, only curl up in a tight ball and try to hide my face while the agony flared across my arms and back and shoulders and legs. It kept going, past the point where my awareness washed away into red and there was nothing but the sheet of agony across my back and arms.

I don't remember when the flogging stopped. Next I recall the sounds of Rris shouting were filling the room and there was a circle of Rris faces hanging over

me, a hand prising my eyelid open. I think I cried out again and tried to cover my face but my arms wouldn't work and the floor under me was slick and wet. There was more pain as something cold touched my back.

A familiar face that terrified me leaned close and said something.

"No more," I moaned in terror and agony. "Please, no more."

"No more," he said, touching my face. "That wasn't supposed..."

"It tried to escape," a voice in the background snarled.

"Shave you!" the Rris crouching beside me snapped back over his shoulder. "You get out of here! I'll deal with you later!"

Muffled cursing. Someone tugged my arm and I cried out.

"Rot," my interrogator snarled. "We can't move him like this."

"We have to. We don't have long."

"At best he'll just die in that crate, at worst he'll give us away. That red-tied fool!"

More voices, arguing, it all fuzzed in and out. Then a hand was holding my head up and there was a glass at my lips. “Drink.”

Water. There was something in it: bitter, alkaloid. I coughed and sputtered.

“It’ll help the pain,” the voice said, and then more insistently: “Drink.”

And at that moment I didn’t care if it was poison. I drank, right down to a gritty residue lining the bottom of the glass.

Voices kept talking. Someone moving around behind me and more touches on my back: gentle, cold dabs. Touches that seemed to be slowly receding, along with other sensations, along with the pain. When I tried to move hands pressed me back down again and I lay in a growing pool of warmth as the pain receded. A tingling pleasure seemed to suffuse me, pushing the fear and hunger and other emotions aside. And through the languid cloud I saw a couple of Rris leaning over me and beyond them a pair of Rris in the doorway; my interrogator gesturing at me, the other turning with a snarl on her face:

Haies aesh Tohikish.

“I delivered my end,” her voice carried. “Now it’s in your hands.”

“Only until the package is safely out of the city and underway,” the other responded. “We’ll consider the contract fulfilled then, not before.”

“You’ll make it. My employer’s ensured you’ve got a free run to the docks. From there... you’ve got the clearance.”

“A,” my interrogator looked down at me. I tried to focus, tried to say something but my tongue was numb. What’d they given me? The spike of apprehension was washed away on a tide of lassitude. “We also want that teacher he met. The one from Lying scales.”

A hesitation, then Haies said, “[Leverage]?”

“A. He bonds to people he trusts. That should do what drugs won’t.”

She chittered. “A, I’ve heard about his ‘bonding’. I’ll have to clear that.”

“Do it. We’ll pay the standard amount for a full load.”

“Something will be arranged.” She looked down: “I don’t like him seeing me.”

“He’s drugged to the eyeballs. Besides, who’s he going to tell?”

“Huhn, risky. See that you don’t loose him.”

“Does it look like he’s going anywhere?”

Another growl and she studied me. “About time someone put him in his place. Doesn’t seem so impressive now, does he. I don’t see what the fuss was about.” A flash of needle teeth before she turned to the others. “There’ll be the matter of payment.”

My interrogator flicked his ears. “I’ll see you at the Kingfisher. We’ll sort out the details there. The rest of you, get that ready. We’re moving out.”

The figures were out-of-focus blurs standing over me, then they turned and swept away. Other figures moved around me and I felt remote touches as hands worked at my back; bandages were wrapped around my ribs and pulled tight; the gag was replaced.

I was still aware when they lifted me, moved me, lowered me into straw and wooden walls: a tiny space where I was curled up into a foetal ball in a nest of straw. Slowly, the lid came down and there was an indeterminable period of silent darkness before the hammering began, reverberating in my head and body. And the drug just made the darkness spin and blur and gradually mingle with body warmth and fatigue.

—v—

Awakening was like surfacing from a dark pool.

There was... nothing: non-awareness. Then I was I . Aware of my heartbeat; aware I was breathing; aware of the pain throughout my body and that my burning back was lying on soft sheets. My left thigh ached with a throbbing that somehow seemed familiar. I lay quietly, my eyes closed as what had happened to me slowly came back. I remembered being beaten, then the lid of a crate closing and after that... nothing. Now, I was lying in what felt like a bed and...and when I tried shifting an arm, it hurt, but it moved. I wasn't tied.

Opened my eyes to a net of pale blue moonlight and shadows thrown across whitewashed walls and ceiling decorated with geometric bass reliefs in cracked and stained plaster. Fear mixed with confusion and uncertainty of what had happened and where I was.

“Mikah?” a low voice murmured.

There was a glazed window with a sliver of moon visible through it. Silhouetted against the light, a Rris shape rose from a chair. For a few seconds the shadow stared at me in silence and I just lay frozen in place, my heart starting to race again. I saw the head shake and the Rris moved across to a table: a metallic rasping and flash of sparks cast eldritch shadows before a small gas lantern popped, then flared to a steady light that reflected off a copper jug and mug. Backlit hands glowed, the fur a golden halo as the Rris lowered the mantle and turned back to me, unable to meet my eyes.

Maithris.

I just stared.

“I’m so sorry,” she said in a monotone.

I couldn’t say anything.

“Mikah, I’m sorry.” She stepped closer, her hand starting to make a gesture then closing and falling to her side. “It was necessary, but...”

I lunged at her driven by nothing but a surge of blind rage and with the movement the throbbing in my left thigh exploded into agony, a fetter around my ankle yanking me up short and sending me sprawling over the edge of the bed in a mess of sheets, screaming and thrashing at the pain that assaulted me from everywhere. A door flew open somewhere and suddenly there were more Rris there, hands grabbing me to lift me back into bed. I struggled, then gripped at the sheets, clenching my teeth while the molten nerves through my leg and across my back slowly cooled. Rris voices hissed urgently as Mai ushered the others out of the room assuring them: “It’s all right. No problems.”

The door closed and we were alone again.

She stood at the foot of the bed. Watching me watching her; ears down in utter dismay. Her clothing was different. It wasn’t the light comfortable stuff I was so accustomed to seeing her in, instead she was wearing dark clothing: heavy leather tunic and trousers. It had the feel of a uniform, perhaps armour. “I had to,” she said after a while. “I had no choice. I’m so sorry.”

She’d betrayed me. She’d left me to be beaten and tortured. She’d used me;

led me and manipulated me and used me and when all was said and done... the fury inside flickered and died.

Fool, I was just a fool. I sagged back. "Why?" I croaked to the ceiling

A hot sigh. "Politics, Mikah. Politics." She actually hung her head. "This was never meant to happen."

"Never meant to happen?" My dry throat ached and I almost laughed. "You left me, Mai. They ignored you and took me. You led me there and left me. It was quite deliberate."

"You don't understand."

"You're right. I don't." I looked at her, that face I'd thought I knew so well. "Please? No more lies."

A soft clicking as Mai tapped claws together, then silently padded past the small lamp to catch the rickety old chair and pull it up to the bedside. It brought her closer to my level.

"All right, Mikah," she sighed again. "My name isn't Maithris. My real name... Hai, I haven't used it for a long time. I've lived and been Maithris for so long, so deeply, that perhaps I've become her," she looked down at her hand, turning it over as if she'd never seen it before. "But it isn't the real me. If you knew that person, perhaps you wouldn't like me so much."

I swallowed. “Your real name...?”

“I can’t tell you,” she said, chittered slightly. “Not my name, not my country, my employers... Probably the best thing for both of us. Mikah, I came to Shattered Water years ago, took the place of the real Maithris. I lived here, I worked, just like any other person.”

As if she were confessing to me, laying the weight of a life of lies on somebody else’s shoulders. I just lay there and listened to the litany as she talked, tearing down the old facades, the pictures I’d painted in my mind.

The alien eyes flashed a metal-rainbow shimmer as she glanced at the lamp, the edge of the bed, my face. “It was a few months ago I got my first orders.

“There were troubles in my homeland. There was the government, then ... factions. One tried violence to settle their issues. There were uprisings in some provinces, small attacks against government properties in others, and they were being supplied with weapons of military quality. Efforts made to trace the supply lines met with little success until...”

This Rris that I’d thought I known, she raked her ears back with both hands and didn’t meet my eye. “Until they started using new weapons.”

“New weapons,” I echoed faintly. I knew where this was heading and a leaden weight settled inside me.

“A. New designs,” she said, “new ideas. They caused a lot of damage with them. I don’t suppose it was too difficult to guess where they were coming from. Land-of-Water had acquired an outsider: a creature that wasn’t a Rris who was providing them with knowledge and ideas of incalculable value.

“By pure chance I met this creature in a tavern. I tended its wounds and talked with it and what I saw in that short time was a being that’d been pulled from his own life into a situation where he was treated like a commodity: Kept in a box when not in use, locked away from the world. A mind that wasn’t like a Rris, one that was superficially similar but that walked down different paths from our own.

“It’d been something I’d been studying: the way the mind works, the way people think. Studying why people in similar circumstances might solve a problem in entirely different ways; the way people observe the world and interpret it. I’d gone as far as to publish a couple of papers. They weren’t well received.”

She waved a small shrug. “I don’t know... I guessed you weren’t entirely sane. I knew what a Rris might do, but you... you, I couldn’t say. Some of the questions I’d asked you you’d responded to in ways no Rris had ever done. You kept your pain inside, masking it with a humor while you turned in directions I never expected. It was intriguing, and fascinating and frightening. A Rris I might be able to predict, but you... I all I could see was that you’d try to escape, one way or another.”

I lay still, listening with a numb feeling as my small island of stability eroded away from beneath me.

“My orders arrived shortly after. Seven years of building a life around myself and then this piece of paper changes everything,” she held out her hands, unfolding an imaginary note. “It had to happen sometime, it was my duty, but it wasn’t the thrill I thought it would be.” In the lamplight I saw her hands crumple the note and drop to her lap. “I got very drunk that night.

“I was to try and find out more about you, to get closer if possible. I sent off to the Palace with my observations and as expected, they didn’t take them seriously. Then you tried to take your own life. The next day they came scratching at my door. From there... you know most of the rest.

“I was able to get close to you and the work was fascinating. You weren’t a Rris, but you were still a very personable character. I found I was enjoying myself; I found I liked you,” a faint smile flickered.

I stared back, not feeling anything. As though my emotions were smothered in layers of cotton. In the light from that single lamp the Rris I’d known as Maithris hesitated, then continued:

“I reported back what I found when I had the chance. Then, I received new orders. They... they wanted me to gain your trust, your friendship. To stay close to you until you and the Land-of-Water government trusted me implicitly.” She looked away when she added, “I did this in the best way I knew how.”

Shadows flickered across the ceiling. Outside, a cloud eclipsed the moon.

“The smugglers grew greedy and took the bait. I was approached and offered a deal: freedom and a great deal of money if I cooperated or ending at the bottom

of the river if I didn't. I acquiesced, as planned. I did as they wanted and... I turned you over to them."

I heard the sigh again, the creak of wood as she shifted on the chair. "You were followed, of course. We watched as they took you, followed you. And then when we had the chance we took you back. They were taking you to the docks, hidden amongst a consignment of rugs and pottery: we ambushed them easily enough. They tried to kill you then, put a bullet through the box. I suppose they forgot which way around you were: it only creased your leg. We got you back, also your clothes and foot protectors." Another flicker of a smile that quickly died.

"Please, can you understand this was necessary?" she implored. "If it hadn't been done, so many more might have died. And I never meant for you to get hurt like this, I never thought they'd do this to you. What did you do to anger them so?"

Light changed as the clouds moved on. I saw shadows shifting as the Ris leaned over to touch my arm. "Mikah?" the small voice was as uncertain as I'd ever heard it.

"What is this place?" I asked.

A hesitation. "You're still in Shattered Water. We wouldn't harm or take you, believe that. The problems that would cause..." she let that trail off.

"I should believe that?" I said, my voice strained as I tried to keep from cracking.

Her ears went flat but she didn't reply, just looked away and stroked her cheek tufts then reached for the jug resting beside the lamp. I heard metal rattle on metal, then water flowing and the Rris I'd known as Mai held a battered copper mug in her hands. "Water? You sound like you need it."

I didn't say anything. Her ears flickered a bit and she leaned forward, the cup held in both hands. And when she was close enough I grabbed the lapel of her tunic in one fist and pulled.

Water slopped and spilled and lacerations across my skin burned but I held her in a white-knuckled grip and she didn't resist. I don't know how long I stared into those wide amber eyes, my other fist raised; ready to pound her muzzle in, ready to kill her. And she just gazed back, not flinching and I couldn't go through with it and felt like a complete fool.

I let her go, dropping back and gasping a sobbing breath. My back hurt.

Quietly, she refilled the mug and turned back to me. After a while she said, "I think a Rris would've struck."

"I'm not a Rris."

"A," she murmured and leaned forward again, familiar fur around my neck as she supported me with an arm while I drank, then laid me down on my tender back. I watched as she set the mug back.

“It was all a lie,” I said. “Everything. Lies.”

Her ears laid back again, a finger stroking the battered copper.

“The time we spent: the lake, the plays and music and nights. It was just your orders.”

Amber-rimmed eyes flashed my way again, the pupils dark holes into her soul. “There were orders. There was a time I was told to find out more about your people, how you thought, what you were going to do; a time I was ordered to have sex with you. I tried to be what you wanted, what you needed. I tried to understand how you thought and... and I realised how different you are up there.” A finger reached over to touch my forehead.

“You need,” she said. “It’s the simplest explanation. You need others; to be around, to be near you. You need to bond with others in a way that just isn’t normal, not for Rris. I tried to understand it; I tried to empathise with it, but Mikah, I can never feel it. Not the way you do. I’m sorry.”

I remembered the times we’d laughed together, the times I’d held her and she held me, the times when we’d been happy together... or rather when I’d been happy. I closed my eyes and shook my head, feeling pain and solid metal around my ankle: “Just acting.”

“Hai,” her voice admonished me. “No, it wasn’t just that. Mikah, I enjoyed the time we spent together. They’re memories that’ll always be sunny days. I’m just

sorry... I'm sorry I can't be what you wanted me to be. Can you understand that?"

Trying to cross a barrier of minds and cultures. I'd believed... I'd known there were differences, but that knowledge had never really percolated through to my hindbrain. I'd never felt that difference, grasped the alien. There'd been the flashes, the times when there was something behind those eyes I couldn't recognise, when that face was so inscrutable, but there were other times when I felt she was part of me and that part would always be there.

Feeling the same way for this alien that I'd felt about Jackie.

Anthropomorphising; humanocentric hard wiring; that tendency to lapse back into an anthropoid viewpoint whenever my guard lapsed.

Whose fault was it really?

My hand spasmed as I clutched at sheets and a voice ventured, "Mikah?"

The tears blurred my vision when I looked at her and a hot trail traced its line across my cheek. My voice sounded very small in the dark. "I... I understand."

A slow bob of her head. "I do like you. If you'd been Rris... you would have been a wonderful mate. As it is... I can't be what you want and I know you can't be anything more than what you are."

“Worlds apart,” I heard myself say.

“A,” a gentle hand touched my face and the wetness there. “There’ll be others,” she said. “You have other friends.”

And that triggered recent memories I’d rather stayed buried. A dread welled up from inside and to the Rris face above me I whispered, “Chihirae.”

The finger touching me hesitated, drawing back a fraction and then she ducked her head. “A. That one. She knows you...”

“No,” I interjected and she looked confused. “No.” I grabbed after her hand. “They said they were going after her. To get to me through her. Did you stop them? Did you get them all?”

She looked away. “Not all. Some left earlier. They were followed, but some of them...”

“They’re going to Westwater. They’re going after her. Oh, Christ, you have to let me go. I have to go after them...”

“You’re in no condition to go anywhere,” she sighed and sank back into her chair, raised a hand to rub across her muzzle. “Oh, rot. I didn’t mean for it to be like this at all. Mikah,” she raked the tufts on her cheeks back and leaned forward, “the teacher’s no longer in Westwater or Lying Scales. A month ago I arranged with Hirht to have her brought here. She’ll be on her way.”

On her way? Coming here? Walking into a potentially lethal situation she had no inkling of. I pictured that friendly face as I'd last seen it: receding behind the wagon before vanishing out of sight. Out of my life. Now back into it.

I owed her everything.

"I have to go," I repeated and tried to get up.

A hand pressed me back. For a second I debated fighting her but the pain through my back and leg talked me out of it. I lay back; sweating, shivering, concerned and frustrated. A palm with leathery pads touched my forehead and stroked my hair. "Mikah," the low voice rumbled. "I can't let you go. Not yet. After we leave we'll alert the Land-of-Water authorities. They'll find you. There's a key to the shackles out there. I'm sorry. It's all I can do."

Sorry. That was all she could say? "Mai, please. They'll hurt her."

And her eyes flickered away again. "I can't. Please, understand that."

I lay still, taking that in. "How... long?" I eventually asked.

Again she raked her cheek tufts back and couldn't meet my eyes. "A few hours. Not before."

“Mai...” I choked.

‘I’m sorry,” she interjected. “We have to. We need time to be away.”

And at that second the door was cracked open and a Rris voice interrupted, “Doctor, we don’t have long. We have to go now.”

“A,” she acknowledged. “A.” There was a huff of breath and the other Rris said something before the door closed again. Mai rumbled softly, then sagged back and rubbed her eyes.

“Rot, Mikah. I needed longer. There was so much I wanted to talk about, to show you... I didn’t want to finish this way.”

Confused and betrayed, I didn’t know to respond. The wound was a deep one, a hole gouged in the center of my being, and she tried to soothe it away with words. A part of me wanted to scream, instead I heard a fool venture. “I’ll see you again?”

“I...” a hesitation, then, “No. No, you won’t.” Then she stirred and leaned forward. “Also, there’s this.” She pressed something metallic into my palm. I raised my hand to see: the bracelet I’d given her.

I stared at it and the pain was like she’d just turned the knife in the wound.

“I can’t take that,” she said in a small voice and stood. Her shoulders were slumped and her tail hung with a lifelessness I’d never seen in a Rris before. “I know this is all a shock for you. I’m so sorry it has to be this way. Mikah, please understand that this has to be. You’ll get by, you’ll survive.” She raised a hand toward me, blinked at it, lowered it again and gave a small shake of her muzzle. “Can you promise me something?”

At another time I might have laughed at the presumption, but now all I was feeling was numb. I just looked at her: an inhuman silhouette against the blue haze of the window. There was frost there a part of me noticed, glittering in a fluctuating moonlight. “A promise?” I murmured.

Again she raised her hand and I heard claws clicking in uncertainty. “The way you tried to escape the pain before. Please, don’t do it again.”

It was a second before I realised what she was referring to. Then I grinned: a death’s head that was all human emotion and very little humor. “You mean kill myself.”

Just a gesture: yes.

I closed my eyes again. In a way she was right: it’d be an escape, a way out of this. It’d also be deserting Chihirae. When I opened my eyes she was still watching me. “On a condition,” I said and when she cocked her head I held my hand out, the bracelet gleaming. “Take it?” I asked.

She didn’t move.

“Please... Mai?” I swallowed. “If what we had meant anything...” I trailed off.

And it was the longest time to wait. A question that meant the world to me at that instant and the seconds she hesitated just crawled by. Then she took a step: a fluid move toward me and picked the bracelet, clasping it in both hands and stepping away again. “Why couldn’t you have been Ris?” she almost snarled, then ducked her head and a peculiar sound escaped her: a small mewling. “Goodbye, Mikah Ri’ey. Have a good life.”

“Goodbye,” I think I said, perhaps only loud enough to be heard by myself. And to this day I’ve regretted that as the next second she’d turned and the door was closing behind her.

I lay quietly. There were a few remote sounds and then silence. Outside, snow fell: fat flakes adhereing to the windows and frosting the glass in translucent white. Later, the lamp guttered and went out. In the cold moonlight I remembered nights of warm embraces, of someone to talk to, to be with. A sense of actual... security, of belonging.

Oh, god...

I just clutched at the sheets and screamed. Until my throat was raw and there was nothing left. It didn’t help.

There was a pale light on Shattered Water when the guards arrived.

Dawn glowed in the sky and with it came the sound of voices in the other room. Metal clattered, then the door was tried, opened a bit, hesitated, then burst open and there were armed soldiers clattering into the room. Their breath puffed in rapid white clouds that hung in the air as they stood there and panted, watching me with wide eyes. An officer pushed through, saw what was going on and snapped orders.

They found a key for the shackles. As Mai had promised. They provided heavy blankets and stood by, offering occasional uncertain hands as I stood and slowly and painfully limped where they led.

The building was a storehouse of some kind, down in a less-reputable part of town. Snow covered the ground, icicles hung from eaves and armoured guards were everywhere. The cold stabbed at my bare feet and my wounds ached as I made my way to a waiting wagon and needed help getting in.

Two guards watched me as we rattled and bumped through a white cityscape. I pulled the blankets closer, closed my eyes and suffered in silence.

—v—

When I'd arrived back at the Palace there'd been a chaotic rush from the carriage, a confusion of guards everywhere. My leg ached abominably and gave out beneath me when I tried to step down and I grabbed for a handhold and the

sheets at the same time and succeeded with neither, collapsing in a humiliating tangle in the snow in front of dozens of guards. They stared until an officer snarled and troopers moved forward to help me. I tried to tell them about Chihirae but nobody seemed to be listening, or care. They just rushed me along as best my condition would allow.

There'd been a fire blazing in my quarters, melting the worst of the chill out of the air. I was deposited on the bed while physicians clustered about. They examined me, fussed around me, changed the bandages, medicated the wounds. All very professional, efficient, thorough and completely impersonal. I looked up at eyes that continually skirted around my gaze, concentrating on anything but my face. And when I tried to get up or to tell them about Chihirae they pressed me back and told me to be quiet until I closed my eyes and let them do what they willed, moving when they wanted but otherwise just letting the world wash around me.

I was so tired.

I never really noticed when they finished. All I remember is that the hands that'd been touching me weren't there anymore and there were more voices in the background. I hurt when I moved my head to see Rris leaving my quarters: the guards and the physicians trooping out the door. Why? The reason was watching me from over by the window. Hirht standing and regarding me solemnly, not even his tail twitching. Beyond, Kh'hitch stood with a scribe's board in hand and a neutral expression.

"How are you managing?" Hirht inquired.

"I'll... live," I said without feeling anything.

For a few seconds those eyes studied me before he ducked his head. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m afraid I really don’t know what else to say. We had no idea.”

No idea. I stared, frustration and anger stretching something inside me to breaking point. They’d no idea... I’d had no idea. I’d lived with her, I’d slept with her and I’d never had the slightest inkling. The fury inside me died and I sagged back. How could they have known?

“No sir,” I said quietly, simply and pulled a blanket closer around me. “No sir. Sir... who was she?”

A rustle of fur on cloth as the king shifted. “I don’t know. An agent, that much is obvious. Not mercenary, something more than that.” He waved a small shrug. “The matter is being investigated.”

I caught a shuddering breath. “She said Chihirae is coming here.”

A hint of reaction around the eyes, then in somewhat displeased tones: “She told you about that.”

“It’s true?” My fists were clenching, nails digging into my palms.

He waved a small gesture. “A.”

“Oh, no,” I moaned, then demanded: “Those bastards , you got them? You got them all?”

Hirht’s muzzle rumped. “If you’re referring to the individuals who abducted you... We don’t know. There was a disturbance near the docks. When the patrol arrived they found a number of bodies, one with a note containing directions to an estate in the Rocks pinned to it. When we stormed the premises there was resistance. We found a handful of individuals who were doubtless involved in your abduction.”

“Haies?” I grated.

“Haies?” Hirht blinked at the name.

“Haies aesh Tohi... Tohikenishi... something like that,” I shook my head. “An... assistant to someone. In the military I think. She was there. She was responsible.”

“Military?” Hirht threw a sharp glance back at Kh’hitch.

“It would explain a lot sire,” Kh’hitch rumbled and scratched something with a quill pen. “It’ll be investigated immediately.”

Something tightened in my guts. If they didn’t know about her...

“The other?” I ventured, dreading the response. “The one with the bracelet?”

“Bracelet?” Hirht looked surprised then furrowed his muzzle. “Him again?”

“Please. Did you get him?”

Another glance at the advisor who cocked his head slightly: “Nobody of such description, sir.”

“Oh, god,” I felt ill: things were accelerating out of control and headed in her direction. “Sir, I have to go. They’re going to harm her. I have to go.”

“Hai!” he barked as I started to wobble to my feet and then he was across the room to lay clawed hands on my shoulders, pushing me back. I yelped as he scraped lacerations, bandages shifted and I sat back down on the edge of the bed, lightheaded with the pain from the welts covering my back.

“You’re in no condition to go anywhere,” Hirht admonished. Behind him, Kh’hitch waved guards back out. “What do you mean? Who’s going to hurt her?”

“They’ve gone,” I choked. “You didn’t find them all. Not all. Others... go. They find her. Hurt her. Not know others gone now...” I stuttered to a halt, trying to speak faster than my ability with the Ris language would allow.

Like chasing after a burning fuse. They'd got the one that lit it, but now the flame was chasing off toward the keg without any awareness of what had happened to the hand that started it. And if they found out their operation had been shut down?

A hostage would become superfluous.

"I have to go," I repeated, imploring.

Hirht's ears laid back. "No, Mikah. We'll look after this. Don't worry. She's on the water route, through Shashi's Gate, Taitied, Broken Sun and Blizzard's Coat. She'll be escorted."

"Please, sir. I want to go to her."

"Out of the question. It'll be handled. Meantime, there are some other questions I'd like to ask you."

I sagged, the breath and fight escaping me. "Yes, sir."

Questions. That there were: what had happened? What did I remember? Describe the faces, the sounds, smells, what they'd said. And I answered as best I could remember, and while I talked the reality of what had happened weighed in on me again: the utter disruption of my world, for the second time in as many years, the loss of something so close to me. The questions kept coming, prying

and incessant and I kept seeing that face that used to lie so close to me at night.

I broke down, shuddering uncontrollably. And when the Rris king said something I just exploded in rage and grief and frustration; tears streaming down my face as I screamed at them in cracking Rris and English to get the fuck out of there and just leave me the hell alone. Guards appeared at the door, Kh'hitch's ears flat against his skull as I raged at them, but Hirht just ducked his head and turned and left me, the others following in his wake.

And for uncountable hours I just wallowed in a grief that scoured the places my wounds never met. A grief that stormed through my soul and emotions, ripping and tearing and breaking as it went, and in the depths of despair I could find only one reason to go on.

—v—

An unflappable seneschal roused me from a tattered sleep the next morning. My eyes burned, my head was thick and muggy and the sharp winter sunlight cutting through the window was in direct counterpoint to my mood. My presence was required, I was informed while a servant laid a breakfast tray and beat a hasty retreat.

I hadn't undressed the night before, and I didn't bother to change my rumpled clothing then. My stomach snarled at the smell of food and I tried to remember when I'd last had a decent meal. That night when Mai... when Mai... I stood staring down at the tray of exquisitely prepared meats and pastries, my appetite gone.

An entire squad of armed guards was waiting in the hall outside. I stopped, looking at the guns and armour with a resigned feeling. The officer laid his ears back and ducked his head under my gaze and I shook my own head then turned to limp after the major domo.

They kept the pace slow and easy, which was all I could really manage. The gouge the bullet had traced across my leg wasn't that deep, but it was painful and enough to slow me down. My back ached every time the bandages shifted, forcing me to keep my back stiff and immobile. So the guards ambled along at my crippled pace, watching corridors, doors, any other Rris they happened to see. I limped along with the aid of a walking stick that clacked on tiles and wooden flooring, following my Rris guides while my mind wandered other halls.

In a long gallery in the outer reaches of the Palace sunlight spilled in through high mullioned windows, washing across a floor inlaid with decorative tiles, a wall hung with vibrant tapestries. I stopped at a window, looking out across a world turned white and pale and harsh under winter's touch. Echoing my mood: washed out, overloaded.

A guard touched my arm and ventured, "Sir?"

I turned and looked into lambent amber eyes, saw the flicker of muscles in the features around them, the pupils contracting and expanding. I never thought about it, never moved my eyes; seemingly of its own volition my hand reached out and smoothly caught the butt tucked into the bandolier and the gun was in my hand. The eyes widened, turning to horrified black pools as the guard realised and pulled away. Too late.

I looked down and for the second time in my life I was staring down the muzzle of a Rris pistol held in my own hands. A solid weight of wood and metal,

the florid mechanism moving smoothly under my finger as I cocked it with a snick that was loud in the abrupt silence.

“Sir,” I was aware of a strangled-sounding Rris saying something.

It was loaded. I could see the rough patch of wadding deep within the barrel; the scratches in the metal around the muzzle; smell old propellant and lubrication. It was a moment when everything focused on the weight in my hand, and a moment when nothing had ever seemed more real or more abstract.

Just a squeeze of my finger...

And a promise would be broken.

But it would be so easy.

Rris voices around me were rising in urgency; cajoling, imploring me to be careful, did I know what I was doing. Did they understand? It wasn't in the Rris psyche, they couldn't know how easy it'd be for me to just squeeze.

And it wouldn't help Chihirae.

I let my arm drop and immediately guards were prising the gun from my hand. I let them take it and retreat with ears plastered to their heads while I just turned and started limping off.

After a few steps I turned back to the crowd and the seneschal who was looking uncharacteristically rattled. “Are we going?” I asked and he huffed, drew himself up, and stalked ahead.

—v—

The double doors to Hirht’s office swung open to reveal the imposing bulk of Kh’hitch. He stared at me for a second, then sighed a white cloud and said, “His highness will see you now.”

I followed him into the big white room. It was cold in there, the sun not yet around to shine in the windows but still raising a glare from the ice gardens outside. The walking stick raised a steady tapping keeping time with the staccato clicking of Kh’hitch’s claws as we crossed to where the Rris king was seated at his desk, the Seneschal standing off to one side. Hirht dipped his head slightly, watching me from under hooded eyes, then gestured to the aide who sketched a bow then skirted around me on his way out.

I stood in front of the King of Land-of-water while he looked up at me, studying me as if he were seeking something. And maybe he found it: there was a change of posture, his head going back a fraction before the mask fell into place again. “Why didn’t you pull the trigger?”

“I want to go to her,” I said.

His ears tipped back a little. “You do,” he said and glanced down at the old

wooden desktop, clear of papers and trappings for once. I was half-expecting him to try and change the subject, but he didn't. "You know I can't allow that, Mikah. It's far too dangerous."

"So I sit here while someone I owe my life is hunted. And I'm responsible. I can't do that."

"And I can't let you go running off after her. Mikah, there's nothing you can do that we can't. All you'll be doing will be putting yourself at risk."

I didn't look away from those alien eyes. "So you'll keep me here. Guards and locks and bars."

"If need be."

Now I turned, staring out at the cold lands outside. My breath frosted in the air. "You know, a gun's not necessary. There are other ways."

Now his ears went flat against his skull. His mouth opened, then closed again.

"You couldn't watch me. Not all the time."

I'd never seen such an expression on Hirht's face before, certainly never one so stricken. "Mikah... why?"

“Why?” I hesitated, trying to package the emotions inside me into something a Rris might understand. “Because, after all that’s happened since I’ve been here, she’s the only one who hasn’t betrayed me. She was kind to me even when she had no idea what I was. I... she means a great deal to me.”

“In the same way the doctor did?”

If I’d had ears like Rris, it’d have been my turn to lay them back. “I didn’t understand that the... that how I felt about her was something she couldn’t feel about me. I mean, I knew it, but I didn’t really understand it, not truly. Chihirae... I know this, but it doesn’t change what she means to me. Sir, I have to go.”

He studied me, then raised a hand to gesture a dismissal to his advisor. I heard Kh’hitch’s claws again, then the door closing. The King looked in that direction, back to me, then asked, “Mikah, are you sane?”

I suppose I should’ve been insulted, but at that moment I really didn’t feel anything. I shrugged slightly. “Compared to what? To Rris? I don’t know. To my own kind? . . I’m not sure anymore.”

His expression didn’t change but I saw the glance toward the doors and for a second I was reminded of the first time I’d met him. There’d been the same look then. “You brought me here to ask me that?”

“No.” He gave a quick flick of his ears. “Not just that. This matter with the

doctor.” A hissing breath escaped him. “Maithris aesh Teremae. Meddling Times is a small town near the Bluebetter border. A good choice for a cover story. It took a long time to verify what she told us. There is a Teremae holding: small, but well-established and reputable. There was a Maithris aesh Teremae who left to come to Shattered Water. The name was registered with the Medical Guild.”

He stopped, watching me, expecting something, but I wasn’t sure what.

“Mikah, the one you knew wasn’t Maithris aesh Teremae.”

“She said that wasn’t her name,” I said, and then started to understand. “You mean, she... got rid of the original?”

“‘Got rid of’,” he mused. “Euphemistic. But yes. You see Mikah, she was dangerous. That is what people will go to to reach you.”

“No,” I shook my head. “Not her. She wouldn’t do that.”

And he just blinked slowly. “You knew her so well then.”

Just a few quiet words that struck home like ice stilettos and left me speechless. And the worst thing was that sedicious little voice that said he was right. “No,” I reiterated, my fist white-knuckled on the top of my walking stick. “No. She wouldn’t do that. She wouldn’t.”

He must've seen he'd scored and chose not to push it, just ducked his head. "All right, Mikah. There was something else: I need to know more about these ones who kidnapped you. Is there anything more you can tell me?"

Trying to take my mind off something I didn't want to think about. I shook my head. "I told you everything."

"Nothing else. A place, a destination, a name?"

Name... "Haies?" I asked.

"That's being investigated," he said. "Is there anything more you remember?"

I flashed back on the whip coming down again and again and the network of lacerations across my back ached. And her name stayed with me, along with a memory of an overheard conversation. "Kingfisher," I remembered uncertainly. "I think they said Kingfisher. They'd meet there."

"You're sure?" Hirht asked.

I'd been tortured half to death, lying drugged in shock and terror and losing blood. I was as sure as I could be. Hirht made a small gesture: "There's a tavern of that name in the Cracks. It's the sort of place that sort might frequent. That will be investigated immediately."

Immediately. And I still couldn't get a response to the issue that was most important to me. "Yes, sir. But Chihirae, I have to go to her," I said again. "Please, I have to."

"Have to?" he rumbled.

I tried to explain, to convey the human emotions to someone whose brain simply wasn't wired to experience them. "I like her. She was the first Rris I knew, the first one who was kind to me. I owe her more than I can repay. If something were to happen to her and I didn't even lift a finger to try and help, I couldn't live with that."

Hirht's pupils dilated at that wording. "There's nothing you can do."

"I can try."

His ears laid back and whatever he was going to say then was interrupted by a distant crack that raised echoes across the Palace grounds. It was a sound I knew, one we both knew, and both our heads came up as another ragged volley of distant gunfire sounded and died out into fading rattles. Beyond the windows, the white world lay unchanged, as if nothing had happened.

The double doors opened onto Kh'hitch, standing with a hand on each handle. "Sir," he bowed, "there has been an incident. It is going to require... attention."

"Sir..." I protested and he waved a hand. "Mikah, I'm sorry. I'll take your

request into consideration. All right?”

“No, sir.”

“What?” he looked surprised.

“No consideration. I’m going,” I said, clenched my hand on the stick. “If you won’t help me, I’ll make my own way, but I’m going.”

He stared. Behind me I heard movement, that of several Rris moving into the room. “You will?” Hirht asked and I wasn’t sure whether he was amused or offended or angry or something entirely different.

“I will. You want to chain me? Lock me away? You can. I can’t stop that. But I think our business relationship would change.”

There was a stony silence. It was the longest lever I had, the only lever I had. It wasn’t something I’d wanted to say, but at that moment it was the only thing I could think of.

“This means that much to you,” Hirht said.

“It means everything,” I said softly.

“Very well,” he grudgingly hissed. “Something will be arranged. Now, you’ve got business to take care of. So have I.”

Dismissal. I turned and slowly limped out, my walking stick tapping against the cold floor.

—v—

The sounds had been gunfire. There’d been a firefight in the Palace, albeit a short-lived one with a single casualty: Haies aesh Tohikish. Apparently she’d been trying to run, fired at a guard. Her employer’s personal guard had gunned her down.

So there wouldn’t be any answers from that source. Convenient. Tidy.

But I’d got what I’d wanted. I received news that the King had agreed to my demands, with a few conditions of his own: I’d be escorted by a small army; my own private guards would follow me everywhere; I wouldn’t take any unnecessary risks... nothing I hadn’t expected.

Two days. Two days before we could set off. They had preparations to make, I was told, but soon, when the weather allowed. And if it took too long travel by water would be impossible; and an overland journey would take ten times as long.

So I went about some preparations of my own.

The workshops were busy, noisy and freezing cold. Another reminder of a time when I'd first stepped into this building. A grey winter sunlight filtered in through cracks and grimy windows, casting a latice of light across a dark floorspace where Rris worked around the shape of the Ironheart, loading, cleaning preparing, voices echoing from an overhead. My breath frosted in the air as I looked around and spied smoke rising from the pipe of the particular Rris I was seeking. I turned to my escort:

"Thank's, Blunt," I said. "I owe you."

The Rris trooper ducked his head, looking understandably nervous. He wasn't supposed to be doing this, but I'd called a favour. "No, sir. I should be saying that. You know, I really shouldn't leave you."

"I'll be all right," I assured him and he stepped back, but didn't leave.

Understandable. At least he didn't follow when I limped my way across the workshop floor to the small group pouring over something on a table. As I approached one looked up and saw me, stared, then another. The one with his back to me kept talking and pointing at something on a plan on the table for a second before realising his audiences' attention was else where: he turned and for a split second there was that expression so many Rris have when coming face to face with me. Then he caught his pipe and his ears came up again.

"Mikah! What are you doing here? I heard you were going to be indisposed for some time."

“I had something I wanted to discuss with you,” I said and looked at the other faces. “Your office might be a better place.”

“A? A, of course. Ichithshi, carry on. Mikah, this way.” Of course, he couldn’t help but notice my walking stick. “Rot me, what happened to you. Ai! You’re hurt?”

“Not badly,” I lied, trying to ignore the pain. “Just, take it slowly.”

“Of course.” He looked uncertain, glancing at my guard and obviously wondering just why I was there.

“You’re getting the Ironheart ready for a journey?”

His eyes flickered. “I was told you were involved.”

I hadn’t been aware they were going to use that vessel. Still, it was the fastest thing in the water, and if anything could beat the encroaching ice, it was that ship. Nevertheless, it was a tough time of year to take out such a new vessel. “Involved. You could say that.”

His office was quieter, warmer, with the potbelly stove shedding heat and frost painting intricate patterns on the window. I moved closer to the fire. Climbing the stairs hadn’t been so easy for me and the heat helped ease the ache. When I looked around Chaeitch was standing with a mug in each hand and his ears down, watching me. “I’ll live,” I assured him.

He ducked his head and handed the mug over. Warm wine. It went down well and left a tart aftertaste. Chaeitch also sipped, and I was abruptly aware it felt more like a formality than the nearly-friendly gesture it'd once been.

"I heard something happened to the doctor," he said after an uncomfortable silence. "It wasn't too serious?"

I stared at him and he started to actually look scared. "She's gone," I said finally, quietly.

"Huhn?" He was taken aback. Of course he couldn't really sympathise with my loss, but I guess he could tell I was upset about it. "Ah, Mikah," he ducked his head and toyed with his mug. "I'm sorry. What happened?"

I started to speak, trailed off and looked down at my own drink, then up at the wide eyes watching me. And I told him. I know I shouldn't have, but the words just seemed to come of their own accord, and once I started... I told him everything.

I don't know if he understood. I don't see how he could've. The emotions she'd shattered were things he just couldn't empathise with, but I told him anyway. Just talking, not really feeling anything through the numbness anymore. And when I finished, his ears were plastered to his skull.

"Oh rot," he murmured after a while. "Oh, rot. I didn't know."

I didn't say anything.

"If there's anything you need; anything I can do..."

I met his eyes. "As a matter of fact. There is."

—v—

The key turned in the lock and the metal-reinforced door swung open on well-oiled hinges. Chaeitch swung the key from a claw as he cast a glance my way, then snatched it up into a fist and returned it to the pouch at his belt. "I really don't know if I should be doing this."

"Is there really anything I wouldn't know about already?"

He looked a little startled, then blinked and waved an acknowledgment.

The building was in the same yard as the other workshops: one of the sheds I'd never been into before. The same warehouse-like building: big and cold inside, but without the slipway down to the river. The main floor was littered with machinery and workbenches, the bulk and arches of cast-iron lathes, presses, moulds and mini furnaces. Down the far end were heavy wooden blocks, sandbags, thick padding used for soundproofing. A few Rris were busy, a half dozen of them busy at benches with tools. So similar to the other places I'd been working, but what they produced here was something I'd wanted no part in.

The sounds of metal on metal faltered as I entered. Rris looked up from their tasks, watching me, whispering, and suddenly the sound of my cane tapping against the floor was very loud. Chaeitch's muzzle wrinkled up and he snarled at them; they hastily turned their attention back to their jobs. He flashed a brief show of teeth, then looked back to me. "Over here."

It was a secure room with another heavy door. He unlocked and opened it. Inside, a few of the newer gas lamps with the gauze mantels threw light over a bare room with locked reinforced cabinets around the walls. Chaeitch produced another key and unlocked a security bar, opening a cabinet.

I stared. Oh, my god...

"These are the latest," he was saying. "The prototypes are there. There were difficulties. The mechanisms require durable and precise parts which are difficult to manufacture."

Rifles. Not muskets, but weapons that might've come from an early picture of the Crimean war. Breach loaders, with barrels of a hardened steel I'd shown the Rris; with rifling drilled by the same machine used to cut threads for screws. The proportions were odd, with cut-down stocks and a smaller handgrip to accomodate shorter trigger fingers. There were a dozen weapons in that one rack, all differing from one another in some subtle way. Chaeitch picked one of the ones he'd called the latetst from the rack, checked the breach, and handed it to me.

The metal and wood was a solid weight in my hands. I worked the bolt, feeling the mechanism glide smoothly and lock into place with a well-machined

snick. A single-shot bolt-action rifle, but a serious advantage over anyone with a musket. “How many of these?” I asked.

“One hundred twenty five,” he said immediately.

“They were distributed?”

“A.”

“To whom?”

He smoothed back his cheek tufts and seemed to think about it. “There were loads to several armouries: The Palace, main garrisons north and south. No further afield. There are problems with ammunition supply. We can’t manufacture as much as is needed.”

“They’re all accounted for?”

His face flickered. “I’m not sure. His highness asked the same thing. We thought everything was in order, but... ” he turned back to the racks of weapons and waved a shrug, “the books could have been tampered with. It’s being investigated.” A hesitation before he turned back to me.

“You believe there might be corruption inside the Palace?”

I weighed my answer, then said, "It's a possibility."

He hissed air through his teeth, "Dangerous accusations."

I knew. But it wasn't a thought that engendered much fear in me. I just nodded and looked along the rows of cabinets. Not just rifles: there were handguns there, revolvers; also clunky, squarish machinations of rods and assemblies that could only be efforts at automatic pistols. I hooked my cane over my arm and picked one up. It was ugly and complex and heavy.

"Doesn't work," Chaeitch offered. "The self-loaders... too complex: black powder jams them."

I just nodded, replaced the weapon and looked at another rack. And looked again.

"There was more success with that," Chaeitch said, and I might be mistaken but I was sure he looked a little sheepish.

I tried picking it up. The six barrels swung easily, with a ratcheting clicking sound, but even with the handle the gatling gun was heavy and cumbersome. All dark steel and brass, a handle and gearing to spin the barrels. No ammunition hopper like the ones I remembered from old pictures, instead it appeared like they'd tried to make it belt fed. I hefted the thing thoughtfully.

“That’s definitely you,” Chaeitch said.

I gave him a look before returning the thing to its cradle, then stepped back and stood, leaning on my walking stick. “I’m responsible, aren’t I.”

“Mikah?”

“For all this,” I waved a hand melodramatically and slumped back. “All this. Shit, sometime... maybe it’d have been better for all if I’d just died in the hills.”

The Rris’s ears went back in an expression of distress. “Rot, Mikah. Why do you say things like that?”

“Why?” I tapped a finger against the cane, looked at the Rris and said, “Everything and everyone I cared about are gone. I’m the only one of my kind in a world filled with a people I can never be a part of. A person I trusted and loved betrayed and lied to me. Some else in trouble because of me. And... and now I find I’ve been used to create a hundred new ways to kill someone.”

Chaeitch didn’t meet my eyes. “You can’t blame yourself for that. There’s everything else you’ve done. Everything you can do. Mikah, people need you.”

“Need,” I said. “Like a tool. I’m something to be used. Sitting outside looking in. I can never be part of your world.”

His ears hadn't come up. "You have friends."

"Yes," I had to acknowledge that. "Thank you."

And when I glanced at him again he was studying me, ears still down. "It's like they said," he ventured at length. "You... need, don't you. Not just friendship; a ... a bond. Something like you had with the doctor." His head tipped a little and in the dim light I could see his pupils flex and contract. "That's why you're going after this old friend of yours, isn't it?"

I rounded on him, about to tell him just how wrong he was. That wasn't the reason at all. It was... it was... Maybe it was. I subsided, gingerly picking through the hollow place where my emotions lay in tatters. "I don't know," I admitted. "I want to help her. But I want..." I heaved a shuddering sigh. "Oh, god."

He looked puzzled. "What does that mean?"

I took a breath and shook my head. "Maybe. Maybe you're right. I don't mean to. I know she can't feel the same way about me, but it's what I am. Your kind can't feel this; I can't not feel it."

His muzzle twitched and he said, "We all have limitations."

I shook my head: I hadn't mean to insult him. "I didn't mean it like that. It's just the way I am: I can't change it any more than I could grow fur and a tail."

“No.” The Rris’s amber eyes flickered up and down, then he chittered a little. “No. Apologies. I suppose... it’s difficult to understand what you mean sometimes. And what you do. You do seem to be different, not just your appearance. More than just a person in a costume. It’s like...” he trailed off and blinked at me.

“Like what?” I asked.

He glanced down at his hands and clicked claws together, then cocked his head and pursed his face in a quick smile. “The way you act: sometimes it reminds me a little of a male in rut. The fixation on a single female. I suppose being in season all the time might have something to do with it.”

I started to snap back an answer, then caught myself and waved a shrug. “We all have our limitations.”

A chitter. “So that’s why you’re going after this teacher? You’re in heat over her?”

“You can get your mind out of the bed. Wouldn’t you do the same if you knew a good friend was in trouble?”

Chaeitch glanced at the guns. “I’d want to help, but you can’t be sure that she’s in trouble. And the trouble, the risk you’re going to... it would have to be a very good friend.”

“It is,” I said. He bobbed his head once, then turned to follow my gaze.

Racks of weapons. Steel and wood. They weren’t like the older muskets at all. I remembered Shyia’s old pistols: the delicate and beautiful engravings on them, turning devices of mayhem into things of beauty. These had none of that: just a lethal practicality. I reached out and touched a particular item. “This. Does this work?”

Chaeitch looked. “That. Huhn, cumbersome. And the ammunition is expensive...”

“Does it work?”

He looked uncertain, trying to figure out why I was asking. Then he slowly gestured, “yes.”

Cumbersome for a Rris, yes. A shotgun, single-barrel with a pump mechanism slung beneath. I’d been shot at before, I’d been kidnapped and attacked with swords and firearms. I didn’t have any illusions about my marksmanship: I doubted I could hit the side of a barn if I was standing inside it, but a shotgun... you didn’t need to be Davy Crockett to use one of those. I didn’t want a gun, I wished I didn’t need one, but the universe didn’t seem to be catering to my wishes at the moment.

“Can you do something for me?” I asked.

Furrows creased his muzzle. "I'm not going to like this, am I," he growled.

"Put this on board, in my cabin. Somewhere others won't find it."

The expression on his face was as if I'd asked him to kill Hirht: pure, uncomprehending shock. "You... you're not serious," he croaked, then caught my look and rubbed hands over his eyes. "Oh, rot. You are."

"Chaeitch, you're the only one I can ask for this. It's not even likely that I'd need it. It's just... in case."

"In case," Chaeitch hissed. "If his highness knew I'd let you in here he'd have me skinned. If he knew I'd given you a loaded gun... Rot everything, I just can't do that!"

"Please."

"I can't." His eyes were wide. "Mikah, I won't be responsible for that."

"Responsible," I echoed. "Chaeitch, this knowledge was taken from me without my consent and you used it to build these," I swept my hand, gesturing to the ranks of dark weapons. "Now, if you're worried that you might end up responsible for me hurting someone, I think you should take another look at reality."

Again his ears went down and he didn't look happy. "Not just that. Mikah, there was an incident with you and a gun."

Uh-huh. It was that again, was it? "If I wanted to kill myself, there are plenty of other ways," I said quietly. "I wouldn't ask for your help."

He was shaking slightly. I knew suicide was a concept outside the Ris mindset, but had no idea it would effect someone so badly. Then again, if something did happen to me and he was implicated, things could and would go very badly for him.

"I'm sorry." I said. "I thought... I might need it. Ris have claws, teeth which I don't have; or swords and muskets which I don't know how to use. If we find these bastards I don't want to be helpless."

"Mikah, if we find these individuals, I'm sure you won't be going anywhere near them."

I nodded. "I know. I just... Just in case. Please."

His tail was dragging the ground as he sighed. "I'll see what can be arranged."

Soft footsteps in the darkness, claws ticking on wood. A familiar figure moved out of the shadows: walking toward me from the distances down the hall, through pools of light cast by torches until she was standing in front of me. Chihirae smiled slightly.

“I missed you,” I said.

“Your life’s been interesting?” she asked.

“Too many changes,” I said and she laughed a human laugh that rang from stone walls and pulled her old coat a little closer around herself.

“I brought you this,” she said and held out her hand, a small square package bundled in leather. Laid it on the desktop.

I laid aside soft chamois folds, looked down at the book laying there, the old leather binding worn and polished smooth from countless years of handling. The title didn’t make sense, the words inside unreadable, pages spattered with red. I looked up and there was another figure behind Chihirae. A hand reached up to push back a hood to reveal face I’d trusted so much, smiling an empty smile as if the features were just a mask.

“Mai?”

There wasn’t a flicker on those features as a hand came up, the cloak falling away from the pistol aimed at the back of Chihirae’s head.

I tried to scream a warning even as the gun went off.

I woke with the gasp of the shout still in my throat. Sprawled amongst scattered sheets with the night air freezing on my skin, heart racing, muscles trembling, one hand still half-raised to ward off something from a dream. Beyond it, light spilled in through the open door, silhouetting the guards standing at the foot of my bed. I shuddered, then slowly folded back into the bed. My back burned mercilessly.

“Sir?” an alien voice growled in the dark. One of the guards, I couldn’t see which one.

“Just a bad dream,” I croaked, trying to get my heart rate down to something approaching normal. “Just a dream.”

“You’re all right? I mean, this hasn’t happened. Not for a while.”

Not like this, no. “I’m all right. Just... please, leave me.”

“Sir.”

A head ducked, then they turned and left. They closed the door behind them and the room was left in darkness, only a faint glow from the remains of embers in the grate. I braved the freezing air to get a drink, then returned to bed and tried to sleep again.

The dreams returned.

—v—

A pale grey winter sky hung overhead, the morning sun a diffuse glow beyond the distant hills. A mist clung to the land, melting into the white and ice, blending the horizon into the sky. The chill air was calm and utterly still, columns of smoke rising vertically from the city's chimneys, reaching toward the drab overcast. Breath hung and settled like white clouds with every exhalation; frost and ice crackled with every footstep.

Hirht walked beside me as I limped across the Palace courtyard toward the waiting cavalcade. His coat was quilted and trimmed with fur, his breeches heavy velvet, and he still had his fur ruffled up against the morning chill.

“Again, Mikah, think about this,” he said, carefully not looking at me. “This is completely unnecessary. There’s really nothing else you can do.”

“I have to go. I have to try.”

He cast me a sidelong glance. His ears were still up, but there was a tenseness to the muscles across his brow. No, he just didn’t understand. “I’d like to stop you. Is there anything I can say?”

“Just leave it be,” I said. “I’m going.”

“A,” he sighed: a ghost of breath settling around his shoulders. “Then all I can do is wish you well. I hope... I hope there are no problems.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Ah Ties has a writ of passage bearing my seal. It will ensure cooperation and safe passage. However, I think it might be best if he handles the diplomacy.”

“Yes, sir.”

He abruptly laid a hand on my arm, the claws partially extended, halting me and turning me to face him. His unusual green eyes flickered across my face, a crease wrinkling his muzzle as he studied me. Around us, guards in their polished armour also stopped, watching impassively. “Something wrong?” I asked quietly.

Hirht’s pupils went to black pools and he pulled his arm away, took a step backward. “Mikah, just...” he started to say, then sighed a white cloud. “Mikah, don’t do anything impulsive.”

Anything impulsive. Uh-huh. I settled my meagre load and started walking again.

“Mikah!”

He caught up to me at the carriage door. “Mikah, this is important. You’re the most important thing that’s ever happened. To lose you would have indescribable consequences.”

“I’ve heard this before.”

“But you have to understand...”

“No, sir. I know what’s at stake: my life and my sanity.” I shook my head. “I’m trying to keep a hold on both, and sometimes I think my grip’s slipping.” I awkwardly clambered up into the carriage, the metal of the handhold I caught freezing cold even through the gloves. After I took my seat I looked back out at the king. “That promise you want: It’s one I’ve made before. I’ll try to hold to it.”

He stared at me, then hissed and reached up to rake his fur back. “You...” He hissed again then just wished me, “All the best.” Then he spun away with his coat flaring around him and stalked off across the snow-covered courtyard, his tail lashing.

And as the carriage rattled off into the city, I looked down at the gloves on my hand. Raised my left hand to sniff the fingers and probably imagined traces of a musty scent there. I let the fist drop back to my lap, gingerly leaned back on the cold upholstered leather and remembered that promise I’d made, and the one I’d broken.

The rythm of the engine permeated the ship: a steady heartbeat that you could feel through the deck no matter where you were. Water rushed past the bow, slapping against the timbers and splitting aside in a white wash that trailed out behind us, a white v cutting through the grey waters of the lake. Occasionally a scab of ice would dash and shatter against the prow. None of them very thick: just crusts that broke easily.

I stood in the prow and watched the city breakwaters - the weatherbeaten stone and mortar arms that sheltered the harbour - fall away behind us. There were Rris in the lighthouse towers at the ends of those arms, gathered to watch as the ship passed. I still stood there as the shore fell away, about a kilometer before the Ironheart came about to run parallel with it. From below decks the heartbeat picked up and darker smoke pumped from the smokestack as the engines were throttled up, the bow cutting through a light chop and sending a mist of icy spray across the deck. I ducked down into the warmth of my jacket and shivered, then turned away.

Not as much activity on the decks as there were on the ships with rigging. There were a couple of Rris up from the heat of the engine room sitting against the wheelhouse, panting into the freezing air and wearing nothing more than their natural winter coats. Further astern a Rris clad in more seasonal garb stowed ropes. A pair of guards stood nearby, trying not to look as if they were watching me. I brushed an icicle from my hair and shook my head before ducking down the companionway belowdecks.

The cabin was small, cramped, built to Rris scale, but it was warm. The Ironheart certainly wasn't designed as a passenger vessel, therefore there were only four small cabins: three for the usual crew and this one small one for a couple of passengers. The contingent of guards we were carrying were riding in the forward hold, their officers in another cabin, the crew in theirs, and myself alone in this one.

It certainly wasn't spacious: a cubicle with two bunks recessed into one wall. In the other was a fold-out desk, a couple of cubbyholes and cupboards and hooks for lanterns. A tiny glazed square of a porthole up near the ceiling admitted grey winter sunlight, just enough for me to see by as I slumped onto the bunk and slowly leaned my tender back up against the wall. Nothing much to do except wait and listen to the drubbing of the engine, watch the feeble rectangle of light from the window crawling across the far bulkhead.

I heard the cabin door open, close again, and Chaeitch stepped into view. "How're you faring?"

"Well enough."

"Anything you need? Want?"

"No. Thank you."

I heard him sigh and lean against the wall, propping one clawed foot up against the panelling. "I suppose you're accustomed to slightly more luxurious appartments when travelling, a?" he asked.

"A," I said.

Another sigh. "Mikah, you've changed."

That didn't come as any surprise, but this was the first time a Rris had said that to my face. I looked at him. There were a few smudges across the fur of his face and forearms: grease and soot from the engine room. And his eyes were wide. That could've been from the dim light, or perhaps something else. It'd explain why I had a room to myself.

"In what way?" I asked quietly.

He looked dismayed and raised a hand to express a small shrug. "You're... you're different. You're quiet. You don't speak as much. You used to joke. And I haven't seen you do that smile of yours. Not once. Not for a long while."

Not once. Perhaps he was right, but that news didn't stir any emotions. "I suppose I haven't had much to smile about," I said quietly.

"No," he said. "I suppose not. These two females; they both mean a great deal to you."

I looked back to that patch of light bobbing on the wall, moving in time with the slight rolling of the ship. "They both saved my life. They've both been people I held in great esteem; whose friendships I cherished. I loved them."

He moved, rubbing at his black and grey striped cheek tufts. "That's one of your words, isn't it. What's it mean?"

“An emotion,” I said. “Something... I don’t know if Rris feel it... not in the same way I do. You don’t have a word for it.”

“And your kind does?”

“A.”

He cocked his head, his eyes narrowing slightly. “We’re missing much?”

I gave a small shake of my head, letting him make what he would of the human gesture. “At one time I would have said yes. Now, I think I envy you.”

His expression showed he didn’t really understand. “This... it’s got something to do with your kind taking mates for life?”

“Something,” was all I said.

He sighed and shifted his gaze to the porthole, clicking his teeth together in a preoccupied sort of contemplation. Then he seemed to make up his mind, huffing once. “Mikah, what you requested the other day... It’s under your bunk there.”

That took me by surprise. I looked down, then back at the Rris.

“Don’t make me regret that decision,” he said.

“I won’t,” I said. “Thank you.”

He snorted. “Why do I have a bad feeling about this?” he rumbled, then stalked out of the little cabin.

—v—

Our first port of call was Blizzard’s Coat. The day had gone when we arrived and a gentle snow was settling from the sky, only visible when a flurry of flakes drifted between me and the lights reflecting off black water. Rris crewmen were up in the prow, shouting commands back to the wheelhouse. The pulse of the engine changed, slowed, as the harbour-master’s tug chugged out. One of the officers on the Ironheart had a shouted conversation with the pilot, then brandished a piece of parchment and frozen-looking Rris hastened to throw tow-lines up. Chaeitch stood at my side, his hands behind his back and breath whisked away on the breeze as the small steam tug hauled us into dock.

A private berth. A section of quayside where elaborate, sleek and expensive vessels were moored. The surreal shapes of Rris lit by the orange glow of gaslamps moved along the wharf to catch lines and haul the ship in the rest of the way.

The troops went ashore first and there was a period of waiting before carriages appeared from the night and rattled to a halt at the foot of the companionway. Chaeitch glanced at my duffel bag as I picked it up and I caught the question in his eyes. He didn’t ask and I didn’t offer.

The carriage we rode in was closed and as cold as the night outside. Periodically during the rattling trip through the winter city a light would flash between the slats of the shutters, throwing bars of light and dark across Chaeitch's features. He was watching me, I could see that but could make out little else.

"You'll behave?" he asked. "And let me deal with ah Metari?"

"He isn't overly fond of me," I reminded him.

"A." The shadowy head bobbed. "We'll be out of here soon enough. They haven't been expecting us, but there should be a courier available in the lower docks. It'll be a full day's crossing to Broken Sun."

And maybe she'd be there and maybe she wouldn't. God, a world without phone, ICQ, TAG or even e-mail. There was no way to send messages faster than we could travel ourselves. No way to know when she'd left or even if she'd left. Only thing to do was backtrack the route her party would be taking until we found her, and that could be anywhere along the way.

"They'll cooperate?" I asked.

I think he smiled a bit. "Oh, yes. All the holdings on this route are friendly. Or at least, aren't openly hostile to the King. They'll help. We also have writs of passage from the Overburdened Embassy in case of incident in the border territories."

“That was necessary?”

“Moving a large armed party along borderlines can cause... tensions,” he said. “There were agreements made; a few favours called for this hunt.”

“That much trouble?”

“Isn’t that natural for you?” he asked and I recognised it as a good-natured jab but didn’t smile. He hissed softly.

“Mikah, just don’t do anything to upset his lordship and there won’t be any trouble, all right?”

“Fine by me,” I said and in a brief flicker of light saw his head twitch, tipping from one side to the other as those alien eyes regarded me.

—v—

I’d been in those rooms before, albeit under more pleasant circumstances. I stood before the mullioned french windows and looked out at the balcony in its little world of light, the fat flakes of snow drifting into that world from a vast blackness and adding to the soft whiteness covering the angles of the stonework. A flash of a summer’s day when I’d stood at this same window and there’d been a friend at my side.

Chistri Einter House. The same suite I'd stayed in the last time I'd been in Blizzard's Coat. Although this time, despite the luxurious fittings, they seemed somehow emptier. And the door to the small adjoining servants quarters was locked. The light was the steady glow of a few gas lamps and flickering of candles contributing to a low ambience suited to Rris eyes and still too dark for mine, covering the opulence of the room with a dimness some might have considered cosy.

It just felt dark to me. I looked through my reflections in all those little panes to the dusting of snow falling outside and sighed. The waiting, that was the worst. Set aside while Chaeitch and the military officers handled the lord, talked to the garrisons, made sure there'd be eyes watching for Chihirae if we should miss her. And while they occupied themselves I could only pace and wait. Just one night, I told myself, and tried to persuade myself to take advantage of the luxury: the next few days might not be as comfortable.

So I sat back in cushions before the fire and tried to wait, staring at the dancing flames and seeing a time when the weather had been warmer and the fire glittered like the sun in lakewater splashed by a playful friend. Fond memories of the Living Hall, a comforting presence and voice in the darkness, a promise to always be there. Moments like photographs; precious fragments of the past to bring out and treasure, something that nobody was going to take from me.

Perhaps somebody was watching me, perhaps not. I didn't worry about that, just passed a cold winter evening watching my memories in the dancing flames. Nothing else to do; nowhere else to go.

The servant didn't knock. I didn't even hear the door open, just a cough and then a voice asking, "Sir?"

A slight and extremely nervous-looking Rris at the door. Tail bottled and twitching, ears laid back. "Sir. Ahh... his lordship requests your presence."

"Now?"

The jaw trembled and the servant swallowed visibly. "Y... yessir."

I nodded, stood and followed. Through dimly lit corridors with crushed velvet wallpaper, gilt trim, antique paintings and carved panels telling stories hidden in shadow. The servant kept its distance, frequently glancing back at me.

Rris looked up as I entered the room: Chaeitch and the mayor at a huge black-wood table along with another Rris in utilitarian armour that didn't carry the spotless sheen of local guards. "Mikah," Chaeitch said, standing and meeting my eye and almost immediately glancing away again. His ears drooped, then turned back flat against his ruff and I knew in that instant that I wasn't going to like this.

"Mikah, this... I don't know how to break this," Chaeitch said looked to the mayor who sat back in his cair and offered nothing. "I think it's best you hear this. I'm afraid it's not... You might want to sit down."

I looked at the offered chair but didn't move. "Tell me," I said.

Chaeitch squirmed uncomfortably, then turned to the Rris soldier in his

armour who'd been regarding me with a shocked stare. "Commander, what you told us, tell him," Chaeitch said.

The soldier looked around but wasn't receiving any support from the mayor or the Rris industrialist. Then he licked his jowls and stammered, "Ah... sir. We... we set out from Lying scales close to two moons ago..."

"Chihirae," I murmured.

The guard's eyes flickered. "A, sir. That was her name. A large escort just for one. Nobody told us why she was important."

"Oh, god," I think I said. I remebered my lips moved, but I don't know if any sound came out. The soldier's muzzle twitched before he continued:

"There weren't any difficulties. The weather was mild. The water routes were open and clear. The [writ of passage] gave us priority passage through the ports, cleared us without trouble.

"It was when we got to Broken Sun..." He clicked his jaws shut and glanced at the other Rris again. "Three nights ago. There was inclement weather. We had to wait it out overnight. Myself and my immediate subordinates were away from the others, hosted by the lord who was curious as to our business. Then we received word that there was a fire..." Another hesitation.

"The lodgings where aesh Hiasamra'thsi was sleeping. It was well alight when

we got back.”

Now he caught a deep breath, staring past me at a point somewhere behind me. “Only a few got out. Hurrh... sir... She didn’t.”

The words didn’t seem real.

“We tried, sir...”

“Mikah?”

It wasn’t real. It couldn’t be. She was... she was... I didn’t know what to think. The world seemed distant and distorted and brittle, stretched like a piece of spun glass. Ris faces watched me and someone said something.

“I’m all right,” I said, my voice sounding odd to my own ears. I tried to say something else, but this time my voice failed and all I could do was turn and walk out into the dark hallway. My legs carried me, not sure where.

A voice called out from behind and I kept going. Something grabbed my arm and spun me back against the wall, leaving me looking at Chaeitch’s concerned face as he asked me something. “I’m all right,” I croaked and tried to catch a shuddering breath. “I’m... I’m...”

My legs wouldn’t hold me anymore. I slid down the wall to curl up in a small

ball and bury my head and try to deny the world. Just hide and hope it would go away while I collapsed in on myself and shook and sobbed and my nose and eyes ran. Oh, god, Chihirae. Chihirae who'd never hurt anyone; who'd always tried to help. Now, because of me...

I don't know how long I was catatonic out there in the hall. Next I recall I was vaguely aware of my arm being shaken, a hairy hand cupped my chin and raised it to meet lambent amber peering at me in concern and not a little fear. Chaeitch. I recognised him and tried to say something but just ended up shuddering and gasping breaths, hyperventilating. He patted my arm, then gently helped haul me to my feet. I went along, letting him guide me.

He tried to talk to me but that was the last thing I felt like doing. I just wanted to be left alone. Eventually, they did so. Leaving me to sit huddled in the middle of that huge bed and stare at nothing, the empty black beyond the windows.

The two guards at my door, however, stayed.

—v—

The morning light came as a bright surprise and the world hadn't changed.

Chihirae was still dead.

I went through my morning routines by rote: dressing and washing and taking a single mouthful of food while guards watched me. I didn't throw them out,

complain about the effrontery of it, do anything. I just didn't feel like fighting.

Chaeitch showed while I was sitting and staring morosely at the cooling food on the tray. No sharp cutlery. I looked up at the industrialist standing there, hands clasped behind his back and his tail hanging limply behind the legs of his uncharacteristically somber brown breeches. "How are you doing?" he asked.

"I am all right," I said in a quiet monotone and his ears went back.

"That... I'm sorry," Chaeitch said. "I didn't want to tell you, but... you had to know. I really don't know what else to say. The truth seemed best."

I nodded and tried to take a deep breath that shuddered uncontrollably

He moved to crouch down beside me. "You didn't sleep, did you," he said. "Rot. Is it like your attachment to the doctor? Your bonding? So when you lose someone it's a lot harder."

Trying to understand. Aware that somewhere he might have blundered, but not sure when or how. His hand touched my leg, then withdrew when I flinched. He tucked his chin. "Is there anything I can do?"

"You can bring her back," I growled on a surge of fury that ebbed just as abruptly as he managed to look even more crestfallen.

“If I could... ” he said and waved a small shrug. “If I could.”

“Are we going on?” I asked softly.

“We weren’t planning to.”

“Just... leave her?” I said, and once again those human instincts forced themselves through rationality. He laid his ears back again.

“You’re sure you would want to see that?”

I closed my eyes and swallowed at the vision my mind flashed before me.
“No... No.”

He closed his hand in a small yes. “I think that’s best.”

—v—

A crystal winter’s day, with the sun like a white eye in a clear sky. Brilliant light that glared off snow and ice and didn’t do a lot toward taking the bite out of an air that nipped at exposed skin. The motionless frigidity didn’t worry the locals going about their daily business: storekeepers and stall vendors and peddlers out in the trampled and dirty snow that covered the streets, shouting praise of their wares. Those yowls only mingled with the cries of their competitors, the noises from animals and carts and other traffic.

I sat back in the carriage bound for the docks and let the sounds wash past me. There were periodic glimpses of the city outside as the curtains swayed, but I was too wrapped in my own mourning to pay much attention. Occasional wagons passing the other way; the facades of buildings so similar to the ones in Shattered Water; a lot of baroquely-detailed wrought ironwork around windows, on fences and gates. On the seat opposite, Chaeitch sat and watched me, occasionally flicking his curtain aside to look out.

Back to Shattered Water. For a paranoid second I considered that this might all be a plot. Chaeitch might be in on it. Chihirae might not be dead. It might all've been a story they cooked up to keep me from this jaunt across the countryside. Just a story. And she wasn't really...

Wasn't really...

Ridiculous thoughts like that. Hopeless hopes. Dreams that maybe they'd been mistaken. And I knew I was a fool for even considering them. Grasping at sunbeams the Rris called it.

Still activity on the docks. There were fishing crews still braving the late October weather to fill their nets a final time before the lake ice closed in completely. Rris worked at unloading crates; ice-frosted stacks of traps and nets piled up near companionways; animals trampling snow to slush as goods drays rumbled across icy cobbles. A forest of masts rose against the cobalt horizon, frost glittering in rigging and along rails, sunlight washing across a few brightly colored sails as they were unfurled. I read the names of vessels up against the wharf as we passed: Hichi's Gull, Sea Eagle, Water Sparrow, Fall-Farer, [something] gannet... Other names, things I still couldn't read. I let the curtains fall back into place and sat back against the polished leather upholstery.

The Ironheart's crew was already at work: scraping ice, loading coal and water, stocking supplies and equipment. Eyes turned my way as I boarded and stopped at the top of the companionway to look out over the docks. There was something niggling at the back of my mind...

"Mikah?" Chaeitch was looking up from where he was waiting on the companionway I was blocking. "What is it?"

"Nothing." But there was something. It just wasn't about to reveal itself at that moment. I shook my head and sighed a white breath in the morning sun breaking over the warehouses. "No, nothing."

Down in the cramped little cabin I stowed my gear, dumping my pack on the bed and flopping down beside it. Abovedecks I could hear occasional thumping, clatterings. Sometimes the light would flicker as a pair of legs went past the window. I leaned back and closed my eyes.

Oh, God, Chihirae. I failed. After everything you did to protect me, I failed to help you. I'm sorry.

A fire. A fucking fire. She had her escort with guards and soldiers and a careless candle or unattended hearth steals her away. So close. So damn close.

I squeezed my eyes tighter but was still forced to wipe away the trickle of moisture that escaped. I caught an unsteady breath, then banged my fist against the bulkhead and clambered to my feet, headed above decks to try and escape

that miserable litany cycling through my head.

The cold air helped, a bit. The prow was quiet and out of the way of the crew still loading coal into the hoppers. I leaned against the railing, hugged my arms across my chest and huddled down into the collar of my jacket. The sun was a warmth across my right side as I stared gloomily out at the other vessels moored in that exclusive area. Their clean lines bespoke the wealth behind them: lords, guild leaders, a few lean courier vessels. On a neighboring vessel a sailor came to the railing, did a double take and kept staring. The ship's name in was announce in gilt characters on the prow: Long Drake. A carved and painted mallard with spread wings as a figurehead.

Birds.

That was what had been nagging at me.

Birds. And words that'd been misinterpreted. The connections slipped into place like the tumblers in a well-oiled lock and the revelation they unlocked left me standing stunned. I didn't want to accept it; it was just too impossible to be true. I turned the concept over and over in my mind, touching it gingerly lest it fall apart into a hopeless grasp at nothing. But it fit; all the pieces fit.

"Mikah?"

I shook myself out of it and looked around. More Ris were staring at me, small crowds gathering along the rails of neighboring vessels to rubberneck while the sun rose and time fled. Chaeitch was standing behind me, looking more than a little concerned. "What're you doing?"

I still wasn't sure. "I... just thinking," I said and looked at the harbor and then back at him. "Who would know about the boats here? What's been and gone in the past few days?"

There was a flash of pink as his tongue flicked around his muzzle. "Ah, the harbormaster would know that."

"Where is he?"

"She. Huhn... talking with the captain at the moment. But what do ... Mikah? Mikah! Rot you..."

They were at the foot of the gangplank. The captain and a stocky individual dressed a dark leather jerkin decorated with brass studs, a clipboard in hand and satchel slung over one shoulder. The harbormaster, I guessed. She looked up and that familiar expression crossed her grizzled grey face: a fleering back of black lips from white teeth as the muzzle wrinkled in a frightened snarl reflex. I heard Chaeitch shout out and the captain glanced around then hastily caught the harbormaster's arm.

It took a short time for Chaeitch to calm her down and explain things. She still regarded me with a dubious eye: "It... he's got questions? About what?"

"A ship, Ma'am," I said and she stiffened, glanced at the other Rris as if making sure it wasn't a joke.

“A ship?” she echoed.

“A. Kingfisher. It was called Kingfisher. Have there been any vessels of that name through Blizzard’s Fall?”

Again she looked to Chaeitch and if he made some sort of gesture I missed it. “Kingfisher. Fair few boats of that name about.”

I sighed and nodded. It’d been a slim hope.

“But, there was one arrived about a week ago.” She leafed back a few pages on her clipboard. “Huhnn, offloading and berthing. To receive cargo from Broken Sun.”

“From Broken Sun?” Chaeitch looked at me.

“A,” she said. “It arrived yesterday. The Kingfisher’s due to sail today.”

I felt muscles tensing, my heart starting to pick up the pace. The Rris all glanced at me and I saw nostrils working. “When?” I asked.

The harbormaster tipped her head. “They’re lakers. They’ll want to catch the winds, so certainly before noon.”

“Where is it?”

“Pier 3 berth 2,” she said. “Other end of the docks.”

I nodded. It fit. It all fit too nicely. The Kingfisher wasn't a pub or an inn as Hirht had believed, and now there was a ship of the same name here. Okay, so the name was commonplace, but here? Now? And there was that fire that had so conveniently destroyed any trace of Chihirae in Broken Sun. Now, this boat was receiving a cargo from said city and I wasn't about to forget the way my kidnappers had tried to ship me out of Shattered Water.

She was here. She had to be.

I turned and ran back up the gangway, nearly brained myself on the overhead going belowdecks. Chaeitch caught up to me in my cabin. He caught both edges of the doorway and laid his ears back when he saw what I was doing. “Mikah. You can't!”

I laid the slats under the mattress aside and lifted out the bundle beneath. The shotgun was in there, along with a box of shells. I examined the weapon, then twisted the underbarrel magazine open and slotted a half dozen shells into place. “They're here,” I said. “She's here.”

“Leave it to the guards!”

“How long will that take?” I said and pumped the action back into place, started putting shells into my pockets. “We can go and look at least.”

“Rot! Careful with those: they’re not stable! And you need that cannon just to look?!”

“Better safe than sorry, huh?” I asked and wrapped the shotgun back up in its leather and headed toward the door. For a second Chaeitch didn’t move out of the way, then hissed softly and stepped aside.

The carriage was still on the docks. “Shave you,” Chaeitch was saying as he tailed me. The troopers stationed at the gangplank looked uncertain as I passed by. “This isn’t a good idea. Wait for the guards.”

“And if they see a horde of soldiers approaching, what then?”

He growled and slashed at the chill air, then stopped to snarl some orders to a guard. I was halfway to the wagons before a blur of tawny gold pulled up, a flat dash to a walk and he wasn’t even breathing hard. “They’re alerting the commander. News will be sent to his lordship to send reinforcements to the dock. Red tie everything, Mikah. Just wait!”

The perturbed carriage driver just gaped when I gave directions for Pier 3 as I reached for the door and then stopped. The driver was just sitting there with reigns in hand and eyes wide, looking from me to where Chaeitch was just standing, watching, his tail hanging limply. I stared at him and he didn’t move, didn’t meet my gaze. I sighed and let the door swing closed and set off on foot with the bundle of the wrapped shotgun in hand.

Ten steps before Chaeitch called, “Shave you, Mikah.”

I kept going.

“All right,” he called again. “Stop. Please.”

I drew up.

“All right,” he said and I turned to see a resigned Chaeitch holding the carriage door open. “All right. We’ll go. Just... just don’t do anything stupid.”

I jogged back and gave him a completely transparent smile. “You know me.”

Chaeitch barked an order to the driver and flopped into the opposite seat as we moved off. He cocked his head: the patterns shaved into the fur around his face were starting to grow out. “I know you. That’s what worries me.”

—v—

Chaeitch nudged the curtain aside with a finger and peered through the gap, then reached up to rap on the panel of the driver’s hatch. The rattling and swaying ceased as the carriage eased to a stop. Sounds and smells seeped in from the world outside.

“There it is,” Chaeitch told me.

I peered through the crack and the slightly distorted glass of the window. Dockside traffic went by outside: the furry heads and tufted ears of Rris; the steaming miasma enveloping a team of bison and the dray they were hauling. When it'd passed by I could see the pier and the ships berthed there. About six of them along the length of the wooden jetty; a tangle of masts and lines and wooden walkways.

“On the far side,” Chaeitch told me. “The second one. That’s berth two.”

I saw it. A bulky two-master that looked all trader: stocky, wide-beamed, paintwork that had certainly seen better days. On deck I could see crew moving around bundling sails, carrying goods and ropes. Nothing to indicate the ship was different from any of the others moored at the pier. There was barely-visible lettering on the prow, several words I didn’t know.

“What does that say?” I asked.

“What?”

“The name, on the prow.”

He squinted. “You can see that?”

“A, but I don’t know the words. Like this,” I copied the letters out on the upholstery with a fingernail. He clicked his own claws together. “Kingfisher,” he verified. “But you don’t know... They look like a trader. How can you tell?”

“Maybe they’ll put up a nice big sign for us, a?” I asked, still watching the ship.

“You pick odd moments for humour,” he rumbled and sat back, watching me as I watched the ship. “Fine fools we’ll look if the guards don’t find...”

“It’s them.”

“I wish I could be as certain.”

“It’s them,” I said. A small group had appeared on deck, some sort of argument going on as they headed for the gangway. “I’m sure. It has to be. I...”

“What?” Chaeitch prodded.

Four Ris, one of them brandishing a piece of paper at another and greenstone glittered in the light. I watched as the group headed along the pier and then the docks, bound for the town. “It’s them,” I said, all uncertainty gone. I picked up my bundle and scooted for the door on the far side of the cab.

“What... ” Chaeitch started to say, then moved to scramble after me. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“He’s here,” I said as I dropped to the cobbled quayside. “That Rris with the ... the wrist thing ... the bracelet. He’s here. So she’s here also. I know it.”

“Hai, red tie it. All right. So we wait for the guards to arrive and we... Where do you think you’re going?”

“Following them,” I said.

‘You can’t be serious!’ he hissed and I ignored him until he physically grabbed me and shoved me up against the side of the wagon. A head shorter than me but still strong. “Mikah, think! Rot you! If they’re the ones, if they see you, everything’ll be ruined!”

Clawtips poked at my shoulder as he kept his hand there and stared at my face with urgent eyes. I looked from him to where the Rris were vanishing into the crowd and started to tell him he was... he was... he was right. Oh, christ. There was no way I could follow them inconspicuously. But I didn’t have any choice. If I lost them, then... then...

“I have to,” I said in a small voice.

“Wait for the guards.”

“Then?” I asked. “What then? They’ll have a ... a ... they’ll threaten to kill her.”

“You’re more important than she is,” he hissed, then his ears went back. It was the wrong thing to say.

“I wouldn’t think that for a second,” I said quietly, then caught his hand and prised it away. He didn’t resist as I pushed past and from behind I heard a quiet oath and then claws pattering after me.

—v—

There was no chance of being inconspicuous, not there and then. Ris noticed me and fell silent and melted aside as I passed on the tail of that small knot of individuals as they made their way along the quayside. I kept my distance, as far back as possible, but they were absorbed enough in their own business that they never looked around. When they left the wharves the going got easier. There was much less traffic: Chaeitch and I could stand in a quiet doorway and watch as the small party made their way down the street until they turned off. We made it to that corner in time to see them enter the archway of a building.

A big place. A warehouse of some kind. It had the look of several separate buildings that over time had grown together: brick here, wooden clapboard there; garrets and gables; slate and terra-cotta tiles, moss-green copper roofing. Three stories, with small windows on those upper floors. There was a yard enclosed by a high brick wall at one end of the place. And as we watched from a small side street a wagon laden with crates rattled out of the archway my quarry had entered.

“Warehouse,” Chaeitch verified. “You really think she might be in there?”

I was watching the wagon heading for the docks and I couldn’t help but remember how my kidnappers had been going to smuggle me out. She might be passing by right under our noses. But they’d wouldn’t want to have... ah... perishable goods sitting in the hold while they finished taking on cargo. They’d want to load those goods as late as possible. That meant...

“Mikah?” Cheaitch prompted. “What’re you looking at?”

“Tell me; Those shutters up there, do they look open to you?”

His muzzle turned. “A. What does...” A spasm of comprehension jolted his features and he stared at me. “Ai. No. No, you can’t be serious. You can’t! Skin you, wait for the guard!”

“And they’ll just charge in? They’ll kill her, Chaeitch. Kill her or use her as a shield. I can go in and find her, get her out before they know.”

He looked up at the third-floor window again. “You can’t do this. I mean, you can’t even get up there.”

“You forget,” I gave a small smile as I unwrapped the shotgun. “I’m an ape, remember?”

“Please,” he said as he raised his muzzle. “I don’t want to have to stop you.”

Silence. He stood there affecting an air of bravado and extreme nervousness. I hefted the shotgun and immediately his ears went flat and he took a step back. I lowered the weapon and sighed a white breath. Behind Chaeitch the building loomed against the morning sky, a thread of smoke curling from a chimney. I shook my head. “Chaeitch, you know I’m right. The guard won’t be able to help her. It’ll take them time to get in there. A knife in her throat would only take a second.”

He didn’t say anything.

“Now, are you going to help me, or hurt me?”

A second’s uncertainty before he hissed and slumped back against a brick wall. “Hai, if you don’t kill me, his highness will. You really think you can get in there?”

It wasn’t really that difficult.

We skirted the wall, circling around to the back of the yard. There were more warehouses there, more business and alleyways and tiny doorways ducking down to basement rooms. A tattered Rri dressed in torn rags yelped when it saw me and skittered off, chittering high yelps, but it was running in the opposite direction and didn’t seem to be going to raise the alarm. It was easy to find a lower wall that I could scale and from there I could poke my head over the wall around the kidnappers’ yard. That move almost lacerated my hands: there were shard of glass set into mortar along the top of the wall, concealed beneath a

frosting of snow.

That made it trickier. I shucked my jacket and slung the shotgun, then laid the jacket over the jagged shards. The synthetic spidersilk offered enough padding to clamber up onto the wall and perch there, my healing leg aching deep in the muscle as I squatted and took stock. There was nobody in the yard to see as I tossed the jacket back down to Chaetich, then made my way along the top accompanied by a crunching as glass cracked under my boots. A crescent of iron spikes where the wall met the building might have stopped a Rris burglar: it just gave me something to climb up to where I could grab hold of the ice encrusted guttering on a second-floor roof and awkwardly haul myself up. The lead and copper creaked and bent alarmingly under my weight as I swung a leg up and struggled up onto slick tiles. A single careless move and a cake of packed snow skidded away from beneath me. I barely managed to roll and spread-eagle myself on the roof to stop myself joining the snow on the way to the ground below. More cautiously I worked my way up to hug the planks of the wall.

The yard was still empty. A few Rris passed by on the street beyond the walls but they never looked up. The surrounding buildings turned blank facades to me and I was thankful for the insular nature of Rris architecture: there were very few windows where someone might chance to look out and see me. I glanced down to where an anxious pair of eyes were watching me, then turned my attention to navigating the treacherous roof.

Two windows closed with thick shutters. I took care while passing them, staying low so a passing shadow wouldn't attract the interest of anybody who might be inside. The third window was open, the heavy shutters hanging ajar to reveal a window glazed with grimy panes of bottled glass. I cautiously peered through the distorted murk and could make out an empty room: some wooden boxes, bales of something stacked in a corner, the frame of a bed leaning against a wall. No sign of Rris.

Of course it was latched. I tried once, then just pressed hard against one of the thick panes. The small square of thick glass didn't shatter, instead the whole pane popped out of its tin-solder seal and rattled to the floor.

I held my breath. The sounds of the city continued but there was no other outcry.

Easy to reach in and flip the latch and slide the sash up. The shotgun caught in the frame as I climbed through and just about tipped me back out again. Not the smoothest move I cursed as I recovered and dropped to the floor and crouched there with my breath frosting as I panted and listened for any sign that I'd been detected. Nothing, no shouts or alarms or running feet.

A dusty room with a closed door. It had that air of a place that hasn't had anyone in it for sometime. I shivered, abruptly aware of how sudden this all was. Not an hour ago I'd been aboard a ship due to leave this town, mourning the loss of someone I believed dead. Now I was chasing after a tiny hope; a last chance that I was pinning everything on. Taking a weapon from the armoury, breaking and entering, and dragging Chaeitch into something he never wanted any part of. But it was the last hope I had.

I swallowed hard and swung the shotgun around, flexing trembling hands around cold metal and wood. The action worked with a heavy greased feeling: the smooth sound of mechanical parts meshing as I chambered a round. I closed my eyes, composing myself with the heavy drumming of my heart in my ears, then tried the door.

Not locked. It squeaked a little as it opened, just a few inches. The corridor outside was deserted, still, with anorexic sunlight filtering through a grimy window above the top of a staircase. A draught wound its way down the hall,

perhaps coming straight through the thin walls: the entire floor looked as if it were an addition to the original structure, and not a very solidly build one at that. Several other doors hung open along the hall, but there was no sign of life. I moved down the hall, carefully placing every step as I peered into the rooms. Beds that had been slept in, the smell of food and Rris bodies, but no sign of inhabitants. My palms were sweaty on the stock of the shotgun.

The staircase was just as deserted: steep, rickety steps descending to a landing with another hall. I hesitated, then started working my way down.

Voices sounded from below, several of them, growing louder as a door was opened.

I froze, then scrambled backwards and crouched with the shotgun ready.

"... the weather."

"Another couple of hours. We'll be gone, don't you worry."

"... one, that." That voice was muffled. I couldn't make out everything.

"She's secure. Not going anywhere. But I don't want anyone causing her unnecessary damage. Not yet."

"How long till we move her?"

“Wait till the last load. Don’t want her in there too long. If she smothers she won’t be of use to anyone.”

Footsteps downstairs. I tightened my grip on the shotgun, hardly daring to breath and only moving my eyes as I looked down on a pair of Rris heads and ears. “So long as you can pay.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get your money. More when we get what we want out of that ape.”

“Almost feel sorry for that one.”

“Huhn, caused us enough trouble already. As far as I’m concerned they can skin it for leather. I’m more concerned with getting through Shattered Water. You’d better be able to do what we’re paying you for.”

A snarl. “Don’t worry yourself about that. It’s all fix...”

The voices faded. Headed downstairs I realised, and waited until the voices had died completely before cautiously moving down myself. Distant sounds still floated up the stairwell: occasional voices calling, banging of wood on wood. No sign I’d been found out. I forced myself to relax a little and glanced down the stairs after the others: nobody there now.

But what they’d been talking about... I knew what they’d been talking about,

and for the first time in a long while I felt a hope. A hope mingled with a growing rage and hatred.

The second floor was darker than it'd been upstairs, the walls constructed from brick and mortar. The windows were the tiny slits that were so common on the facades of Rris residential buildings, and perhaps that was what this had once been. Now, feeble light seeped through boarded-up slits to illuminate a corridor full of dust and cobwebs. A stack of wooden crates marked with Rris characters scratched in charcoal leaned against a wall. Further down the hall a door hung open. A trail scuffed through the dust led to that door.

I flexed my fingers on the heavy wood, licked my lips and started inching down the hall. Sounds still drifted up from downstairs, covering the faint groan of wood shifting under my feet. I took step after cautious step, then froze when another sound came from the room ahead: a snarl of anger, a thumping, a sound like a lid slamming. I hesitated, then peeked.

Another store room with stacks of crates and barrels. A Rris with bottled fur stalked out from behind the crates. It tossed a foot-long wooden truncheon onto a table beside a flintlock pistol and flopped down into a chair, snarling all the while. Clawed hands scooped up a bundle of small white sticks and spread them out onto the table, then started sorting through them: a game of some sort. When a low moaning, scarcely on the verge of hearing, sounded from somewhere in the back of the room the Rris's anger flared again: "I told you, quiet it! Now!"

Another small sound and the guard was on its feet with a bludgeon in its hand. "That was your last warning," it snarled as it started back towards the source of the sound.

Perhaps I made some sound as anger overcame my caution. The Rris stiffened

and turned and I saw the eyes go wide in utter horror as I approached with an uncontrollable snarl plastered across my face. It tried to dive past me for the gun on the table and I just swung the butt of my own weapon and felt the impact across the side of the Rris's head. The guard tumbled, crashing against a crate and I brought the butt down again and again...

The guard wasn't moving. Blood leaked from its mouth and cuts under the fur and pooled on the floorboards. It hadn't cried out, hadn't had a chance, and the faint sounds of activity from the floor below continued unabated. I heaved lungfuls of air, then prodded it with a foot: a hand flopped limply, but nothing else. I stepped over it.

There was a cage in the back of the room. An actual cage: low box with a black iron grill over the front. Something you might keep an animal in. In the dimness I could see tawny fur amidst dirty straw, the links of chains, scratches and fresh wounds, the reek of urine and terror.

Oh, god...

It was locked. I found a keyring on the guard and put the boot in again for good measure. There was a key that fit, and the cage door swung open with a grating of hinges. The figure in there stirred slightly, a low moan sounding.

Oh, Christ...

A pathetic figure curled up in misery. Blood was caked on naked fur. A multitude of scratches raked and criss-crossed her filthy pelt, the dried gore not quite hiding markings that looked tantilisingly familiar; heavy black-iron

manacles were clamped around ankles and wrists and a leather hood drawn tight over the head and tied around the neck. I gingerly reached and touched a foot, then flinched as the figure tried to pull away from me. Was it her? Was this a trick of some kind?

“Chihirae?” I ventured and the figure stopped, her chest heaving. “Oh, no. Jesus... Chihirae?” I touched again and the bedraggled figure jumped again, trying to curl up into a ball. I stroked gently, then tried to get her out of that hole, feeling muscles shivering violently the whole while. She struggled feebly, making getting that hood off all the more difficult. When it came off it dripped moisture: condensation turning the lining slimy and plastering fur against a familiar face distorted by pain and the straps of a muzzle. Amber eyes screwed up against the light as I worked at the muzzle and when it came off she gasped hungrily for air, then croaked a faint, “Mikah?”

I cradled her. Just holding her there in that dank little cell, stroking her face and whispering reassurances while she whimpered and shook in my arms. All other thoughts banished for that time when all that mattered to me in the world was held close.

—v—

She lay propped in the juncture of two crates, watching with frightened eyes as I threw the guard into the box she’d had so recently occupied. The hooded figure tumbled into the reeking straw and lay motionless. I done it the only favor I felt like granting: not checking to see if it was still alive. At the least the confusion might buy us some extra time, if only a couple of seconds.

I crouched beside Chihirae. “All right. We go now.”

“A,” she said in a tiny voice and didn’t immediately take my offered hand.

She could barely walk. That was hardly surprising: she didn’t know exactly how long she’d been in that cage. Her legs must’ve cramped up terribly. Bruises and scratches covered her, especially where the straps had chaffed and cut into her: wrists, ankles, angry sores across her muzzle. It hurt me just to see her suffer as I helped her stand, but we had to go. She choked back a mewl of pain when I took her arm over my shoulder.

I froze, not moving while she panted like a scared animal. “I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“No,” she gasped. “Just go. Please, let’s get out of here.”

I patted her arm and started moving again. She limped along, sagging into the support of my arm and obviously biting back the pain with every step. It took a while to get out into the corridor, and when we did she looked around: “You’re alone?”

“Sort of.”

She made a small, frightened noise. “How can you... Sai, Mikah, you’ve got a plan.”

“Yes...”

And it was then that a Rris came up the stairs at the end of the hall. It didn't see us at first, not until it turned our way and yelped in shock. I started to raise the shotgun with my free hand and the Rris just blurred back with the sound of claws scrabbling on wood and was gone down the stairs, cries of alarm floating back up.

"He saw us," Chihirae panted.

"You think?" I asked and she actually chittered a bit. I felt my face twitch in a smile and I touched her cheek; just gently. "Don't worry. We'll get you out of here."

"A," she panted. I could feel her heart pounding, thumping against her ribs. And when she forgot her claws I just grimaced and bore it. At least those jabs couldn't have been causing me a tenth of the discomfort she was feeling as I hurried her down the hall. From the sounds coming up from below, heading downstairs wasn't an option, so we took the only other one. With every step upwards her claws clenched but she didn't utter a squeak.

Shouts sounded from behind us, then an ominous silence. Chihirae tensed, trembling violently. "They're coming!"

Of course. I wasn't expecting anything else. I had the shotgun, so we might've been able to hole up in a room and hold our pursuers off until help arrived. But I didn't know how long that would be, or even if they would. So I had to get her out of there. No way we'd be able to back out the way I'd come in: in her condition she'd never make it across that obstacle course. I'd lied when she asked if I had a plan. I'd just wanted to get us out any way I could. Now, that

plan hadn't changed, but the way I was going to accomplish it had. Only problem was I didn't have a clue how I was going to go about it.

"Mikah? We're in trouble?" Perhaps she smelled my nervousness.

"You'll be fine," I said and hoped the future wouldn't make a liar of me. I needed a rope to get her down, so that left only...

I carried Chihirae into the first room and shouldered the door closed. There was no lock or latch, so I set her on an unmade bed with its unwashed and reeking sheets while I dragged a couple of the other five pallets over in front of the door. Neither the barricade or the door would hold against a serious assault, but they'd slow things down a bit. It was the corner room, one with a window in the wall opposite the door, another in the perpendicular wall. The first window overlooked the roof I'd clambered across getting up here, the other opened right out over the street. I burst the shutters open and looked down at the snow-covered cobbles three floors below.

Chihirae sagged back on the bed, breathing hard and watching with glazed eyes as I started grabbing blankets and tying them together. White membranes flickered from the corners of her eyes. She didn't look good and in a flash of fear I wondered about internal injuries as well. "How're you doing?" I asked as I worked.

"Hurts," she said, and something made me feel like that reply wasn't addressed at me. I gave a tight smile and tried to work faster.

The door rattled and bumped.

Shit. I picked up my makeshift rope in one hand and the shotgun in the other. Chihirae gasped as I tucked the loop under her arms and snugged it. "Listen," I said urgently as I helped her over to the window. "Find soldiers. They should be coming. Ask for Chaeitch. Tell him who you are, he'll understand. He'll help you. Chaeitch. You got that?"

"Chaeitch," she muttered, then saw the street three floors below. "Mikah?"

"You'll be fine," I said as I swung her legs over the sill. She grabbed for first the windowframe, then the linen with both hands. Her eyes went wide as I let her go and all her weight was on the line.

It held. I braced myself against the windowframe, straining to lower her slowly and grimacing as deep weals in my back made their presence felt again. Friction heated my hands as I played it out as fast as I dared, the figure clutching the rope below slowly descending, occasionally bumping against the building. Ris on the street were stopping to stare at the spectacle.

The door thumped and shook again, then again. Louder and harder this time as more weight was thrown against it. The beds propped against it started sliding across the floor. I clamped the rope with my left arm, swinging the shotgun up with the other. The blast of smoke and sparks and a scream from beyond the door, the room filled with a choking cloud of acrid grayness which slowly dissipated. My hand tingled and there was a chunk of wood the size of my fist missing from the door. I flipped the gun to catch the forestock and pumped it one-handed - sending a brass cartridge clattering across the floor - then flipped it back and kept it trained. The rattling had stopped.

Chihirae... I tried to split my attention between her and watching the door. Almost there now. I let the rope slide faster, another awkward knot bumping through my hands. And down below there were spectators approaching her and I wanted to scream: any of them could have been affiliated with her kidnappers and I'd simply be handing her straight back to them. I could start pulling her back...

And more Rris spilling out from a side street, a tight group decked in armor that glittered in the cold light. Guards. At last, the guards. They spread out, snarling orders and moving the civilians back, rushing toward the limp form of Chihirae. I gasped in relief and yelled, "Help her!" The Rris words rasped in my throat and echoing in the street.

I saw a musket raised toward me, then knocked aside as officers pushed through and barked something. Armored guards reached up catch Chihirae and the rope went slack.

Movement through the hole in the door. I fired wildly, a blast of smoke and sparks that hung in the freezing air and faded to reveal another hole. A snarl from beyond the door and the wall suddenly erupted in splinters as guns on the far side volleyed, holes punching through and rounds ricocheting through the room. I dove for cover, fired back at targets I couldn't see and there was another volley, this time from the room next door. Splinters and shattered wood filled the air, dust spilling from the ceiling. Then the door exploded.

The blast hit like a physical blow, an overpressure that knocked me back against a wall and set my ears ringing. Through a stunned daze and clouds of chokingly thick smoke I saw blurs moving through the gray. A Rris face bared in a snarl as it saw me and my finger squeezed on the trigger. I didn't hear the shot that took half its face off in a spray of pink and I pumped and fired again and the next Rris flipped facefirst as its abdomen was eviscerated. Again and I don't know if I hit anything as clawed hands ripped the gun out of my grasp and

something hard came around in a vicious arc that terminated in the side of my head.

Voices snarled beside my ears: loud. That was the first sensation to permeate the grey wool wrapped around my awareness. Next was the pain as my hair was yanked back to raise my head. There was a brilliant light, a glare that blurred and sharpened and resolved into colors and shapes: sky, rooftops, a dizzying drop down to the street where figures stood looking up. Clawed hands clamped on my shoulders and a furry body was pressed close, reeking of musk and gunpowder. A circle of cold metal was jammed against my jaw, a contrast to the warm tickling down the side of my face. I tried to move: claws dug deeper, my hands twisted behind my back.

”... something!” a voice snarled in my ear. “You know we mean it!”

I gritted my teeth and tried to focus on the street, at the troops surrounding the building with muskets trained: troopers taking cover around corners and in other buildings. A dark droplet dripped from my chin and fell away, seeming to take a long time before it splashed into dirty snow below. Then I winced as a claw dug into my neck and the voice hissed again: “Say something!”

I grinned through blood. “Shoot! Shoot the motherhuhn...”

They didn’t want to hear my contribution to the world of Rris obscenities. Pain spiked as claws dug in and the Rris dragged me away to slam me facedown on the floor. The whole room reeked of sulfur and powder and scorched wood, underlying that was the organic coppery reek of blood and a methane stench from lacerated bowels. Somewhere a Rris was keening in mindless agony, elsewhere I could hear a voice shouting: “It’s still alive and still in one piece. That can be changed. You’ll keep your distance, give us passage when we

require it. You try anything and the ape will be the first casualty.”

There were shouted responses. I didn't catch them, concentrating on trying to breathe under the weight of the Rris atop me. An attempt at slight movement and claws dug a little deeper while a snarl like tearing cloth sounded at my ear. All I could do was lie motionless with my face pressed against grimy floorboards while Rris voices shouted in the background.

She was away. She was safe. That was all that mattered to me. But I still felt fear as the shouting voice yowled in fury and then my left arm was just about dislocated as they forced it back, stood on my fingers to splay them immobile against the floor.

I knew what was coming but it was so quick: a sudden freezing pressure across the tip of my little finger. A crunch and thump as razored metal cut through something softer into wood. It didn't hurt, not for a split second...

They held me while I spasmed and strangled on the scream and purple floaters spun in front of my eyes. It hurt. It hurtithurtithurt...

Over at the window bright sunlight flared around a Rris throwing something out and my hand was an excruciating throbbing that felt as big as the universe. Oh, christ. I moaned and clenched a slippery fist around the pain and gore. A distant shout, then the sunlight was gone as the shutters slammed shut.

A few subdued exchanges, then a moments pause before a pair of Rris feet stalked into my view. The Rris squatted, a familiar Rris cocking his head and turning a horribly serene gaze on me. “So, Mikah,” my old torturer rumbled.

“You’re turning into a real thorn.”

And I wasn’t afraid. I was in horrible pain, but the fear just wasn’t there, only a dull resignation. “I… try,” I croaked.

He favored me with a slow grin and displayed a hand stained with blood. Mine. “I’d be interested in hearing just how you ended up here and what happened to my associates.”

My head was spinning, from pain and perhaps blood loss. But I was able to return the grin. “They annoyed me,” I whispered.

“Huhnn?” he looked amused. “Actually, I think you’re simply luckier than you have any right to be. Still, that’s moot now. You’ve slashed our current agenda to shreds and caused us more than a little inconvenience so I think that it’s more than fair that you help us out of here.”

“Get bent,” I closed my eyes and tried to curl around my pain.

There was a rattle of metal, then a mechanical sound. I looked up into the muzzle of the shotgun. Behind the stock my torturer grinned again and his finger toyed around the trigger. “Fancy toy. You bleat about your peace-loving ways, then you build things like this. Very nice.”

His finger squeezed and there was a clack as the gun struck empty. He blinked at me, perhaps wondering why I hadn’t even flinched, then swung it around into

both hands and looked it up and down, a pink tongue coming out to lick around his jowls. “A, very nice. Tear a Rris’s insides out, drape them over her feet and still let her live. What a spectacular civilization your kind must have.”

I almost managed to laugh. “We’ve got assholes like you too.”

There was a low growl, then I heard him giving orders: “Stop that bleeding and get it downstairs. We don’t have much time.”

Claws tore me again as they hauled me to my feet.

—v—

Sunlight glared into my eyes as the wagon rattled out of the shadow of building’s main gate and into the street. I squinted but couldn’t turn my head away: the gun barrel digging in behind my jaw prevented that.

They’d torn my shirt off and used rags of that to staunch the blood trickling from the remaining stump of my little finger where it’d been severed at the last joint. That hurt, a helluva lot, and the throbbing only started to die after they tied my hands behind my back. In fact, I lost all feeling in that digit. Then the bastard had grinned at me while they strapped the muzzle of a musket to the back of my neck, the circle of cold metal pressing in behind my jaw.

“You might want to be careful,” the Rris had hissed through bared teeth. “The trigger’s a bit sensitive, and we wouldn’t want to loose you. Not yet.”

The smart-ass reply I was going to make was choked off when the Rris behind me yanked on the musket to haul me to my feet. I coughed for breath while Rris hands clenched tight around my arms to hold me still, rows of needles digging in and my torturer reached up to hook a claw under my chin. "Learning to keep your mouth shut, are you?" he grinned.

I smiled back through blood and brought my knee up, hard and fast.

It connected and I swear I heard something go crack. His eyes went shock-wide and his jaw dropped before a small sound like leaking steam escaped him and he folded. It was a small satisfaction I didn't have long to savor before I was slammed face first up against a wall. From behind came the sounds of consternation and seriously personal pain. It brought me a bit of time, but it didn't seem like long before claws grabbed my shoulder. "You..." a choked voice snarled. "You [something] freak. I should cut your maleness out."

I just smiled quietly. "You need me alive."

"Huhn, you would still be alive. Believe me, you would still be alive," he rumbled and snapped a sharp gesture. I caught a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye just before a blow to the side of my head sent a spike of white light that washed away the world. I staggered, nauseous and disorientated, blinking the world back into focus. Clawed hands were supporting and when I dazedly tried to touch the burning lines on my face they shook me hard enough to rattle my teeth, hustling me out into the battle-scared hallway.

At least the bastard was walking with a pronounced limp.

Armed Rris surrounded me; a half dozen ahead of me and at least that many behind. The cold metal of the musket digging into my neck was mingled with the throbbing burning of the headwounds that dribbled blood down onto my bare shoulders. I was starting to shiver: cold or fear or shock, I couldn't tell. And every time my guards laid hands on me I got more scratches and cuts.

Hastened down stairs that creaked under our combined weight. I could smell smoke from somewhere: a faint haze was seeping into the first floor hallway outside the room where Chihirae had been held. Down to the ground floor where the smoke was thicker, crawling among old rafters and stained timbers of storerooms filled with merchandise of all descriptions: crates and barrels and bales and flasks and chests. Stacks of them, more crates waiting on a loading dock where wagons and harnessed bison waited. The animals were restless, disturbed by the smell of fire permeating the building. Heavy doors leading outside were closed and barred tight, a few pins of sunlight seeping in through chinks. Dozens of Rris with mismatched armor and a variety of firearms bustled around, their ears back and an air of apprehension setting hackles on end. I saw a familiar face: a Rris with a greenstone bracelet and a pair of pistols in a baldric. He met my gaze and took a couple of steps toward me, a hand moving toward the hilt of a flintlock. The gun in the back of my neck jabbed, getting me moving again. The Rris growled softly as I was hustled past.

“We’re taking it?!” I heard.

“Only as far as we need.”

Into the back of a wagon. Kneeling, my hands tied behind my back, the muzzle of a gun in the back of my neck and the weapons of four other Rris trained on me. The doors were unbarred, opened and sunlight flooded into the gloom.

Now... wisps of steam rose from bison's coats and mixed with their breath; their hooves clumped against the ice and cobbles; wagon wheels rattling as we left the darkness of the entry archway and turned toward the wharves. A freezing breeze hit me like a physical force and now the shivering was uncontrollable. Glaring sunlight made me squint, seeing a achingly blue sky spread beyond tiled rooftops, blank plaster facades with the dark slits of small windows turned to the world, a street lined with soldiers.

Armed and armored, with metal accouterments glittering in the sunlight. Polished armor of royal guard, the more prosaic quilted leather of garrison troops, even a few mediators in their the black leather coats standing and watching impassively. None of them moved. A hundred eyes watching as the small procession passed by on the way to the docks, a hundred eyes watching me: a battered hostage with half a dozen guns pointed my way.

Further along. A familiar figure behind a cordon of soldiers: Chaeitch, staring with an expression that was horror no matter what the species. He mouthed something, I had no idea what it was, but I offered a small smile. It was all I could do before he was gone from sight. My torturer cast glanced that way from where he was sitting watching me and favored me with a glistening grin.

The docks were cleared. What had been a bustling waterfront that morning was now a deserted strip of littered cobblestone. If it wasn't for the distant cordon of troops sealing the dock area off there wouldn't have been a Ris visible anywhere. The wagons lurched to a halt at the wharf where the Kingfisher was moored and my leash handler half strangled me again when he yanked me to my feet. "Move," my torturer growled and gave me a hard shove in the back with claws extruded. I nearly fell out of the back of the wagon.

Not easy to walk over uneven cobbles and planking when your knees are

rubber and you can't look down, but they pushed me along double time, cursing at me when I stumbled and nearly fell again on the gangplank. Ironically it was the strap around my neck that kept me from going over the side.

On board crew were working with feverish haste. Ris stripped down to light tunics hauled a few last crates aboard while others prepared sails and lines, only casting furtive glances my way as I was hustled along with the muzzle jammed up into my neck rubbing my skin raw. Armed Ris were taking stations along the railings, ears and tails twitching as they watched the surrounding ships. Nets were being strung up to prevent easy boarding and I saw several small swivel cannons being slotted into place on the rails. Larger cannonades were being assembled and primed. They looked ready to fight a small war.

Claws caught my arm: my torturer. "You'll stand up here," he said as he led me forward, toward the prow. "I want you where the world can see you."

"How far is this going to go?" another voice spoke growled. "Rot it, this thing's too hot. Even if we lose these troops, there's not a government that'll rest while he's at large. You want twelve kingdoms snapping at your tail?"

My torturer looked annoyed. "My people can handle those problems. They're good at making things disappear."

"Your people! And it's never occurred to you that 'your people' might've been compromised?! The rotted Bluebetter authorities know you! This thing was bait, they wanted you to snatch that thing and everything was a play to lure you in! How do you think this thing got loose? Rot it, they pulled it out and took your people at the same time. By now they'll have followed the trail back to the hearth. I wouldn't pay you dirt for your peoples' chances."

A low growl. “It’s occurred to me. It occurred to a lot of people. There are contingencies against such an eventuality.” A distant shout sounded: someone hailing the ship. I heard another snarl. “Right now, we’ve got more immediate concerns.”

A hand shoved me forward, causing me to choke again before the guard with the musket started moving. If he had his finger on the trigger... I was right at the bow, a captive figurehead looking out over the cold surface of the breakwater harbor. The little pilot boat had rounded a jetty and was chugging toward the Kingfisher: the meager crew stripped bare as they tended the clattering engine. “You wait there,” my torturer said. “Let them get a good look at you. They try anything and they can see how well your remains float.”

The tug drew up off the bow. The crew stared at me, black lips fleered back from teeth. I heard a mirthless chitter from my torturer. Lines were tossed out and secured and the little engine started up, slowly drawing the Kingfisher out of dock and toward the wider channel where she could unfurl sails.

And once there, it was over for me.

“You think you’re going to get away with this?” I rasped.

My guard jerked the musket and I choked.

“That a yes or a...”

Another jerk on the musket and this time I choked and kept choking. Strangling and coughing and feeling the pressure building behind my eyes as I collapsed to my knees and the cord pulled even tighter. I rasped horribly for breath, facedown on cold decking as I convulsed against the straps and heard Rris voices. “Red tie you! Not so hard.”

“I didn’t, sir! He ...

“Get him up!”

Claws raked my skin as they turned me and I saw my torturer standing over me, the guard with the musket pushed aside and I kicked up again, right between his legs.

This time he screeched as he doubled over and I scrambled back, the musket falling and twisting the straps around my neck, cutting off my air for real as I kicked out again, knocking the Rris back into the way of the others and turning. Someone howled and a clawed hand grabbed for me but my skin tore and I hit the railing with my stomach, flipped over it and the musket cartwheeled over my head, the weight of it turning it into a lever that nearly broke my neck as the pair of us became a two-body equation tumbling toward the water.

An impression of blue and grey spinning end over end.

Hit.

Freezing water. Crusts of thin ice.

It was like... I don't know what it was like. Try sticking your hand into a pitcher of ice water. It was like that, only over my entire body instantaneously. The shock was a frigid electrical jolt to my system; a physical blow to my entire body; ten thousand icicles being stabbed into every square centimeter of skin at the same instant. An agony that threatened to suck the breath from my lungs and it took sheer desperation to hold on.

A confusion of bubbles and freezing murk, the weight around my neck turning me upside down and my hands were still tied. I'd tried to plan out my movements beforehand, but actually doing it while the light faded and freezing water tried to force itself up my nose was something else. I managed, somehow... pulling my legs up and sliding my arms down, feeling ropes cutting through the numbness and almost dislocating my shoulder, but then my bonds were past my butt and pulling my legs through was easy.

The light was up, follow the bubbles. I righted myself, my lungs bursting as I kicked for the surface and fought against the strangling weight of the gun that tried to drag me back. The cords were wet and something kept catching, stopping me from pulling the damn thing loose. It was only with a final desperate yank that the weight came away and I let it tumble back down into the murk while I struggled upward.

Broke the surface with a floundering splash and hoarse gasp of precious air. Above me was a howl. "There!"

I ducked under again and the water around me erupted: dozens of foam trails

punching down from above and only penetrating a few inches before their velocity was killed. Something bounced off my shoulder: a small distorted lead sphere bound for the depths. I struck out away from the hull of the Kingfisher, swimming underwater with bound hands as well as pants and boots. The freezing water seemed to be seeping into my bones, tying my muscles in knots and leeching at my last reserves while the pain in my finger was back again. Only a few meters before I had to risk another screaming breath and a fresh volley rang out. This time as I dove something large hit the water nearby with a terrific crash and waterspout. A damned cannonball. I changed direction, trying to jink. If they'd had explosive shells I'd have been dead.

Next breath there were more eruptions of water around me, then a jolt that tumbled me and I broke surface just as a scattershot was fired: something raked a burning line across and through a bicep.

The Kingfisher was coming about, after me. Even in the harbor they were raising sails that caught a favorable wind. The lines to the tug were slackening as it gained momentum and I knew there was no way I could make shore before they either overran me or hit me with gunfire.

Dive and dodge. Again while gunfire pattered and thumped even over the sound of my heartbeat that was growing louder and seeming to fill the underwater world. No, not my heartbeat I realised, but it was a sound I knew.

And saw the source the next time I surfaced. The mastless silhouette of the Ironheart emerging from the cover of the VIP wharves, smoke streaming from both funnels as the engines were opened and the underwater heartbeat turned to an angry hammering.

The Kingfisher swung about, nose pointing toward the breakwater mouth and

broadside to the Ironheart.

I tried to scream to the Ironheart to break off. The bastards had cannons and the Ironheart was never built to stand against that. And as if in response clouds of smoke billowed along the Kingfisher's rail, black blurs arching through the sky toward the Ironheart and one struck. A cloud of splinters spun away from a bite taken out of the forward deck.

"No!" I tried to scream again, taking in a mouthful of freezing water. They couldn't. They'd just get themselves killed.

The Ironheart altered course, turning toward me. They were trying to put themselves between myself and the Kingfisher, but they'd only get themselves blown out of the water. Were they going to ram? They only had personal firearms...

Except for the assembly on the forecastle. A cannon, I thought at first. They'd taken a cannon and mounted it on the ship. But I knew it couldn't match the battery that blasted another cloud of grey smoke from the Kingfisher and raised more fountains around the Ironheart, tearing out part of the wheelhouse roof.

The Ironheart responded.

A sound like a giant sheet of tearing linoleum ripped across the harbor for long seconds. A gout of grey smoke rose from the Ironheart's forecastle and the Kingfisher's deck seemed to erupt. A storm of splinters and fragments of wood spun into the air, ropes and masts torn and split apart, sails shredding and billowing. The hull was peppered, hundreds, thousands of holes punching and

tearing until planks split and gave away. A devastation that swept from stem to stern and back again. On deck...

Figures seemed to dance like marionettes before flying apart. Screams were cut off, others continued after the snarl of the weapon had died leaving a slowly listing vessel bleeding smoke into the sky.

A shadow fell over me. The wall of planks and caulking that was the Ironheart's hull filled the world and the Kingfisher's corpse was lost from sight.

There were voices calling down to me and a rope splashed into the water beside me. I caught after it with clumsy, bound hands and managed to catch hold, clutching at it with everything I had left and it was just enough to keep my head above water. My hands didn't want to work, my fingers utterly senseless, and when someone started to haul the line in the wet hemp simply started slipping through my fingers. I just held on with hands that couldn't feel anything while water slapped around my face and voices shouted at me.

A splash sent a choking wave across me and I panicked, thinking cannonball again and trying to kick away but my legs didn't seem to be there. Then hands caught me and what must've been arms wrapped around me. Wet fur was pressed against my skin and there was a voice in my ear as something tightened under my arms and the freezing water fell away.

I could feel the pressure but nothing else as hands caught me and pulled and I was lying on hard wood. Ris were gathered about me and I remember wondering why Chaeitch was dripping wet and looking so distraught.

“Mikah?”

“Hi,” I mumbled vaguely and trying to focus on him. “What... happened?”

“Huhnn...” flying water sparkled as he raked wet fur back from his face then reached down to pat my arm. “You’re all right now. You hear me? Shave me... get him below. Now! Warmth, get...”

I faded out for a while. Next I remember I was slung between a couple of Rris being manhandled down the companionway. Another break in memories, then my soaked and freezing clothes and the bindings around my wrists were gone and I was being towed down then laid into a bunk and I still couldn’t feel anything. Blankets were piled on. More urgent voices in the background and I opened my eyes to a Rris reaching for my face.

“No...” My scream was loud in the tiny cabin but almost immediately Chaeitch was leaning past. “Mikah, just lie still. He’s a doctor. Just be still.”

“Chihirae,” I tried to say. “Chihirae...”

“She’s safe, Mikah. She’s safe. Just lie quiet.”

They tended to my wounds while Chaeitch stayed and reassured me. I sank under with his calming voice a hissing susuruss over the throb of a heartbeat. I woke once, vaguely surprised when I was face-to-face with a Rris in the narrow bunk with me. Two actually, I think, hugging me between them. And the worry

on that face might have been funny but I was starting to shiver violently and my hand was aching abominably and the warmth they provided was almost too painful. I nestled closer to soft heat and just gave in.

—v—

Something in the warm darkness touched me. A face leaned over me and a gentle cool hand stroked my forehead. “Mai?” I mumbled.

“No, Mikah, I’m afraid not. Don’t you remember?” a low voice asked.

The waking dream shattered as I started to muzzy consciousness. I was in bed, buried under a stack of warm comforters. Overhead was the dimly-visible gilt inlay of the ceiling of my quarters in Chistri Einter House. It felt like night, with the drapes closed against the winter cold, with dim light from the fireplace and lamps turning the bedroom room to patches of warmth and pitch shadows. There was a Rris perched on the side of the bed. “Mai?” I said again through the clinging fogs of sleep and tried to touch and winced when the bandages on my hand shifted.

“Don’t, Mikah. It’s me. You remember?”

I blinked the familiar silhouette into focus and felt a fool. Chaeitch. “Oh.” I croaked. “I was dreaming... sorry.”

“Quite all right,” he smiled a little and offered a cup. “Here, drink. You sound

like you need it.”

I sipped cold water, quietly taking stock. I hurt, in a lot of places. There were bandages holding pads to the side of my head, more around my torso and the stinging line across my bicep. My left hand was bound in a mitten-like swathe and what had been my little finger throbbed with a low but persistent pain. ‘What happened?’ I whispered.

The bed shifted as he set the cup back on bedside table, then adjusted the finely cut tunic he was wearing. “We pulled you out of the harbour. You were in quite a mess; just collapsed on deck. Scared the urine out of me. You were exhausted and frozen through. You’ve slept the better part of two days away.”

On deck... Last I remembered was... was the ironheart and someone looking worried. No memory whatsoever of being moved, of being treated. But other memories flared to the foreground. “Chihirae,” I blurted and tried to sit up and winced as lacerations shifted and Chaeitch promptly pressed me back. “Where is she? Is she all right? I’ve got see her...”

“All you’ve got to do is stay where you are. As for her, you can ask her yourself.”

“What...” My gaze followed his gesture toward the door through to the main room where fragments of darkness shifted and changed and resolved into a figure that limped into firelight. She was walking now. She’d cleaned and brushed and had new clothes, but they didn’t hide the bandages and bruised swellings and patches where fur had been clipped from around wounds. Dark marks were scored across her muzzle in dreadful lines that were a reminder of the scars that distorted my own face and she moved slowly, painfully. For a split second there was a flash back to that night she’d first come into my room: that

predatory slink, as fluid as oil on water, and seeing her now was a horrible reminder of what'd happened to her. "Hello, Mikah," she said: a low, familiar voice.

"Oh, Chihirae. I'm so sorry."

She ducked her head and a pained grimace flickered momentarily. "You came for me. Thank you for that."

There was something wrong. I could hear the tension in her voice and she hadn't met my eyes; not a glance. "I had to. I couldn't leave you."

Her ears lowered and raised: there was a scabbed notch in one of them. "How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Better than you look, I'd wager." She hugged her arms around herself, stroking at the fur of a bicep and then almost snarled: "Rot, Mikah, why'd you do it? I was happy. I had a home, I had work. Why'd you pull me into this?"

My heart plunged like a stone. She was angry at me; something I'd never seen in her before. "I'm sorry. I never intended this."

"Never intended it," she breathed. "Mikah, you dragged me away from my life. I didn't have a choice! You never intended it?!" Her eyes flared wide and she planted a finger in her chest then swept down her body: taking in the cuts and bandages. "They hurt me, Mikah!"

“Ma’am!”

Chaeitch was on his feet, but she ignored him. “They asked me questions, Mikah. About you. They made me answer. They tortured me!”

What could I say? Offer her excuses; tell her who’d sent those orders off. Shift the blame onto someone I still had feelings for, but ultimately there was only one person who caused all this. “I’m so sorry,” I said in a small voice.

“I know,” she breathed, almost a hiss.

“Ma’am,” Chaeitch interjected again. “You don’t understand...”

“I understand,” Chihirae literally snapped and then closed her eyes, composing herself. “Sir, I thank you for your hospitality. Now, please excuse me.” She ducked her head and started to limp toward the door. Chaeitch laid his ears back and started to get up, to pursue her. I pawed at his arm and he looked around. “Don’t,” I said. “Please.”

So he just stood and watched as she closed the door behind her. “She’s wrong.”

“No. No she’s not. I’m the reason she was brought here. I’m the reason she was hurt. She has every right to be angry.”

He looked shocked. “You can’t blame yourself.”

“She never asked me to fall into her life. I was the one who went to her.” I swallowed hard, looking at some place beyond him. “She’s done so much for me and then I bring something like this on her. I suppose... it hurts, but I can understand. Give her some time.”

Amber eyes blinked down at me, the patterns shaved into the fur of his forehead distorting as his muzzle wrinkled a bit. “You... Just as I think I might be starting to get some idea of what goes on in that head of yours. I don’t think I’ll ever understand you.”

“I’m afraid I feel the same way,” I said, closing my eyes. “Can you just... Please, can I have some time?”

“Alone?”

“A.”

A very obvious hesitation before he said, “I’ll have some food sent up later. That’s all right?”

I felt my lips grimace in what might have been a smile. “I’ll be here,” I assured him.

Another hesitation before I heard the door close. No, Chaeitch, I wouldn't try that. The repercussions a suicide attempt might visit on Chihirae would make what she'd been through pale into insignificance. No, at the moment I just wanted to be alone.

Hot tears leaked out despite tightly clenched eyes.

—v—

I woke to midmorning sunlight. Clear winter sun spilled through the french doors and mullioned windows, glaring off gilt and satin finishings. I lay quietly, a little confused: I'd never heard the servants open the drapes.

It hadn't been a quiet night. The dreams had crept back every time I started to close my eyes: dark and seditious and utterly terrifying, dragging me back to consciousness shaking and crying and trying to separate the nightmares from reality. It was some ungodly small hour before I finally dropped of into a bottomless sleep. And that morning I was feeling the effects of it. I started to raise a hand to rub my raw eyes and grimaced, blinked at the bandages, then used my other hand.

"I didn't want to wake you."

The voice in the morning stillness made me flinch. Chihirae was standing in the door through to the main room, a hand resting on the frame and her tail lashing the air behind her. A shape I remembered from last night, her fur

groomed and gleaming in the morning sun but still showing the marks of her ordeal: There were bandages around her wrists that were only half-hidden by the sleeves of the baggy russet tunic someone had given her. “You looked like you could use the sleep. I hear you had a restless night.”

I flexed my wounded hand slowly. I hurt: a dull throbbing that ached in time with my pulse. “Good morning,” I said.

She ducked her head, watched me with hunched shoulders. “The dreams? You’re still having them?”

“Not that bad for a while,” I said. “Not since... Not for a while.”

She trailed a finger down the carved door frame, let it linger as she took a cautious step toward me. “Mikah, about last night... I spoke with ah Ties. He told me everything that’s happened to you. About Maithris.”

“Oh,” I said, laying back to stare up at the ceiling. I wasn’t entirely surprised.

Chihirae sighed, her breath visible in the bedroom air despite the fire, then she limped over. “Why didn’t you say something? If I’d known I wouldn’t have said those things.”

“You were right,” I told her. “It’s because of me that you’re here. If I hadn’t intruded on your life this would never have happened.”

She sat at my side and laid a hand on my leg. “If you hadn’t intruded on my life some overexcitable farmer would put a bullet through you. But meeting you... Mikah, that’s something I’ve never regreted.”

“I never wanted for you to get hurt. How are you feeling? The cuts... they looked bad.”

“I’m fine.” She reached up a hand with bandages around the forearm and touched the dark marks across her muzzle. “Compared with you, these are nothing. My hide’s a bit tougher, a?”

“I wish it’d never happened.”

“That would’ve been preferable,” she sighed and patted my leg again. “Ah Ties said you didn’t know anything about my summons. Why was it done?”

“Mai... she only told me a short time ago.” A short time? God, it felt like an eternity. “I should’ve known she’d do something like that. I told her how much I was missing you...” I realised what I’d said and looked away from her. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was quiet without you around. I think I missed you as well.” She laid her ears back a little and waved a small shrug. “The cubs in Westwater asked when you were coming back.”

I smiled at that. “Ah, them. They’re well?”

“Growing and learning. Feher is a sharp one.”

“Good with a snowball too. Those were good days, a?”

“A,” she affirmed. “Doesn’t seem to be too much change. You still seem to be chasing down trouble.”

“This does seem familiar.” I thumped a hand against the bed spreads. “We’ve been here before, haven’t we?”

A chitter of amusement. “At least this time you can talk.”

I also had to laugh at that. “That does help.”

She patted my leg. “You feel like eating? They said they can bring some food if you need it.”

Food. The last time I’d eaten was... “Food would be wonderful. I’m very hungry. But the servants can get it...”

“You wait,” she said and limped off through to the other room. I heard the door open and distant Rris voices carried. She was hurting and she still went off and waited on me while I lay like a lump on a log. Rot everything... and now I was starting to swear in Rris.

I threw the sheets aside and swung my legs over the side. The movement made me dizzy and I just sat on the edge of the bed for a second, feeling my naked skin pebbling in the chill air. My clothes, now where were they? The chest at the foot of the bed was my best guess.

My clothes were in there. A mix of a few remaining items of my old clothes along with a far more extensive wardrobe of Rris garments. I was picking out a shirt when I heard Chihirae's voice from the other room:

"They're bringing something more substantial for you. Meantime, there're some rolls here..." Chihirae's voice got louder before abruptly cutting off with the sound of shattering crockery. I spun to see her standing in the doorway: her ears back, a tipped tray in her hands and smashed plates and scattered buns on the floor. She was staring at me with an expression of shock.

"Chihirae?" I ventured with a twinge of alarm. She'd seen me naked before, so it couldn't be that causing that look of horror. "What's wrong?"

"Rot," she set the tray aside, just let it lay forgotten beside the door as she came up to me and touched my arm, turning me. "Hai, Mikah. Your back. Rot... your back."

Oh. That.

The scabs were breaking away, leaving a crosshatching of angry weals scarring me from shoulderblades down across my thighs to where the healing

bullet wound was a viscious knot. I felt a leathery fingerpad touch a scar and move so gently: Just the pressure of the touch, no texture, no warmth. The sensation made my skin crawl.

“Who did this to you?” Chihirae asked in a small voice.

“You met them,” I said quietly.

Another gentle touch on my arm as she slowly turned me, walking around me. Her ears were flat against the fur of her scalp as she looked me up and down, at the scars and cuts and gashes mapping my hide. “What’s happened to you?”

I shrugged, feeling the scars on my back shifting. “Just Rris. You tend to forget your claws. You’re a sharp people.”

“Your back. Those...”

“They beat me,” I interrupted, feeling a surge of fear as dark memories flashed back. It wasn’t something I wanted dredged up.

Her eyes were black pools. “I should never have let Shyia take you.”

“You know it would’ve happened sooner or later. I couldn’t stay there forever.”

Chihirae sighed and took my hands. “I never thought it would be this bad.” She turned my hands over and the pale tracks across my wrist were very visible. I saw her head tip slightly to the side and hastily pulled away. “I think I’d better get dressed,” I mumbled, turning back to the clothes chest.

“You need help?”

“No. Thank you,” I said as I tried to step into a pair of Rris-made pants, overbalanced and managed to catch myself on the edge of the bed. “I’m all right,” I held up a warding hand as she stepped forward.

“Your decision,” she said and watched for a second while I carefully stepped into them and pulled them up, then she limped over to the spilled tray.

“Let the servants get that,” I said.

She huffed. “I’ve never had to rely on others before and I’m not about to start now.”

“That’s what they’re paid for. You want to put them out of work?”

She chittered but nevertheless crouched to put shattered dishes and fallen pastries back on the tray. By the time she’d done that and was putting the pieces aside on a exquisitely carved table I was trying to tie a belt around a baggy satin shirt of Rris manufacture. For a second I considered the jigsaw of broken pieces

on the tray: was that expensive china? Hell, they could bill Hirht.

“You look almost civilised.” Chihirae was watching me, looking me up and down. “You’ve got yourself a tailor as well?”

“A. Still has some trouble with my sizes though. And this rotted belt...”

“Huhn,” she flicked her ears, pushed my fumbling, bandaged hands away from the belt and tied it herself. “Better?”

“Thank you,” I sighed and added, “I wish I didn’t have to rely on others.”

She smirked and reached up to fuss with the folds of the shirt where it didn’t hang properly. I ignored the twinges of pain that stabbed up from my amputated finger as I caught after her hand and held it lightly. “God, Chihirae. I know more now. About Rris; about you and your feelings. I know you can’t feel the way I do and I can’t understand everything that goes on inside you, but I missed you. So much.”

The translation carries some of the overtones of what I was feeling, but the Rris tongue just doesn’t have the words to describe human emotions. Chihirae looked up at me with a curious expression and opened her mouth...

“Ma’am?” Another voice offered. There was a Rris wearing a servant’s simple kilt standing in the door. Its ears twitched as it obviously caught to keep them upright while its eyes flicked from myself to Chihirae. “You sent for food?”

“Thank you,” she said, still regarding me with a puzzled expression.

And when the servant bowed and withdrew it had to make way as Chaeitch swept in with a flourish of those expensive clothes he had such a penchant for. “Morning and waking...” he drew up short, eyes widening at the sight of us, then said: “Rot, Mikah. Should you be up?”

Chihirae blinked and disengaged herself, stepping back. “He seems much improved. A night’s sleep helped.”

“I’m all right,” I assured him.

“He won’t be running any races for a while,” Chihirae offered.

“Huhnn,” Chaeitch growled thoughtfully and scratched at the side of his muzzle. “So long as he doesn’t fall on his face.”

“I’ll manage,” I said. “But if I don’t get something to eat I might just do that.”

So the Rris sat and watched as I worked my way through the breakfast. The cooks here still weren’t used to catering for me: the meal was predominately meat, charcoal on the outside while the interior was rare.

“All right?” Chaeitch asked.

“Fine,” I said. It was a bit like chewing the bottom of my boots. And I was aware of Chihirae in the corner of my eye, sitting and watching quietly. I kept thinking back to what I’d said earlier and couldn’t return her gaze. I was almost relieved when the household major-domo materialised from somewhere to bow and request her presence.

“The captain of the guard would like to speak with you if you’re willing. He just has some questions about what happened to you. If this is agreeable with your lordships.”

“There’s trouble?” I asked, a little alarmed.

The Rris’s eyes widened just a little and a furred hand stroked nervously at the fabric of its doublet. “No, sir. Just to inquire about anything she may remember. To ensure all the [something] who abducted you are apprehended.”

Chihirae laid her ears back a little at that. “Mikah?”

“Only if you want to,” I said. “Your choice.”

Maybe Chaeitch gave her a cue I missed, but she glanced at him and then clambered to her feet and followed after the major-domo. When we were alone Chaeitch cast a look back at the closed door, then waggled his hand. “A nice female. Very nice.”

I gave him a hard look. “What do you mean by that?”

Perhaps he could tell he was toeing the line. His ears tipped sideways in a sheepish sort of way. “She’s a nice person. Sensible, smart, generous. She likes you.”

“How much did you tell her?”

“Huhn. You know, a?” He flashed me a small grin: a parody of one of my smiles. “I think you knew she’d ask me. You planned that?”

I ignored the little side trail he was trying to lure me down. “How much?”

He sobered. “Not about the sex, if that’s what you mean. Nor about your attempts to hurt yourself. I told her you’d been very close to Maithris. I told her how Maithris betrayed you and what you’ve been through. She regrets what she said last night.” He waved a shrug. “She heard you had a restless night.”

I folded back a cloth covering a small wicker basket. Buns. Still warm. Those were a damn sight better than the meat. “I’ve slept better. But she had every right: I don’t hold anything against her.”

“So I noticed,” he said. “Mikah, are you feeling the same way about her as you did about the doctor?”

I tore a bun in half, studied the fragments before answering. “I felt like that about her a long time ago. I never truly understood why it couldn’t work.”

“What are you going to do?”

I shrugged, my way. “What she wants. Nobody’s going to force her to do anything against her will.”

He leaned forward in his chair, elbows resting on knees, and cupped a hand in assent. “A. I know. Listen, Mikah, we’re going to have to leave tomorrow. We’ve been lucky with the weather, but there’s no way it’s going to hold. We sail with the first light. Does she come with us?”

“I suppose we ask her.”

“And hope she says yes.”

I sighed and I remembered everything I’d been through. “And hope she makes the right choice,” I corrected.

Chaeitch’s muzzle parted a fraction, as if he were going to speak, then he muttered something under his breath and looked away.

The air was still and freezing. The approaching dawn stroked the bellies of the clouds in the eastern sky with tinges of salmon pink but hadn't yet touched the hills or roofs of the town. Toward the west the sky was still dark: not the empty dark of a night sky but the leaden solidity of storm clouds building. Cold. A motionless chill that nipped at the skin and seeped through clothes.

I shivered and pulled my jacket a little closer as the Ironheart nosed through the breakwater toward the harbour mouth and the river beyond. Crusts of ice parted before the bow wave. Inch thick in places: the bow was plated with metal so it could handle that, but the ship had never been designed as an icebreaker. A few more days and the Ironheart would have to resign the lakes to the winter ice.

The pulse of the engine picked up as the Ironheart left the shelter of the breakwater. I looked back beyond the twin stacks spilling smoke to the waking city. A few lights still burned. Two times I'd been to that town, both times I'd been shot at; I hoped it wasn't going to be a continuing trend and sighed and turned to amble back along the deck. I stopped to look again at the steam lines built into the deck, the web of reinforced bracing.

A crane. Huh.

I prodded a pipe with my toe. A large-calibre, steam-powered, breach-loading black powder gatling. Crude, but it was enough firepower to chop a ship's deck to kindling. Now it was broken down again, stored back in the hold where it'd been on the way out. I'd given them the pieces, the fragments of knowledge, and they'd put them together to build that. Building swords instead of ploughshares, just like we'd built a bomb before powerstations.

“It was necessary,” a familiar voice spoke up.

“A crane,” I shook my head, turned. “I actually believed that.”

Chaeitch was sitting crosslegged on the cabin roof, watching me with his ears flagging wary caution. The ruffled sleeve of his exquisitely tailored scarlet doublet swayed as he waved a small shrug and said, “A. Actually, there is a winch. That’s what it was designed for. The cannon was secondary.”

One word for it. I sighed. “What else haven’t you told me?”

“Mikah, it saved your life.”

I nodded. “I suppose I should be angry.”

“You’re not?”

I looked over his shoulder to where the city was falling behind, soon to be lost behind a headland. “If I’d found out about it earlier, perhaps in different circumstances...” I shrugged and added, “As things stand, I think it solved a problem.”

“And gave you something you’d been hunting for?”

I blinked at him. “What’s that?”

An ear twitched and he reached up to brush back one of those cheek tufts. “You can’t say you don’t have a personal interest in being rid of them. After all they did to you... to the teacher.” I stiffened at that and he ducked his head. “In a way it’s you who destroyed them.”

In a way... So in a way I was also responsible for a weapon that destroyed a ship. That would doubtless be used to destroy and kill long after I was gone.

“You’re upset by that?”

I had to shake my head, not necessarily meaning no. “I don’t know. I never wanted to hurt anyone. I’d rather this never happened.”

“But it did. They weren’t going to let you go, you know that.”

“A,” I sighed and slapped my palm against the polished wood of the ships rail. “For what they did to Chihirae...For that they deserve what happened.”

He tipped his head again and the sigils shaved into his forehead fur writhed as he wrinkled his brow slightly. “You’re upset about her decision?”

“I just hope it was the right one.”

“You don’t think she’s capable of choosing?”

“I’m just not certain she knows what she’s stepping into,” I said.

He huffed and those amber eyes studied me. “She doesn’t strike me as a foolish type. I think she had some idea.”

“And you didn’t take her aside for a little talk that might’ve had some influence on her decision?”

His ears laid back. “No. No, it was all her own choice.” He glanced past me, back toward the stern. “You can ask her yourself.

Chihirae was making her unsteady way past the wheelhouse, stepping aside as a sailor hurried past. She’d lost her possessions in the fire. Her clothes, some mementos, and her books - her precious books - they’d been lost in that conflagration, but someone had salvaged that tattered old coat of hers. Now it clashed with the fine clothes she’d been given and didn’t look comfortable in. She favoured me with a curious look as she approached. “Ask me what?”

Ris hearing. Those ears weren’t just for show. I met Chaeitch’s expectant gaze then shook my head. “Nothing.”

“A?” She flicked her ears then glanced at the dark water flowing past the hull and hastily moved away from the railing. “You really built this?”

I smiled. “I just gave them a few ideas.”

“Huhh,” she breathed a glittering white cloud, inspected the roof of the cabin before gingerly settling beside Chaeitch. “A steam boat. It moves like the ones from your world?”

“Yes.”

“What else has he been showing you?” she asked Chaeitch.

He looked amused. “It’s been a very interesting time.”

“That’s one word,” she said softly and looked down at her arms where they peeked from the cuffs of her coat; the dark scabs of healing cuts were quite visible through her tawny fur. She suddenly looked very small. When I sat beside her the face that turned to me was anxious and the hand that I took in my good one was so much smaller than mine.

“They won’t hurt you again,” I said.

Chihirae looked away: down, at our hands, at my bandages. Her other hand gently touched the marks of old scars on my knuckles, then fingers worked

around to a fresher ridge across my wrist. She touched gently, then said, “You promised before.”

That shocked me. I looked at Chaeitch who laid his ears back and avoided my accusing stare. “I didn’t mean to,” he said, wrinkling his muzzle. “She guessed.”

“Why’d you break it?” Chihirae asked me.

“It... ” I took a deep breath, trying to suppress the shudder. “It was too much. I just couldn’t go on and no one would listen...” I trailed off. “I just couldn’t take it.”

A hesitation. Beyond her I saw a trio of guards from the complement we were carrying wandering along the deck to cluster at the prow. They glanced our way, then turned away. Breath turned to short-lived white clouds as they talked. Chihirae said, “What do you mean?”

I stared at the deck. The knots and whorls in the varnished wood blending into memories that were still too vivid: those exhausting days and nights of being treated as a thing, not a person; being utterly unable to fit into the alien world around me; living in fear of some little slip, some wrong word or gesture getting my face torn off. And now Mai was gone, now Chihirae might still choose to return to her home once the winter was past, would I return to that?

“Mikah?” Chihirae ventured and I looked down to where my hand had tightened around hers. I let her go and out of the corner of my eye I saw Chaeitch touch her arm and make a small gesture. “No,” she said to him. “What happened to him? What did you do to him?”

Chaeitch looked past her at me and his ears turned back. “We didn’t understand him,” he said. “Please, it might be better if we discussed this later.”

She met my eyes and for the life of me I can’t imagine what my expression must have been, but she stared for some time. I saw her pupils dilate, contract again while the cold wind set the short fur of her cheeks rippling like distant fields of grain. “All right,” she said slowly. “Later, a?”

Chaeitch waved a small ‘yes’. “That’d be for the best. I can imagine you’ve got a lot of questions.”

She sighed, then her small hand took mine again. I felt her claws pricking my skin as she squeezed. “I wouldn’t know where to start.”

Chaeitch smiled. “There’ll be plenty of time. I’ll be only too happy to answer any questions you might have. But at the moment... huhn, you’ll have to excuse me: it would seem the captain is requiring my attention.”

I looked around. The captain was standing and waiting, ducked his head in apology. Chaeitch bowed to Chihirae and murmured something in her tufted ear then said, “I’ll leave you in her hands, Mikah.”

Chihirae watched him stalk off, her head cocked to the side. “Odd fellow. He never told me what he does.”

“A bit of everything, I think,” I said. “He built most of this,” I patted the wood we were sitting on. “I just gave him the idea, he put the thing together.”

“Huhn,” she rumbled. “You seem to get along well with him.”

“He’s a friend. He treats me like a person but I think I frighten him sometimes.”

She patted my leg. “Still doing that, a?”

The soldiers up in the prow were watching us. Not openly, just quick glances and murmured asides. About me? Or about Chihirae? How was she going to feel when she realised just being with me made her a target of gossip and rumors. Perhaps she’d been through that before. I’d never really known what she’d had to go through when I was living in her house in Westwater. “I don’t go out of my way to do it.”

“You never did, did you,” she said, then blinked at me and smiled; that pursing of her muzzle that creased the dark marks of wounds. “What’s the city like? I mean... Shattered Water. I’ve read about it, heard stories and tales, but I’ve never seen it. Half a million people. What’s that like?”

“Busy. Alive. Rris everywhere. The Palace, huge boulevards; The Cracks, dark alleys. Beautiful old buildings, other places that aren’t as nice. A mixture of the best and worst of your people.” I shrugged. “In some ways it reminds me of home.”

“Ahh,” she breathed and stared off into the dawning sky beyond the slowly passing shoreline. “And that... the scholars and savants, could they help you?”

I shook my head, grimaced as that made a bruise ache. “They didn’t have a clue. Maybe later... maybe they’ll let me go back and find that place where I woke up here. There might be something there. Something I missed. I might be able to...” I trailed off and shrugged again. A hand touched my shoulder, then hesitantly withdrew.

“You still want to go back there?”

“Rot, Chihirae, it’s my home. My kind. I just don’t fit here, and the trouble I’ve caused...” I turned to her and gently reached up to touch a tender mark across her muzzle. “They hurt you. I never wanted that.”

“But that’s over,” she looked - at my wounded hand then up at me, eyes flinching to amber behind black and her voice almost pleading. “It’s over, isn’t it? All this... no more?”

I stroked one of her cheek tufts. I’d never... last time, I’d never noticed how soft they were. So different from Jackie’s hair. And she never looked away, didn’t flinch when I smiled. “A. It’s over.”

I saw the white cloud of her exhalation, then she was hugging me: arms wrapped around my chest. I ignored protesting wounds and returned that human gesture of affection that’d been one so few I’d shown her; the last I’d shown her. I breathed in the dusk of her scent: unaccountably reminded of summer and sun warmed dust and I murmured in english, “For you. For you it’s over.”

The guards watched with flattened ears.

—v—

We beat the weather to Shattered Water. Barely.

The sky was blotted out by swollen purple-grey clouds roiling in from across the lake. Wind-raised whitecaps slapped against the breakwater walls in a staccato applause as the Ironheart slipped into the smooth embrace of the harbour.

Chihirae stood with me at the railing as we watched the harbour, then the city dockside littered with dirty snow slowly scrolling past in the fading light. Mid afternoon, but still getting dark under the leaden clouds. And the air was heavy with the promise of snow, the rising wind from the west ruffled the Rris teacher's fur with every freezing gust as she stood and watched in silence.

The docking at the royal shipyards went fast and smoothly. Rris crewmen threw lines to shore while the ship's engines thumped faster, settled to idle and faded to silence. The lack of the background sound left an emptiness in the world that was oddly unsettling. On shore dockhands caught the lines and shipyard guards with firearms held at port watched as they pulled the ship in and made it fast. As the gangplank was run out Chihirae stepped a little closer to my side and hugged her satchel with the precious few possessions she still had. New to a strange town; I knew what she was feeling.

“Welcome home.” I turned as Chaeitch stepped up beside me. “Times I thought you wouldn’t be here to see this,” he said.

“You should have more confidence in me.”

“Huhn, with stunts like that...” he laid his ears back. “I’m not looking forward to hearing what his highness will have to say about it.”

“He can bring it up with me,” I said and touched Chihirae’s arm. She glanced down and I saw her smile: I was wearing the gloves the kids at Westwater had made me. “No regrets. I’d do it again.”

“What is this place?” she asked.

“The Royal Shipyards,” I said. “Chaeitch works here.”

“You own it?” she asked, sounding more than a little impressed.

“Some,” he said.

“Ai,” she breathed, looking at the huge construction buildings.

“It’s a living,” he smiled and sketched her an exaggerated bow, sweeping his

arm toward the ramp. “Now, if Ma’am would do me the honor of stepping this way?”

She gave him an uncertain smile and started down the ramp. I slung my bag over my shoulder and followed; noticed her clutching the rope railings and casting a misgiving look toward the black water and scabs of ice below. She didn’t like water? I hadn’t thought of that. The boat trip couldn’t have been much fun for her.

Word of our return must’ve already reached higher places. As our little group crossed the docks a contingent of mounted soldiers escorting a carriage clattered in through the main gates, snow scattering from animals’ hooves. Chaeitch looked that way and wrinkled his muzzle. “Someone’s anxious to see you.”

The first small flakes started swirling in from the lake as we clambered into the carriage.

—v—

Chihirae stared out the window at the driving snow, her arms wrapped around herself as she watched the dancing flakes or something far beyond them. Lake effect snow: a solid cloud of fine particles blowing in swirling horizontal gusts. Chill static beyond the glass, silhouetting my old friend against a grey light.

She’d been quiet on the ride to the palace. Staring out at the passing town that gradually faded into the growing blizzard. She’d pressed against my side during the walk through the Palace halls. Rubbernecking, but not saying much. Excited, a little nervous, perhaps a little awed. And now we were in my room she stood at

the window and watched the worsening weather outside.

I stepped up behind her, seeing my reflection looming over hers in the glass.

“I’ve never seen snow like this before,” she said without turning.

“It unique to this part of the world,” I replied. “Beautiful, but very inconvenient.”

She watched a bit longer. “Mikah, you’ve really been unhappy here? Living amongst all this?”

“Before Mai came it was empty, lonely. A golden cage.”

She turned, looking up at me then around at the room: the expensive carpets, satin drapes, the pictures, fire blazing in the grate, gas lamps ... They’d been changed from those ridiculous wagon-wheel shapes to more elegant wrought-iron frameworks. Either the spyholes were gone completely or they’d found another place to hide them. I wanted to believe the former option. But what Chihirae was seeing was a room so much more elegant and extravagant than her little place out in Westwater.

“Golden cage,” she echoed.

“It’s very elegant. But nobody would talk to me.” I shrugged and tried to meet

those amber eyes. “Rris... Rris are more solitary than my kind. I found you don’t feel the same way. You don’t need the... companionship I do. Understanding I’d have to live my life like that... that was very hard.”

She blinked and I saw that she didn’t entirely understand. “That was what you couldn’t cope with?”

I caught a deep breath. “That.” I had a flash of Rris guards attacking me just for smiling. “And other incidents.”

“Shyia didn’t help you?”

“He told me a lot. I didn’t believe him at the time: I thought he was crazy. But, he was so right about some things. Things that... things that frightened me so I didn’t want to think about them. He had to leave.” I looked out at the grey swirling snow. Somewhere out there were the trees of the gardens, lost beneath white. “I didn’t know he’d left. Someone tried to kill me. I was hurt. I found he’d gone. I was alone and scared and didn’t understand what was happening...” I was babbling. I took another breath, sighed.

“Someone tried to kill you?” Her eyes were wide.

“A.” I remembered gunshots and fire lighting a dark street, those horrible cries of drowning Rris. “Tried. The government wanted to lock me away after that.” I felt my lips tighten in a rictus that was closer to a grimace than a smile. “So, spend my life behind bars and guards and doors or become a target. One way I die slow, the other much faster.”

Her ears laid flat against her scalp.

“Mai. She was... she was a friend. I thought she was a friend. She made them treat me like a person. She accepted me. She listened to me, talked, answered my questions. She made life worth living, more than just an existence. I never thought... Of all the people who might have betrayed me I never dreamed she would be among them.”

Those amber eyes studied me with that worried intentness that I'd known so long ago. She touched my arm then took my good hand in hers. A finger laid along my wrist and I knew she could feel the drubbing of my pulse, my distress. “You're so upset.”

“Chihirae. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to think; who to trust; what to do.” I squeezed her hand again, trying to convey at least a fraction of the conflict and confusion that continually churned within my head. “What I want to do is wrong; what I have to do... I can't. It's not what I am. Trying to think as you do... it's tiring. It's so hard to hold on.”

Her head tipped slightly and there was a flash of pink as her tongue darted to lick her lips. Nervous: was I doing that to her? “I don't understand,” she said softly.

No. No, she wouldn't. I sighed and was aware that I was holding her hand a little too tightly. “I'm sorry,” I said as I released her.

Her ears flickered and she looked past me, just before there was a scratch at the door. I turned as it opened and Kh'hitch stalked into the room: imposing in dark purple and blue satins. He sketched a perfunctory bow: "Mikah," his level stare cut into me, "We're pleased to managed to make it back to us, albeit not entirely in one piece."

He didn't wait for me to answer but turned to Chihirae. "Aesh Hiasamra'thsi, welcome to Shattered Water.

"I was sent to inform you that his highness demands your presence. At your earliest convenience."

In other words, now.

—v—

Chihirae stayed close on our walk through the Palace. She'd once been my guide, helping me through things I didn't understand. Now I was the familiar object in a world unfamiliar to her, a world that she'd learned was dangerous.

Ironic.

We walked through corridors lined with polished wood and red velvet. Gilt framed paintings and silver statuettes; wooden carvings in forms mimicking frozen Rris, animals, plants. Guards opened the door for us, closed it behind and enclosing us in the close warmth of Hirth's private study. Through the distorted

glass of the windows the flurries of snow continued to dance and swirl, the grey light turning the room to a place of gloom and shadows. The light from the fire cast a welcome glow and warmth.

“Mikah. Aesh Hiasamra’thsi.” Hirht stood from where he was settled in his high-backed chair before the fire. “Please, come in. Seat yourselves.”

There were a pair of beanbags set out: soft satin filled with what felt and smelled like potpourri. Chihirae glanced at me as I sat before cautiously settling herself and tucking her legs in, watching Hirht with her ears visibly trembling.

“Chihirae aesh Hiasamra’thsi.”

“Yes, sir?”

Hirht seated himself and brushed down the fur on the back of his hands. “I must say it’s a pleasure to finally meet you. The female for whom Mikah would give his life.”

I felt Chihirae looking at me and cringed, looking at my feet, the floor; anything but her.

“Ah Ties and I have had a very interesting talk,” Hirht said, lacing his fingers and watching us over the steeple they formed. “He told me what happened; what you did. There was a reason for that?”

“Sir, they were hurting her. They would have killed her.”

“So you risked your life for her. After you said you wouldn’t.”

“You would put more stock in words than in someone’s life?”

An eye narrowed. “I think that might depend on the circumstances. You however had no idea what the circumstances were. You charged in blindly; You didn’t know who they were; you didn’t know for certain that the teacher was in there. You could have hurt someone entirely innocent. You could have been killed!”

“I was sure she was there,” I said.

“Were you? He said you were extremely upset when you heard what’d happened in Broken Sun. You were just clutching at sunbeams weren’t you. Grabbing after any hope she was still there.”

I looked at Chihirae, watching me with wide eyes. “Sir, it was all there was left.”

His head went back a fraction, evaluating me. I couldn’t guess what he was thinking: wondering about my sanity, what might’ve happened if I hadn’t gone after her... “You’d rather I left her,” I said. “Why don’t you tell her that to her face?”

Chihirae looked shocked. Hirht amused.

“Lady,” he smiled to her, “I didn’t mean any offence. Mikah is very important to a lot of people.” He turned back to me, watching me. “We fear for him. He has a propensity for leaping into situations before thinking them through, as well as a knack for finding those situations.”

A hesitant smile pursed Chihirae’s muzzle. “A, sir. That I had noticed.”

“And this time he pulled you in along with him. I have to apologise for what you’ve been through. This was never intended.”

“What were your intentions?” I asked softly. “She wasn’t happy about being brought here. It wasn’t her choice.”

He tipped his head slightly. “I know. Miathris. She put the suggestion forward. You needed a tutor, and after that incident with Esseri she said it would be best to have someone who is familiar with you and whom you feel comfortable around. Aesh Hiasamra’thsi was the best, the only, candidate. Now I understand Maithris undoubtedly had ulterior motives, but at the time, Mikah, we had your best interests in mind.”

“And her interests?”

The Rris king ducked his head, his lip flicking up to expose a flash of teeth. “Your’s come first,” he rumbled. “And she is an employee of the government:

her job is whatever we say it is. However, if you really want her to go back that can be arranged.”

Again I looked at Chihirae who was sitting quietly and not appearing entirely happy. “That’s her decision. Ask her.”

“Ma’am?” he looked expectant. “Please. Truthfully.”

Her ears twitched. “Ah, sir. I’m honored to be here. Truly. But, Lying Scales is my home.”

“You want to return there.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, glanced at me for a few long seconds before she added, “Eventually.”

He pricked up an ear. “Eventually?”

“A. Since I’m already here... Mikah does need some help with his pronunciation. And I would like to see more of Shattered Water.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged,” he said and I noticed that he relaxed a bit. “And I can assure you everything will be done to make your stay as comfortable as possible. If you require anything, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Of course,” he inclined his head to her. “Now, both Mikah and that mediator told me a little about you, but I’d be interested in hearing a little more about you, how you met Mikah.”

“Yes, sir. “She wrung her hands for a second, clicking her claws as she gathered her thoughts then started telling that story again. I sat quietly as she recounted those first days in the barn and the memories were still as fresh as if it’d just been yesterday. Looking down on that small hamlet with the furry figures in the street; the sunlight spilling into the barn as she moved among her class and I watched from hiding; flashes of the shock on her face, the light on the quarrel in the crossbow, the ...

A twinge shot through my shoulder, reminding me of that deep knot running through muscles and tissue. I realised I was rubbing the spot, something that Chihirae didn’t miss. She was watching me as she spoke, those amber and black eyes level and cool and utterly inscrutable.

“He left,” she was saying. “I saw him look back and thought that was the last I would see of him. I’d said it’d be quiet without him: it was. The cubs missed him.” She brushed at the fur on the back of her forearms. “I missed him.”

“Huhn,” the Rris king mused. “He certainly has an effect on people. I think everyone who’s met him can testify to that.”

Chihirae chittered a little and cast me another uncertain glance. Doubtless wondering what he meant.

Hirht leaned back. “All right. Now, thank you Mikah, but could you leave us? I’d like to talk with aesh Hiasamra’thsi alone for a while.”

Talk about me, undoubtably. I hesitated, looked at her. “You be all right?”

She smiled a little and I realised the question sounded both absurd and perhaps a little insulting. “I’ll be fine,” she assured me.

Hirht tipped his head a little but otherwise his expression hadn’t changed. “Thank you, Mikah. We’ll talk later.”

Dismissed. I climbed to my feet and left them. Royal guards outside the room watched impassively as I closed the door, then sighed and looked toward the windows at the end of the hall: dusk falling outside. We’d been in there longer than I’d realised. A pair of armed guards fell in at a discreet distance as I made my way back to my rooms.

—v—

Your fault.

Mist swirled around an indistinct figure standing alone on a deserted night-

time dockside, back towards me as it stared out across oily black water. I turned away, and the same scene was there in front of me again. Walking forward and the figure didn't move, but the voice was so familiar.

"Why'd you leave?" Jackie asked.

"I didn't," I said. "It wasn't like that."

She turned. Rris eyes flared in the dimness as Miathris stepped toward me. "But you know it had to be. There wasn't any choice."

"Why?" I implored. "You didn't have to. We could've been together."

"A," she nodded. "I did love you, you know that. But there's so much you don't understand."

"You can teach me."

"I'm sorry."

"No..."

She raised her hand and the mask that was her face came away and Chihirae

was watching me. “Where did she go?” I asked.

Chihirae shrugged. “It’s a big world. Somewhere out there,” a clawed hand swept toward blackness lapping against the shore and when I looked back the docks were empty.

“Chihirae?”

Nothing. Just a silent desolation.

“Mai?”

Gravel crunched under my feet and then I knelt to look down into black water lapping against the shore. Cold, bottomless, trickling through my fingers when I dipped my hand and my reflection stared back.

Gleaming eyes...

The blackness exploded in a soundless spray and gaping jaws lunging toward me in a blur of flesh and sharp whiteness. Pain ripped through me as I was caught and it tore and and burned as the darkness closed around. .

And yanked me out of sleep with arms flailing to ward off an attack that existed only in my mind. For a few seconds I sat staring into nothing before I really awoke, then collapsed back and just lay panting in the freezing dark. “Oh,

Christ.” The bed was clammy, old and new wounds aching, throat raw. I’d been there before.

Dark. Just a single monochrome strip of moonlight stretching across the floor. I’d no idea what time it was.

The evening had passed and Chihirae hadn’t returned. I’d waited, going over old pronunciation lessons again and again in the hopes I might be able to improve. Finally I’d called it a night and retreated to the warmth of the sheets. It hadn’t been a peaceful rest.

Remnants of confused and disturbing, sometimes terrifying, dreams still lurked in the shadows when I closed my eyes and sleep just refused to come. When it had finally come... the nightmares returned as well, snuck in alongside.

I pushed the heavy covers aside and braved the chill of the night air. The bathroom tiles were freezing underfoot as I leaned over the fine porcelain basin and splashed icy water across my face. The shock cleared some of the muziness away but still left the disturbing feelings those night terrors had engendered lurking at the edges.

I sighed and grabbed a towel, wiping away the water as I returned to the bedroom. I just sat on the bed amidst the rumpled sheets, feeling my skin pebbling in the cold. Memories: of a gentle voice in the night, of someone who was there during the loneliness.

“God, Mai,” I whispered to the solitude, “I miss you.”

“She must’ve made a real impression on you.”

I jumped wildly, looking around for the source of the quiet voice. Darkness and shadows everywhere, but over on the window seat a patch of darkness stirred. “Who’s there? Who’s that?”

“It’s me,” a Rris voice rumbled and then elaborated: “Chihirae.”

Another shift and a furry shoulder settled into the moonlight. I relaxed a little. “The soliders came to me. They said you were calling out in your sleep. Apparently that ‘Mai’ would sometimes come to calm you down when you had dreams like that. They thought I might be able to.”

Oh. I never told them... they thought she was there in the same capacity Mai had been. “I’m sorry. They shouldn’t have disturbed you. What are you doing over there?”

A wave of a hand. Just part of what might have been a shrug visible in the moonlight. “Watching you. Thinking. You called out that doctor’s name several times. She really helped you with those dreams?”

I wasn’t sure how to explain that. “She was... she helped. A lot.”

A pause. “His Highness explained. I’m not entirely sure I understood. He said you and she were very close; that you were pretty torn when she left.”

I sagged, gazing down at my bare hands, arms. "I loved her," I said softly.

"I don't understand."

No. She couldn't. I took a deep breath and tried to push those wounds back into the depths. "She was... I thought she was a ... a friend."

There was a low exhalation from the shadows. "Huhn. I'm sorry. You couldn't have known." For a while there was silence, then she ventured, "His highness also explained how she came here. Those marks on your wrist." Another pregnant pause before she added in somewhat admonishing tones, "Why did you do that?"

"I wanted to die," I said and there was only silence. I coughed, then stared at the darkness where her face might've been. "People who treated me like an animal, watching the fear in their eyes; the same reactions day after day. Every day, being so careful. Not able to smile, to laugh, to even talk properly. Knowing it would be a lifetime of that." I saw her breath in the moonlight. "I couldn't go on like that."

"But she was able to help you? How? She could change everyone's reactions to you?"

"No. No, she couldn't change the world. She was just... there." I held my hand up, watching myself gesture at an imaginary figure at the foot of the bed. "She let me be myself. She wasn't frightened around me; she understood my

smile, my expressions. She fought to make Hirht and others understand that I'm not a machine: that they couldn't lock me in a box when they weren't using me. She showed me parts of your world I never knew existed." I smiled slightly at the memories that brought up. "She made life worth living."

"And when she left, you didn't... try again."

I glanced toward the figure in the shadows. "There was something I had to do."

"Ah," she said. "Ah. And now, what? If I were to leave, what then?"

"I don't know." I caught a deep breath, slowly released it.

"His highness said he was... he said he wasn't sure if you're entirely sane."

The way that was said... Low and gently, as if she was oh-so carefully making her way through a minefield. I looked her way again, trying to see her hidden away in shadows and moonlight, keeping her distance. Was that why? The things he'd told her I'd been through, the things I'd done. And she was... she was...

"Oh, God. Chihirae. And that's why you're afraid of me?"

No reply.

“I’d never hurt you. Can you believe that?”

Still silence. I couldn’t see her at all; couldn’t read her at all. I clenched my hands in the eiderdowns. “Please, Chihirae.” A response. Anything.

The shadows moved as she stirred, stood, and for a split second the moonlight fell on her: A cold nimbus around bare fur that swished almost inaudibly as she moved, then settled on the edge of the bed beside me. I felt a warm hand touch mine. “Not of you,” her voice was a husky burr. “For you.”

For some reason I had an unaccountable flashback to a time in the sun on the deck of a ship where another Rris was trying to wear my sunglasses. I closed my own eyes tight and swallowed hard and could still feel her right hand gently stroking my skin, then curl around to lay a fingertip across my wrist.

“His Highness asked a lot of questions about you, also told me a lot. When you left Westwater I’d thought... I don’t know what I thought. Never this.” The hand squeezed lightly: When I looked I could see the darker tracks of scars against my skin in the moonlight. “It’s so difficult for you? I thought you would settle, get used to it. He said you just didn’t seem to be able to.”

I shivered. “‘Used to it’? Chihirae, it’s like trying to be two people. I can’t be human, and I’m unable to be Rris: minding every word, gesture, emotion. Just trying to do that every day, then looking forward and seeing a future where it never ended...” The words caught in my throat and I knew the alien fingers on my wrist could feel my pulse racing.

“It scared you that much?”

I nodded. “Being alone like that.”

“His Highness said your kind ... you stay with your females for life. Like swans. Like those plays you showed me. You have to be with someone?”

“Not have to. It’s... I don’t know how to explain. It makes things easier, knowing there’s someone there with you.”

“And you would like someone.”

That was said in a low, level voice and I suddenly realised how she might be construing this. “Oh, shit no. I’m sorry. I never meant you should... I mean, I never wanted to involve you in any of this. I certainly never intended they use you to replace Mai. Your choices... Chihirae, it’s your life, your decision. I tried to tell them that. They’re not forcing you to stay, are they?”

“No. He was most civil about that. He just said that since that Maithris left you’d been very withdrawn. You frightened them. He said seeing that change since you’ve returned was a pleasant surprise. They would like me to stay, so I will. For a while. I hate travelling in winter anyway.”

“Thank you,” I breathed.

The hand squeezed again. “The only time I’ll ever see Shattered Water. It’s something I’d have never seen otherwise. And it’ll be good to have a guide.”

I had to smile at that. “Me showing a Rris around. Why does that sound odd?”

There was a low chitter in the dark. “I imagine Maithris showed you some interesting things.”

I tensed, immediately wondering just how much Hirht had told her. “She was a good teacher.”

“Huhn,” she huffed and I felt the warm wash of breath across my shoulder. “I suppose that might have been because you and she had so much in common.”

“A?” I didn’t understand what she was saying.

“Both trying to be something you weren’t?” she said quietly. “Both trying to fit in. I’d imagine she’d have had a difficult time as well. Perhaps that was why she understood you so well.”

“I’d ... never thought of it like that,” I admitted.

“She never left because she wanted to. She had to. It wasn’t up to her. And what she did to you... I know that was horrible... but she might not’ve had a choice.” A gentle touch on my bare shoulder, the soft stroke raising goosebumps

before withdrawing. “Two dark roads. It can’t have been easy for her.”

The lesser of two evils.

I sighed. “It would’ve been nice to know.”

“I know,” she rumbled sympathetically. “I know.”

“Maybe someday...” I shrugged and shook my head, knowing how unlikely that sounded. “But thank you. For what you’ve put up with, for staying... Thank you.”

She touched my shoulder again, stroked down my bare back to lightly touch scars and scratches. Fingertips traced the weals, tracing other marks and I tensed when I realised she was exploring the pale reminders of that first night with Mai. “These... claws, aren’t they.”

“A.”

“Not new,” a fingertip touched so very lightly, almost a caress. “How?”

I swallowed. “Accident,” I said. “It was an accident.”

“Huhn? What happened? They’re... oddly placed.”

I took a deep breath and stepped off into the deep end. “How much did Hirht tell you? About Mai and I?”

A hesitation as if she were wondering why I’d be asking that. “You know... what happened to you, why she came. How she looked after you and became a thorn in the foot until the ones-who-decide would change the way they treated you and you were so fond of her...”

I think the penny dropped then. She cut off into what I interpreted as shocked silence.

“He didn’t tell you we were closer than that?” I said to the stillness. “Mai and I, we had sex. There were... differences. The claws were an accident.”

The hand around my wrist, the finger laying across my pulse, were motionless. The dark was such a frustration for me, making this kind of interaction so one-sided for the Rris. I couldn’t see her, couldn’t see any reaction or tell how she was taking it, but that cold silence made me feel as if I’d transgressed. I was terrified of how she’d take that news; how she’d interpret me telling it to her then and there

“You would’ve heard,” I said, trying to fill that silence, horribly aware I was sounding as if I were trying to explain something I still wasn’t sure of. “Someone would’ve told you.”

In the darkness her hand tightened around my wrist again: just a light squeeze. “That was something his Highness didn’t tell me. From everything else I’d heard... I’d wondered. I didn’t know.” I heard a sigh and then a leathery fingerpad touched my shoulder and slowly stroked downwards. “Why’d you tell me now?”

I shrugged and looked down. Her hand was a dark spider around the pale skin of my wrist. “I don’t know. It was something between us. Others knew about it and there are... stories circulating. I didn’t want someone shocking you; asking a stupid question. I thought it would be better if you knew... heard it from me.”

“Huhn,” came the low growl. “I remember that morning, waking to find to find you sexually aroused. That surprised me, and quite frankly Mikah, it frightened my fur straight.” There was another intake of breath, then in coaxing tones, “She didn’t have that problem, a?”

That... there was something in the way she said that I didn’t understand. “No,” I said simply.

“And she told you the truth in all other matters?”

Oh, god. That again. “No.” I shook my head vehemently. “She didn’t. I know her. I knew her. I could see she not tell not-truth. Most honest she tell ... No... I mean. She lied, but not in that. Not lie that...”

I choked into silence, the feelings trying to spill out through the congestion of my tongue stumbling over the Rris language. I knew it, dammit. I knew.

But there'd been those moments when something behind Mai's eyes had slipped and I was sure there was something else was looking back at me. Those moments... there was fear, but it was something so much like my occasional lapses: The rational mind beating back the shadows of fear that crept from the recess of ancestral memory. I knew... I just felt it in my guts, that what we'd had was built on something besides those foundations of lies on which she'd constructed the rest of her life. I took a deep breath and tried to compose myself.

"She... didn't have to come back. She could've just dropped me from her life and gone. What she told me..." I looked at the moonlight streaming in through the window and for an instant I was back at that moment, in that freezing little room and that familiar form was sitting there in the night glow telling me things that hurt so much.

"Mikah?" a voice ventured into my awareness. I blinked back to the here and now and was aware that I was trembling and that the alien hand on my arm could doubtless feel it. I pulled away, perhaps a little too abruptly.

"Mikah?" Maybe she sounded a little hurt. "I'm sorry. I suppose I could have been more tactful. I suppose ... You're right." There was a feather-light touch on my back. "You're frightful. I have to admit that. But one can get used to you." The hand gently stroked, avoiding the marks of scars. "I think I might have forgotten what you were. Being away from you stole some of that familiarity. And I think I started to think of you as more like a Rris."

As I was guilty of doing to her.

"I suppose that while I was forgetting the real you, that Maithris was learning

the real you.” The hand stroked gently, reassuringly, and a bony, furry pressure laid on my shoulder: her chin. I could smell harsh breath: “You have enough redeeming features for someone to become quite fond of you.”

I leaned my head against hers and for a while we shared a silent moment. Then I put my arm around her and hugged her closer, feeling the warmth and the coarseness of her winter coat. And underlying slight twitch of muscles as she tensed, then sighed and those muscles went completely lax as she sagged against me and snugged her head a bit closer. “You’re cold?” she murmured.

“You’re warm,” I countered.

A small chitter. “Like those nights in Westwater, a? Winter nights.”

I smiled at that memory. “A. Good memories.” I ventured a light scratch of nails through her fur; the sort of familiarity that Mai had liked. She breathed a low rumble.

“Chihirae... “I started to say.

“What?”

“I wanted to say... I mean, back in Westwater I never told you . . I never got the chance ...” I just couldn’t say it. That admission of feelings her language had no word for, those desires that ... that would probably insult her. After what she’d said that night, I just couldn’t bring myself to say something that might

frighten her away.

“Mikah?” she asked quizzically.

“I never said thank you,” I was aware of what a cop-out that was. “For everything you did for me: thank you.”

Her head raised and I think she was staring at me but I didn’t turn to look. “That’s it?” she asked and there was something behind that question. A touch of amusement? Curiosity? Gas? I couldn’t tell.

“A.”

I heard a quick chuff of air, a stifled laugh, and then she pressed against me and something rough and wet and warm latched across the bare skin of my neck. I hugged her back and for some indeterminable length of time she stayed with me.

Safe now. As I’d told her, it was over. At least, for her it was over. There were still things to be done, a trail to be followed to the end before everything could be laid to rest, but at that moment I could set that aside.

I must’ve fallen asleep with her watching over me, as she’d done in Westwater. I don’t remember exactly when I dropped off. Not that it mattered.

The morning sun looked down upon a white world. High wisps of cloud formed wind-sculpted curlicues across a blue sky that washed to pale on the distant horizon. Just outside the windows fat icicles hung from the eaves while the palace gardens were a buried beneath a blanket of fresh snow. Cold and pale and pristine. Like someone had shaken the globe of the world and let the flakes settle.

My breath frosted, fogging the chilled window pane with its latticework of frost. Winter again, well and truly here. The roaring fire in the grate kept the temperature within tolerable bounds, but it wasn't what I'd call warm. I shivered in the folds of the eiderdown wrapped around my shoulders and drew it tighter, trying to foil an errant draught.

I don't know how long she'd stayed last night. I'd woken alone, with only a depression in the mattress beside me and a few telltale hints of stray fur. No reason for her to stay all night; No reason for her to come to me in the first place. But she had, and I really appreciated it.

In the bathroom I filled a bowl with steaming water and washed the sleep away. Through the swirling mist my reflection looked back; those features that were becoming more and more alien to me; the beard that I grew and trimmed in an attempt to... to hide? To fit in? To try and be something I could never be?

I took up the trimming scissors and started snipping. Just smoothing the worst of the irregularities out, then cutting more and more. Hunks of hair fell onto the bench and into the bowl of water as I cut and cut, working by feel.

"What are you doing?!" came the horrified cry from behind me. I turned to

see Chihirae at the door and when she saw my face her ears went down flat. “Red tie... your face. Your fur! What’re you doing?”

“Shaving.” I shrugged and looked down at the tangles of hair floating in the bowl. “It wasn’t really me.”

“Wasn’t really...” she shut her mouth with a clomp. “What’re you talking about?”

“I’ve never like growing my face fur. Itchy, you know. I was getting tired of it.”

“But you... It makes you more...” I saw her hand was clenching, the claws sliding in and out as she doubtless tried to think of a tactful way to word things.

“What? Makes me look like a Rris?” I smiled. “I’m sorry to have to tell you, but I think that maybe people have been seeing through this disguise.”

She blinked, ruffled the fur of her muzzle when she rubbed a hand over it. “Mikah, you...” She gave a shaggy shake of her head, a parody of one of my gestures, then chattered. “You’re really so uncomfortable with it?”

“It’s just...” I trailed off. I’d known what I wanted, but now, trying to explain myself to her, it was slipping. “I just wanted to be myself for a while.”

She cocked her head and studied me, then thrust out a hand. “Give me those.”

I hesitated.

“Come on,” she wagged her stumpy fingers. “You can’t do that yourself. You’ll cut yourself. Now, hand them over.”

I surrendered them.

“Right,” she said, snicking the blades a couple of times. “Now come here. Let’s see if we can’t do a proper job of that. Just your face? Not your head or those bits above your eyes?”

“Don’t be silly,” I said. “That’d just look foolish.”

She chittered.

—v—

The guards kept sneaking surreptitious peeks at my face as we walked the cold halls of the Palace. My beard was gone, shaved back with my remaining shaving cream and not-so-disposable razors. If I wanted to keep it that way I’d have to learn to shave with a straight-edge; one of those cut-throat blades. That was if the Rris allowed me to.

Chihirae had done a good job, although watching her fumbling with a can of shaving foam, sniffing at the contents, hadn't inspired a great deal of confidence for the moment when she took up the razor. Still, she'd been careful and hadn't nicked me, not once. And the look she'd given me when I'd rinsed off:

"It's a sign of humiliation or illness you know," she'd said quietly. "Shaving."

She'd found the idea ludicrous yet she'd gone along with it. To please me.

The secretary in the outer office did a doubletake when he saw me. "I'd like to speak with his Highness," I said and the Rris just blinked. "Sometime today would be good," I added.

He shook his head, then ducked it and hastened to the door of the informal inner office. A quick scratch at the plate before he entered. I gave him a second then barged on in.

"... and he's..." the aide was cut off with a yelp midsentence when I opened the door on them. Sitting at his desk with quill pen in hand, Hirht turned his attention from the secretary to me and I saw a flicker of shock there.

"Sir," the aide said to me, "you should wait..."

"That's all right," Hirht interrupted. "Just leave us."

“Sir,” the secretary closed the door behind him.

“Now,” the Rris king sighed. “I trust this is important. It’s got something to do with what happened to your face?”

“No. That was voluntary.”

It wasn’t often I saw something rattle him, but that was one of those instances. “You... desired that? Huhnn. And you say that’s not the problem.”

“No, sir. I want to talk to you about this situation.”

“Situation?” he laid his quill aside and leaned forward, head cocked quizzically. “Which situation would that be?”

“The one I’ve been in since the first day I arrived in your world. The reason those Rris tried to kidnap me, why they hurt Chihirae. They were involved in smuggling, weren’t they. Selling weapons to anti-government forces in another kingdom.”

His face didn’t move. “That Maithris told you that?”

I met his stare and grinned, slowly. And this time he did flinch. “Her. A few

others. Did you even know it was happening?”

The mask returned. “There were discrepancies, but we didn’t have a true picture of the scale of it. Then you were kidnapped... ” he growled softly. “We hadn’t realised they had their claws in the Palace.”

“Haies aesh Tohikish?” I said quietly.

“A. That one.”

“It was her?” I asked. “You’re sure?”

His amber eyes narrowed a little, then he sighed and waved an affirmation. “We’re sure. She tried to run, then to fight. And we found incriminating documentation hidden in her home. She was the one.” His ears twitched. “You’re worried about your teacher friend now, aren’t you? Don’t be. It’s over.”

“Thank you,” I nodded. “That Haies; whom did she work for?”

“Huhn? Marah ah Cho’tai. Commander in the city Militia. You know him?”

“No,” I said. “No. But I would like to meet with him.”

He cocked his head. “Why?”

“I’d like to ask him some questions.”

I could see he was thinking, probably trying to work out what was going on in my head. “What sort of questions, Mikah?” he asked very softly and I knew he already had an idea.

I told him.

—v—

I crossed the threshold into the office of Marah ah Cho’tai, commander of the western militia of Shattered Water, 4th in the affluent Cho’tai lineage and veteran of the Southern Border wars.

It was an office that exuded wealth and power. This room and the other chambers where his personal staff and guards waited were all carpeted in a plush pile that must’ve cost a fortune. The walls paneled in wood and papered in crushed and patterned velvet. Paintings in frames so ornate they stole the eye away from the mediocrity of the actual subject: almost invariably long-dead high-ranking Rris going about everyday tasks. There were crystal chandeliers suspended by gold chains from a high ceiling plastered with bas relief patterns. Sunlight poured in through high windows, the old glass panes working like melted prisms: fracturing it into a ragged net of light and shadow. The Rris behind the low desk in front of those windows was obviously waiting for me.

“Dismissed,” the commander snapped to his guards who’d escorted me in and they ducked their heads. The double doors boomed slightly as they closed and I saw the inner panels were festooned with intricate carvings.

“So. You’re Mikah,” ah Cho’tai said, calmly looking me over. He was an elegant Rris, with finely-brushed golden fur like the grass in summer. Darker spots dusted his arms and his muzzle while the white ruff of his chest was visible under the expensive leather jerkin he wore.

“The talking ape,” he mused. “I was told you wanted to speak with me. I wasn’t told about what though. Perhaps you’d like to clear that up?”

Patronising bastard. “I just had some questions.”

“Ah? About what?”

I smiled slightly and went over to the desk. He watched, perhaps with a bit of a flinch as I unslung the laptop and set it down, rotating it toward him and tapping the keyboard. “This,” I said, making sure he had a very clear view of the screen.

He went stock-still. I swear I saw the fur around his neck bristle. The laptop was running through a series of pages from the history file, the encyclopedia entries that’d been accessed by hit and miss: rifles, pistols, aircraft, a Star Wars blaster... weapons of all manner and description.

“And what about those?” he asked quietly.

“I think you know,” I said. “Your assistant certainly did. Unfortunate what happened to her. Also convenient, wasn’t it? No way anybody could ask her awkward questions, a?”

He was sitting absolutely motionless, not even the tip of his tail twitching. It was the conscious freeze I’d seen in so many Rris politicians when they wanted to hide their cards. “Do you know what you’re saying?”

“A,” I grinned slightly and he did flinch this time, drawing back a fraction. “I don’t think the trail ended at her. Interesting that the guards who shot her were yours. Interesting that Rris spoke of their superiors in the Shattered Water government: Rris who kidnapped me, who worked for you; Rris who hurt a friend of mine. Smuggling, wasn’t it?”

“Westwater was a stepping-stone. A handy little spot away from the main trade routes. I arrived and drew a little too much attention to the place. I also saw one of your agents. That’s why they tried to kill me, especially when they found out I was a little more than an animal. I could identify people, couldn’t I. Am I getting close?”

Those amber eyes glared at me. “Accusations like that can get you into serious trouble. You have evidence?”

“I know what’s going on.”

A slow grin spread over his face. Not humor, never that. “Then you have nothing. Really, ape, you do need something more substantial than that.”

“And you were the one responsible for what happened to Chihirae.”

“Huhn? Ai, the Teacher. My clients felt that she would’ve been an excellent incentive to help you cooperate. You both should’ve vanished without trace.” He favored me with a small and deliberate grin.

“And it was a shame about the doctor. She really did cause some problems but... Strange: she betrays you and yet you still pine for her. If we’d known that, we could’ve taken her when we took you. That would’ve solved a lot of problems, wouldn’t it. I’m sure seeing her skinned would’ve encouraged you to be more cooperative.” I saw his eyes flicker to where my fists were bunching and his grin widened, completely baring his teeth even as he raised his hand and laid a pistol on the desk. A heavy revolver. There was a ominous metallic click as he cocked it and didn’t quite point it my way. “You can try, ape.”

“And you’d find out what it’s like to be flayed alive,” I responded with an unnatural calm.

“Perhaps.” He waved a shrug and patted the pistol. “Although you are quite unpredictable. Self defence wouldn’t be out of the question.”

I’d be dead and at the very least he’d be ruined and in a way it would be a victory for me. For a few heartbeats I just stood there, the two of us facing each other in that sunlit office. I thought of all the things I’d been through and knew that this Rris... this bastard had been behind them all and for an instant I

could've just gone for him; no matter what the consequences. But that meant I wouldn't be around to savor it.

"You caused so many deaths, you betrayed your country... why?"

"Why?" he rumbled softly. "That really doesn't concern you."

"You try to kill me and you say it doesn't concern me."

He chittered. "I've never tried to kill you, ape. Although, I'm beginning to regret that decision."

"Yeah? There was that attack in town, on the way back from the foundries. And there was that attack in Blizzards Coat."

The commander snorted. "That wasn't at you, you fool."

I hesitated, thrown off track. "At Mai?"

"The name was Maithris, name-breaker. And yes, it was just a warning. She was being too stubborn. It was a demonstration of how vulnerable you both were. And as for that other incident in Shattered Water... I don't know anything about that."

Was he telling the truth? Why would he lie about that after everything else he'd told me? He noticed my uncertainty and narrowed his eyes, baring teeth again. "And now you're probably wondering why you shouldn't just go and report this to his Highness, a?"

"The think... the thought had ... crossed my mind," I growled, anger distorting my Rris.

"Still having trouble talking, huhn ape?" A low chitter and then he leaned forward, his lips flicking up in a Rris smile. "Well, I can give you a few reasons.

"You might go to his Highness and regale him with this story. I'm sure he would listen politely, and even if he believed you, I have some very influential and powerful friends in the city council: merchants, military associates and the like... They all know what an [upstanding] citizen I am and hold me in the highest regard." The smile widened back into a gape-jawed grin.

"If I were to be suddenly arrested, on the word of a mentally unstable talking ape at that, they would certainly demand answers. And proof. And proof, I'm afraid, is something you don't have. I was most careful to cover my trails."

I didn't say anything.

"Also, there's your friend: the teacher. What's her name? Chihirae? From what I've heard you're quite fond of her. I'd imagine you'd be quite upset if something happened to her. There'd be more than enough time to ensure that something did. You understand me?"

I stiffened and felt that unpleasant constriction of fear closing around my guts.

“You understand?” he snarled again.

I slowly closed my hand in a Rris ‘yes’ gesture that left my clenched fist quivering.

“Good,” his muzzle smoothed out and now he looked almost amused. “In any case, who do you think they’d really believe? An insane creature who’s tried to kill itself several times, or a fine citizen like myself?”

It was like I was seeing at him through a red mist. The rest of the room drifted out of focus and there was only him and the rage that felt like a heat suffusing me from head to toe. And he blinked slowly, lazily, while his hand lingered near the pistol.

I reigned it back and stiffly bowed. I had the satisfaction of seeing him flinch when I bent to pick up the laptop and closed the lid with a solid, final click. He was watching carefully as I slung it over my shoulder and turned away.

His voice growled across the office as I reached for the door. “You never answered my question.”

I froze, standing there with my hand on the cold brass of the handle.

“Who would they believe?” he repeated and the voice was level and cold but I knew he was mocking me.

I swallowed hard and I don’t think he saw my lip twitch in a tight grin of my own; in any case I didn’t turn when I said, “You, sir. You.”

Then I left those expensive offices behind and he didn’t try to stop me. A few minutes later, out in the corridors away from his guards and secretaries, my own escort of royal guards stopped in concern as I leaned against a cold marble pillar and tried to get my trembling under control. I closed my eyes and clutched the precious laptop and felt the solidity of stone and whispered, “You. I hope.”

—v—

I cast a sidelong look toward Chihirae, her face turned up toward the old paintings with an expression of wonder that was almost childlike... that’s if I wasn’t anthropomorphisizing again. The winter sunlight streaming down through the gallery skylights filled the long room with flat light, washing across the checkered floor, the pale walls and the multitudes of pictures there. Chihirae stood in that wide space, hands clasped behind her, her fur golden sienna in the light: a splash of color against the monochrome floor.

And god, it hurt to look at her. Lithe, lean, as sleek as Maithris had been despite the differences in coloration and the lines of scars ran across that hide like dark rivers through golden plains. She was a predator, conjouring images of Our World specials on big cats that were so out of place in that elegant chamber. I felt the pangs as emotions she couldn’t feel hooked at me and fought rational thought.

I'd told her it was over; that she didn't have to worry any more. A lie? Maybe. If this little game I was playing and putting so much on didn't work, then it certainly would be. So much was hinging on this maneuver: justice, truth, revenge for everything I'd been through... for everything people I cared about had been through.

"What?" Chihirae was watching me with her head cocked to one side. I'd been staring.

I guiltily turned away, then back and offered her an embarrassed smile. "I'm sorry."

"A?" She also smiled: a little quizically. "Looking at me like that? What's going on in that head of yours?"

"Just thinking."

"Huh? About what?"

I shook my head. "Just... differences."

"A," she said again and her eyes glanced down, then up again to meet mine: Pools of ink in amber. "Differences, hurr?"

I felt the flush climbing the back of my neck and shrugged.

“Mikah, I’m not her,” she said gently.

“I know,” I sighed. “I know.”

“She showed you this,” Chihirae moved her head, indicating the art gallery, “didn’t she.”

“A.” I looked back at the walls of paintings. “The first time I saw anything like this. First time I’d been allowed to do anything but work. It made me feel like a person. And it’s beautiful.” And I looked at Chihirae and saw those images, those pictures of her imprinted in my mind: watching her through a crack in a wall; standing in barn doors; sitting at my bedside in the flickering candlelight; dark eyes in a moonlit sleigh; a battered and moisture-slicked face in a cage.

“So are you.”

The words seemed to echo in that big room. Her head went back, her eyes wide and black. “Mikah... why’d you say that?”

Oh, god. I’d said that once before, long ago, but that hadn’t been tinted with the undertones I was feeling now. I swallowed and forced a smile that can’t have fooled her, then ducked my head and reached to gently pat her shoulder. Just once. “All these paintings,” I said. “All this wealth and property and power

around here. The money I'm being paid... I would give that all away. It can't compare to you."

Her eyes didn't leave me, her muzzle twitched as transient emotions followed one another across her features like weather patterns. "That's... flattering," she said uncertainly. "But I don't understand why you're saying that. Why now? I don't understand."

"I..." I caught a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I know. I'm sorry."

She tipped her head, ever so slightly. "Sometime... sometimes you sound like you're using our words to say something completely different. It can be disconcerting."

"I'm sorry," I said again.

"No. Don't be. It's just... I thought that as you learned more of our language it'd be easier to talk to you. Sometimes... you just seem to create more questions."

As did they. Although... perhaps I had a bit of an advantage. I was the one learning their language, even starting to think in their language. I've heard of a language described as a conceptual framework upon which a subjective model of the world is built. By learning Rris I got some idea of how they saw their world, how they thought. Not exact by any means though: I could learn the words for things Rris could experience, feel, sense that I just wasn't equipped for. I could parrot those words but never really know them. A word for a lashing of the tail; for a particular scent; a kind of wind-chime that made a sound out of my hearing

range...

Describe violet. Or the difference between indigo and violet.

To a Rris the words would be different but both colors would be black. I was bending their language to try and convey concepts from English that didn't have any exact translation in their tongue. It did confuse them and at times made me sound like a fool.

"I know the problem," I said and looked back at the paintings: an exaggerated perspective of towering trees with a fan of light shining through the spreading branches. Then I looked back to the golden-furred alien woman standing quietly watching me with her hands clasped in front of her. "I didn't mean to upset you. I'm sorry. I just wanted to... You mean so much to me. I wanted to tell you. I've wanted to tell you for a long time. That was... that just came out. I'm sorry. I'm sorry it sounded so foolish."

She stepped a little closer and touched my arm, brushing her furry knuckles across my forearm and wrist. "That was what you wanted to say the other night, wasn't it?"

"A," I nodded.

"Why didn't you?"

I sighed and stuffed my hands into my pockets. "After what you said, about

that morning... when you saw me ... aroused. I thought... I thought you might be angry or frightened.”

She was horribly still. “You mean you think of me in a sexual way?”

“No. I mean I... I mean...” I stumbled with the language, tripping over pronunciation and grammar, trying to word it in a way that wouldn’t give her the wrong impression. I took a deep breath: “Until that time with Mai, I’d never known it was possible. I felt like this, but I never knew any other kind of relationship was possible. Between Rris and me. Not until Mai.”

“And now?” she asked quietly.

“Chihirae...” I wanted to scream in frustration. “I don’t know how to tell you. I love you. I don’t know how else to say it. Your language doesn’t have words to say my emotions.” I turned to her and raised my hands, half prepared to grab her before I saw the look in her eyes. Instead I shook my head violently and raked my fingers through my hair. “You’re the most important person in the world to me. You mean more than they could ever pay me. You saved my life. You’ve put up with me, you’ve understood me, you’ve been kind to me. You’ve been a friend.”

“Friend,” she echoed softly in a level voice, just watching me.

High above us, flakes were settling on the skylights. More snow. I sighed deeply. “It was about this time we first met, wasn’t it,” I said.

“About,” she said. “Close.”

“I frightened you then. You were so nervous around me.”

“A,” her ears drooped.

“You feel the same way now?”

She tipped her head. “Mikah, my Mikah. I think I know you well enough that I couldn’t be frightened of you. And I’m not angry: you’re alone here, it’s a sort of solitude I understand. It’s just... You’re strange Mikah. So strange. The idea of sex with that strangeness is just... it’s that idea that scares me. Not you.”

Like the sensations I’d felt that night in Mai’s little apartment when she first touched me: uncertainty and fear, deep and quite disorienting. I tentatively reached up to touch her shoulder, then her neck. “I think I understand.”

She lowered her head and gently rubbed the velvet fur of her cheek against my wrist. “I suppose I should apologise to you, a? If that insults you... I’m sorry.”

“No,” I moved my hand, stroking the bone and flesh and fur of her cheek. And no matter what she looked like, there was a person under there. “Friend?”

“Friend,” she rumbled and leaned against me.

I could feel her relaxing as I gently stroked her but it didn't do much to calm me. In fact, it just made things all the more difficult. Those moods. I didn't understand them and maybe I couldn't. Like white water: they ran fast and unpredictable and all you could do was try to ride them out. Now ... I still had something important I had to tell her and I had no idea how she'd take it.

"What's wrong?" she asked without turning.

"Wrong?" I said stupidly, my fingers faltering as they stroked her.

"Mikah, your scent... you smell nervous."

"Oh."

"This has something to do with last night? Don't pretend nothing happened: you came back with a cloud of old fear and anger hanging around you. Do you want to talk about it?"

Talk about it... I felt my stomach plummet and she reached up to gently take my wrist in her hand.

"Please, don't," I said, tugging against her grip. "That always scares me."

She hesitated then moved her finger away from my telltale pulse and just held my hand, cocked her head, watching me. “Am I that transparent?” I asked miserably.

“I know you,” she said quietly.

A. She did. After the time we’d spent together, the time she’d spent tending and looking after me and protecting me, she did know me. And because of all we’d been through I had to tell her. Not doing so would not only be selfish, it would be a betrayal.

“Chihirae,” I choked. “I was wrong.”

“Wrong?” Her ears flickered. “What do you mean? When?”

“When I said it was over.” I saw her head go back, just a fraction. “Chihirae, it can’t be over. Not while I’m still alive. Anyone who knows me, anyone who’s close to me... It’s too dangerous to be close to me.”

Muscles in her jaw shifted and she looked down at my hand, then back at my face. “What’s happened? Tell me. Everything, Mikah.”

I told her and she listened and when I was done I hung my head and waited for her judgement.

“You knew about him before,” I heard her say and it wasn’t a question. When I looked up she was regarding me with a level stare. Trying to read me.

“I guessed,” I told her. “I didn’t know for certain. I didn’t know he would threaten you. I never thought he would threaten you. I’m sorry.”

“‘You guessed’.” She narrowed her eyes. “You knew it wasn’t over.”

“I couldn’t be sure,” I said guiltily. “I never knew they’d pull you back in. I didn’t think... I didn’t want you to worry.”

She hissed, long and slow. A sound that held more exasperation than anger. “Didn’t want me to worry. And you thought by not telling me that would protect me?”

“I just didn’t... I don’t want you to be thinking about that. I don’t want you waking at night with the kind of fears I have. I just thought you might be able to get your life back to normal.”

She barked out loud, a yelp that echoed through the hall then faded to chittering that had her jaw spasming and shoulders shaking. “Normal?” she choked and sucked a deep breath, finally snapping her teeth a couple of times. “Mikah, since I’ve met you I think I can safely say that my life hasn’t been ‘normal’.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It hasn’t been all bad.”

And I could see her lying amidst that filthy straw in that cage, that anguished and torn face twisted up in the light, the fur plastered to her face. I laid a finger on a dark line under her fur and gently traced. “But some of it... I don’t want that to happen again.”

“There was nothing you could do,” she said softly. “That wasn’t your fault.”

If I hadn’t... if I’d... On the walls of that empty gallery the ranks of long-dead Ris looked down on me in silent judgement.

“If I’d known...”

“But you didn’t. You couldn’t have. Mikah, stop blaming yourself, rot you. There was nothing you could have done.”

“But if I go ahead with this then you might get hurt again and it will be my fault.”

“No. Mikah, no.” A black-palmed hand laid itself on my chest, right over my heart, and she said as slowly and as clearly as possible, “What you’re doing is the right thing.”

“You approve?”

Her hand over my breastbone clenched: ever so slightly. Claws pricked through my shirt to kiss my skin. “A. I approve. I want you to go through with this.”

I looked down into her face: teeth peeking through in a slight grin and muscles locked with determination. I just nodded, a gesture she understood that said what I wanted to say.

“And Mikah, I want to be there.”

“No ...”

“Yes,” she almost snarled. “They dragged me into this. They started this. I want to see the end of this. Mikah.”

I closed my eyes. It was so easy to remember those first days in Westwater. The cubs, that was all she had to care about. Teaching, a quiet profession without murder and assassinations and political backbiting and treachery. Now she’d been pulled into something she never wanted.

That was something I could understand. And I could also understand that need to blame someone; for revenge. It was something I’d hoped to never see in her. The end of the innocence: A blemish on a beautiful picture.

“I’ll... ask,” I choked out. “I’ll tell them.”

Then the cool pads on her palms touched my cheeks and cupped my face, gently pulling me down to the level where a rough tongue dabbed at my eyes.

“Salt,” she murmured.

—v—

I shivered in the cold dimness of the hallway: partly through tension, partly from the chill. Outside, through the grills of mullioned windows, the trees of the gardens were black sawteeth silhouetted against a blue-grey sky. Shoals of grey clouds sculled across the twilight, the pale moon periodically visible through fractures in the amorphous greyness.

Fur brushed my hand and then small, furry fingers caught after mine. “Calm down,” Chihirae said gently. “You reek of fear. Just be calm. Don’t be afraid. You’ll be fine.”

“I’m trying,” I said, trying to breath steadily while my heart labored as though I were running a race.

“I know. Just do your best. That’s all anyone can ask.”

At that moment I was so glad she’d bullied me into getting Hirht to let her

accompany me that night. I squeezed her hand again and for a long, quiet moment we watched the dread, closed doors beyond which the Rris council was meeting.

“I remember this,” she said eventually. “That day. That walk to town.”

“A,” I nodded slightly. It hadn’t escaped my notice either: the second time I was going before a jury in a trial to decide my future. Only this time if I screwed up there was somebody who was going to be dragged down with me. “At least this time I can understand what’s going on.”

“Sir? Ma’am?”

A steward was waiting for us. Standing before those doors with hands clasped, watching us with trepidation.

I took a deep breath. “We’re on.”

“A.” Her hand squeezed once, then she reached up to fuss with my hair. “I think I told you before. Just tell the truth.”

I hugged her, just quickly. Then turned back to the startled steward and guards and straightened my jacket. “All right.”

The light was fading. The dark-panelled conference room was shrouded in

darkness, the high ceiling and corners lost in shadows. Carved wooden statues stood in niches, their alien features peering out from the gloom. There were candles burning on the massive old low table in the center of the room, illuminating the Rris heads that turned and set those alien eyes to flickering like hot metal as they stared at me. Over a dozen of the most powerful individuals in Shattered Water: guild lords, military commanders all in their uniforms and finery seated crosslegged on their cushions around the circumference of that table. My palms were slick-wet on the laptop: I tightened my already white-knuckled grip.

Those eyes watched unblinkingly as Chihirae and I entered. I recognised a few of them: lords and guildmasters I'd spoken with before; the imposing and grizzled bulk of Kisti aesh Hostei watching me levelly through weathered fur. And directly opposite her sat Marah ah Cho'tai.

He was staring at me. Not with the curiosity and perhaps apprehension of the others, but a stare that had the sharpness and chill of an icicle. "That," he snapped as he stabbed a clawed finger toward me. "That's what been spouting these preposterous allegations. Rot me, how can you even contemplate believing such wind."

I saw heads around the table tipping. Some looked like they believed him; they looked like they wanted to believe him.

"Enough of that," Hirht rumbled and ah Cho'tai subsided. I saw his gaze shift from me to Chihirae and his upper lip fleered back: just a fraction, just for a split second. It was enough to make my hackles stand on end.

"Mikah." I looked back to Hirht. "Do you understand why you're here? You've made some very strong accusations. We can't just take your word for it.

There has to be proof.”

“Proof,” I echoed. The way he’d looked at Chihirae... that was a warning. Oh, god...

“You would even listen to something as ridiculous as this?” ah Cho’tai sounded incredulous.

“He has a right to be heard.”

“The thing is delusional,” ah Cho’tai growled. “You yourself commented on his mental state.”

Hirht didn’t meet my eyes.

Marah ah Cho’tai coughed disgust. “Who would you believe? That,” he used the tone you might use when referring to something found at the bottom of an oubliette, “or an actual person.”

I realised I was clenching my teeth and my grip on the laptop was tight enough to almost hurt. A touch on my arm reminded me of what was at stake here and I took a long breath. “You asked me that same question before,” I said as I approached the table. Guards shifted uneasily until Hirht raised a hand slightly and they fell back.

““Who would they believe?”” I remembered aloud as I opened the laptop and set it on the tabletop. He was watching my hands, his ears back, and when his eyes did meet mine they were black. He knew something was up.

“And I told you, I hope they believe you,” I said and hit the key.

On the laptop screen was the image of his face; his voice echoed around the room: “Huhn? Ai, the Teacher. My clients felt that she would’ve been an excellent incentive to help you cooperate. You both should’ve vanished without trace...

Cho’tai’s face was twisting through the gamut of emotions before he settled on an outraged snarl and howled in fury. “A lie!”

“That’s you,” Kisti growled, jerking his jaw toward the screen.

“It’s a rotted trick!” Cho’tai snarled. “That filthy thing...”

On the screen the recording of him was threatening Chihirae. I felt her tense and looked at her. Cho’tai eyes were wide, the white of sclera flashing around the rims as they rolled and flickered to the picture, then to me, then to the guards approaching and his face twisted into a gape-mouthed snarl of threat and his hand was a golden blur that whipped up from under the table holding something small and metal.

“No,” I screamed even as I twisted and dove to my left, toward Chihirae, and

there was a sound like a sharp clap and something slammed my right shoulder, knocking me into Chihirae who cried out even as I bore her back to the ground and more concussions blasted out and left my ears ringing.

There was shouting and yowls and a high mewling. I looked around to see that Cho'tai had fallen and through the confusion and thick smoke left from discharged weapons I saw a trooper standing over a thrashing golden form with a pistol pointed straight down.

The flash of fire and crack of sound came at the same instant and I looked down at the wide eyes of Chihirae beneath me and then her face contorted and she cried out and I saw the dark stains spreading through the fur of her upper left shoulder and chest.

"No," I screamed again and tried to find the wound, to staunch the bleeding, to do something. But there were scores of holes torn through her tunic and below that were matching wounds torn in her hide, turning her golden fur to a sodden sheet of blood. Shotgun, I realised. As she moaned and grimaced and tried to curl around what had to hurt a lot. Oh, christ. Oh, god... I was babbling out loud as guards closed around us and someone was calling for a doctor. Hands caught me to pull me away.

"No," I struggled.

"Mikah... "

"Fuck off!" I snarled at the voice.

“Rot... No, Mikah!” Guards caught me and pulled me away from my injured friend and I cried out as pain spiked through my shoulder as my arm was twisted.

“You were hit,” Hirht was telling me. “Where is it? How bad?”

Me. That’s who they were worried about. Not Chihirae writhing on the expensive carpet with her clothes and chest fur glistening red. “Help her,” I pleaded.

“Doctor’s coming,” he said as a guard checked my shoulder, then stepped back with a startled expression. “Sir?”

I didn’t want to know how bad it was: another batch of scars to add to my collection. But the Ris caught a pinch of my jacket and pulled gently and I winced as something pattered to the floor. Shotgun pellets.

They hadn’t even penetrated my jacket. The fabric had dimpled into the three layers of winter clothing and partially into my skin. The blood running down my back was from the pellet that’d nicked through my ear. I was bruised and it was starting to feel like someone had taken a baseball bat to my trapezius, but it was far from life threatening.

The Ris looked stunned as more pellets rattled to the floor. I yanked away from the guards and glared at Hirht who laid his ears back as hastened back to Chihirae.

I'd tried to protect her. I'd almost succeeded. I'd taken the worst of it: the spread that would have hit her chest and throat, but unlike me, Chihirae hadn't had a spidersilk jacket to protect her and what had struck...

She was mewling in pain: a sound I'd heard from her once before and it still tore me to my heart as she trembled and reached up to try and paw at the sodden fur of her left shoulder, chest, upper arm...

"No," I caught her hand and held it, even when she clenched it and claws dug in. Shock-wide eyes were locked on me, milky-white membranes half extruded as she panted like a wounded animal. "Don't move," I urged her. "You'll be all right."

"Rot... oh rot. It hurts," she gasped in a small voice then snarled, at the pain I guessed.

I looked up and around. From my perspective the Rris lords were taller than they had any right to be, and they were standing back and watching, murmuring agitatedly as they watched with black eyes. Guards lurked in the background, blending in with lazily swirling smoke and darkness: shapes from nightmares.

"Help her," I implored.

"A doctor's coming," Hirht said, standing with his hands clasped before him and his ears back. "Mikah..." He glanced at the bloody figure lying on the carpet and trailed off with a sigh. "A doctor's coming."

I squeezed her hand and stroked her face. In the background I heard him saying, “Esteemed ones, we should retire to somewhere more conducive to conversation. I think you’ll all have much to talk about.”

Their voices were still hushed as they stalked out, detouring around us. One pair of legs hesitated, then a Rris crouched opposite me: the solid form of Kisti aesh Hostei. The old general tipped her head as she regarded Chihirae, then very carefully ran claws through the shotgun wound, huffed and gave me a ghost of a smile. “She’ll live. I’ve seen much worse.”

And looking at that grizzled bearlike form with her tattered ears and scared hide, I believed it. It helped a lot. “Thank you,” I said.

The old warrior cocked her head at me and I couldn’t tell what was going on behind those eyes. “You really feel pain for her?”

“She’s a friend,” I said, scared for Chihirae and not sure how to feel about this Rris who’d been so standoffish to me in the past.

“A friend. Huhnn,” she flicked her thumb along her chin thoughtfully. “I know a few Rris who wouldn’t be so loyal. All the best, Mikah.”

The doctor arrived as she was leaving. All of a sudden there was an elder Rris snarling at the guards who gently but inexorably pulled me away while the Rris poked and prodded. Chihirae cried out when they moved her onto the stretcher and I tensed and felt the guards’ hands tightening on my arms. But they let me

go with her when she was carried off to a nearby room where the doctors could work.

It was an excruciatingly long, exhausting night. For hours I stood by Chihirae's side and held her hand while the doctor laboured under flickering gas lights that turned blood and flesh to ghastly hues, methodically digging pellets of lead out of her. She'd been drugged down to a stupor, but I think she still felt it as the doctor dug away in the gore with tweezers and one by one little slivers of soft metal plinked into a bowl and the pile of bloody rags grew. The gun hadn't been large; the load light and underpowered even by Rris standards, but if it'd hit her full on, in the face or neck or penetrated to the lungs...

The doctor continued his painstaking, horrible work deep into the night and I felt so helpless just standing by, but all I could do was hold her hand and stroke her face until it was over.

When the doctor and his assistants had gone Chihirae lay quietly, more unconscious than asleep. She looked as exhausted as I felt, with her fur matted and bloody and the sheath of bandages and pads swathing her wounds. I took a bowl of water and very carefully tried to sponge the worst of the gore from tangled fur. She stirred but didn't wake.

Then I sat at her bedside and watched her sleep.

—v—

Something woke me. I lay quietly in that place where unconsciousness laps on the shore of awareness, listening to a soft murmur of Rris voices before memory

returned and yanked me out of sleep, blinking into grey morning light.

I hadn't meant to fall asleep. Last I remembered Chihirae was laying quietly and I was sitting, watching her, and I just closed my eyes for a second. Now I was laying on the carpet at her bedside, squinting into grey light filtering through the window.

At some time somebody had covered me with a blanket. That helped, but old wounds ached and the muscles that'd taken a hammering the last night protested as I moved. It felt like glass moving under my skin as I stirred.

Chaeitch was sitting on the edge of Chihirae's bed, speaking softly. A faint chitter sounded from the bed in response to something he said.

"Hai," I said as I clambered to my feet, wincing as my shoulder moved. "Chihirae?"

Chaeitch twisted as though startled, then visibly relaxed when he saw me. "I didn't mean to wake you."

Beyond him, Chihirae was awake and watching me with wide-eyes. The bandages were stark white against her skin and I saw someone had finished what I'd started, cleaning that blood away.

"You should have," I absently said to Chaeitch, then to my old friend. "Chihirae... How... how are you doing?"

Her face twitched as she glanced to Chaeitch and back to me again. "I'll live," she murmured.

I swallowed hard. "I shouldn't have let you. I shouldn't have... that should have been me. You should never have been there. I'm sorry."

Her eyes closed tight. "Don't. It was my choice. I remember what you did... You tried. You tried."

"But you..."

Chaeitch touched her good arm and slowly ran a finger through her fur. "Mikah, you saved her life."

"I should never have let her go in the first place!" I protested.

"Mikah," Chihirae opened eyes that'd already seen far too much. "Mikah, it's in the past. It's done. It's not a carcass worth fighting over."

She sounded so tired that I didn't want to argue with her. I just hung my head and kept quiet.

"Mikah," she sighed. "Rot, come here. Here."

I hesitated and her good hand flexed to scratch at the sheets. Chaeitch moved aside as I knelt and she beckoned again. “No. Here. A.” Her hand touched my face and curled around, her stubby fingers stroking my hair. “You did all you could. I know that. Don’t hold my decisions against yourself,” she said, then her claws flexed a little, just pricking my skin. “You hear me?”

“A,” I said.

She stroked, just brushing my skin. “But you stayed last night. Thanks for that.”

“He’s loyal,” I heard Chaeitch say and Chihirae’s touch faltered a little. I had to wonder what they’d been talking about while I was asleep on the floor. Me? I suddenly felt like an outsider butting into a private conversation where the participants were too polite to tell him to get lost.

“Perhaps I should leave you a while,” I said. “You need some rest.” I stroked the fur of her arm, then disengaged myself, straightened her sheets and stood.

“That might be best,” Chaeitch added. “Anything you want? Drink? Food? Something light.”

“Soup would be good,” she smiled tiredly at him. “Thank you.”

“Just lay still,” I told her. “You’ll be fine.”

A faint chitter. "I know. Mikah, you worry too much."

I bit my lip and Chaeitch touched my arm, gently urging me along toward the door. I went, then shied just long enough to say, "I'll come back." But I think she was already asleep again.

Chaeitch carefully closed the door behind us, then murmured an aside to one of the two guards stationed in the deserted corridor outside. When he rejoined me he peered up at my face. "That expression, that's concern isn't it. Don't. She'll be fine. The soldiers won't let anything happen to her."

I nodded.

"What?" He asked.

"Cho'tai... he said he would kill her. I thought... I don't know. I thought he'd be more subtle about it, more careful. What happened just didn't seem to be his style. He must've known he couldn't be sure."

The Rris industrialist gave something analogous to a frown, wrinkling and distorting the patterns shaved across the bridge of his muzzle. "It seemed pretty effective to me. If you hadn't had that coat of yours you wouldn't be here." He glanced back down the hall. "And maybe she wouldn't either."

I shivered. It'd been too close.

“Strange thing though,” Chaeitch mused.

“What?”

He didn’t answer. He just stared vacantly up at the ornate ceiling, scratching his neck as we walked, then his ears laid back. “Red tie it.”

“What?” I asked, growing a little alarmed.

“I was just thinking: his highness would never have allowed someone to bring a weapon into a [tribunal] chamber. Certainly not someone who was potentially so dangerous.”

I blinked. “But then where did he ...” I trailed off, not sure what he was getting at.

“Rot. He had it, but probably not when he went in.”

I put two and two together. “You mean someone else brought it in and gave it to him or hid it in there. And that means... there’s someone else.”

We both stopped where we were in the middle of the corridor amidst fluted marble columns and niches containing the sculpted skeletons of trees and stared

at one another. Chaeitch's ears almost vanished into his mane they laid down so flat. "I think..." he said. "I think we'd better have a word with his highness. It'd be prudent to ... Where are you going?"

"Where'd you think?" I called over my shoulder as I started back the way we'd just come, a growing sense of apprehension gnawing at my gut. "Tell the guards. Nobody goes in or out."

"Mikah..." he started to call, then claws pattered on the floor as he fell in beside me.

The two guards cocked their heads as we entered the corridor. "Something wrong, sir?" One of them asked Chaeitch.

"There might be," he said. I could see muscles twitching under his fur. He was that concerned about her? "There might be trouble, an attempt on her life. Nobody enters without specific authority from myself, his highness, or Mikah here."

The guards eyed me uncertainly, then ducked their head. "Yes, sir. That includes that food you ordered?"

Chaeitch grimaced. "There'll be written authorisation when that arrives."

"Sir?" The guards exchanged confused glances. "But sir, he just took it in a minute ago."

Chaeitch looked at me. I think my eyes were as wide as his. We hadn't had time to order the food...

He hit the door a split second before I did, slamming it back with a sound like the crack of doom, and the first thing I saw was the Rris with the large floor cushion pressed hard over Chihirae's face look up with wild eyes.

My cry rose with Chaeitch's howl and his muscles bunched as he started to move, blurring into a headlong rush. I saw the Rris standing over Chihirae also start to move: a hand darting into the recesses of his servant's tunic...

"Chae!" I yelled and he hurled himself to the side as the gun came up and I dodged frantically as the flintlock flared and filled the room with noise and smoke and something smashed splinters from the doorframe behind my head. I skidded on a carpet and went down to one knee and heard Rris yelling and there were movements through the swirling grey then a flash of servants livery and something caught me a stinging blow across the side of the head that staggered me and a Rris figure blurred past. Startled yowling sounded out in the corridor.

And Chaeitch was pulling the suffocating cloth away from Chihirae's face. I saw the fabric was was oozing stuffing: tattered and clawed, as if by struggling hands. And underneath...

Chaeitch laid a finger in the pit of her throat, then bent to place an ear at her nostrils. "She's... "

Chihirae twitched, then coughed violently and inhaled a sobbing gasp, writhing in the tangles of bedding bloodied by reopened wounds.

“Alive,” I sagged, my heart still hammering, and in that instant of looking at her sucking air I remembered the face behind the gun. “It was him,” I said.

Chaeitch was kneeling at her side, holding her hand. He looked up. “You noticed.”

Oh, yes. No greenstone bracelet this time, but now I knew that face. I was never going to forget that face. I touched my old friend’s shoulder and saw she was breathing easier, her eyes flickering. Too much suffering.

“No more,” I whispered in english.

“What?” Chaeitch stared at me with eyes still dilated.

“Enough,” I said. “I’ve fucking had enough!”

“Mikah?” he called as I headed for the door and the commotion in the corridor outside.

I didn’t turn, just said, “Look after her. Just look after her.”

“Where are you... Mikah?” he called after me but I left him with Chihirae while I set off toward the commotion in the corridor outside.

The guards were hammering at a closed door, their weapons taking gouges from the painted wood. In the distance a contingent of armed soldiers spilled into the corridor, hurrying toward the disturbance.

“In there,” I nodded toward the door and the guards looked distressed. “Yes, sir. It’s locked. I’m sorry...”

I didn’t need that. I looked the door up and down, then planted my boot just below the latch: once, as hard as I could, then again and the whole lock splintered away and one more kick slammed the door back on its hinges.

The room beyond was unfurnished, decorated in shades of pale stone, and utterly deserted. Directly opposite the high windows were hanging open with the waving drapes framing the grey monochrome of the cloud-shrouded Palace gardens beyond.

I dashed over to look out at a one-story drop and a freezing breeze that nipped at my skin. Bushes directly below the window were crushed and broken and a trail of prints in the snow pointed off toward the snow-shrouded treeline but the bastard was already out of sight. A guard clattered up to the windowsill beside me and looked out, then yelled back to the others. With all that ironmongery I wasn’t sure if they could get out there, and it didn’t look like they were going to try. If they weren’t going to...

The guard managed a bark of protest as I vaulted the sill and dropped what

felt like a long way, landed on frozen ground and broken shrubbery with an impact and twinge I felt through scarred muscle as I went to my knees. Just a moment, then I set off after those tracks.

A steady jog.

Letting the legs go, moving in a steady rhythm as my breath crystalised and every lungful of frigid air burned. A steady jog: not pushing it, just keeping going after those prints through the snow.

Rris. Faster than I am. Much faster. Cheetah fast. And like cheetahs they're best at a burst of speed. They couldn't keep it up over a long distance.

I hoped.

Snow crunched under my boots and winter air was brittle against my face, burning in my lungs as I loped across the frozen meadows, following the tracks toward the trees. There was a freezing mist flowing in from the lake, gradually condensing on branches and leaves and twigs, covering the world in a glittering patina of frost and ice, turning trees into dark shadows fading off into the grey.

A monochromatic world: cold, ethereal, still, and it was something out of my nightmares. I remembered running like this before and for a fleeting second I thought I heard the cries of hunting Rris behind me, but that sensation was gone almost as soon as it had come. The gasping clouds of my breath mingled with the fog as I followed the spoor, pushing through denuded branches and the winter skeletons of undergrowth. Along summer trails buried under snow, over fallen logs and through a lonely gazebo. When the trail crossed a half-frozen

rivulet, the ice at the side was cracked where he'd put a foot through, misjudging the ice. I jumped it and scrambled up the bank on the far side.

I was getting my second wind by the time I reached the wrought iron fence surrounding the Palace grounds. The footprints in the snow bent off, paralleling the eight-foot iron bars. I followed them for at least a dozen meters before they ended at the foot of a gnarled old oak, the massive boughs wearing snow and ice. The branch hanging out over the fence was really hint enough, I didn't need the gouges of claw marks in the bark to tell me where the son had gone: straight up and over.

Maybe he could do that. I couldn't. On the other hand, that fence had never been built to stop apes.

The wrought iron was freezing on my hands when I jumped and caught the icy top rail. "Where the hell are those guards!" I growled as I swung my legs up and clambered over the gilt spikes, then dropped down the far side. The tracks were there again, just where they'd be if someone jumped from that branch. They crossed the belt of cleared land and into the trees on the far side.

My question was answered when the peal of distant bells rang through the misty woods. They had to be alarm bells so that meant guards would be behind, would be spreading out and sending troops to scour the grounds and hopefully the surrounding environs as well. But they had to rely on messengers and word of mouth. He could be miles away and gone before the Rris security got a cohesive search together.

The trail led arrow-straight through the woods surrounding the Palace grounds, then the trunks thinned and a bank dropped down to a roughly east-west road paralleling the Palace and headed toward the lake. The avenue was a

natural vault, with the denuded branches of old trees arching and lacing overhead. Opposite lay the estates of the Rocks, the Nipple, with their expensive buidlings and sprawling grounds. Wagon, sled and animal tracks crossed and tangled along the thoroughfare, old tracks just suggestions in the snow while a couple of newer sleigh tracks were crisp lines cut into the white. A single pair of footprints joined the road there and headed west, toward the lake. And away down the road in that direction, through the lake mist I could see a figure.

He was moving much slower now: not much more than a fast walk. I picked up the pace, feeling the freezing air starting to ache in my lungs: frigid against my skin while elsewhere hot beads of sweat were trickling and a ball of tension knotted in my guts. Concentrating on breathing and running while with every step my boots squeaked through crusting snow and ice.

The figure ahead hesitated and turned, twisting to look back and by then I was close enough to see an anxious face suddenly go to outright terror. He started to run again: not a smooth sprint but a ragged lope that screamed exhaustion. Hunters: Rris are built for a short, sharp pursuit, not a long, drawn out chase. Humans on the other hand... my distant ancestors ran their prey down in hunts that could last the better part of a day. I wasn't in the best of shape, but the heritage was in the bone and for once I had the advantage.

For a short distance he pulled away and was just a shape through the mist ahead of me, staggering slightly. I could see him cast glances back as slowly the distance closed and I was starting to reach my limits as well as the burning in my legs flared and my lungs and body ached.

A wagon appeared out of the fog, in the other lane bound the other way. My quarry dodged in front of it, setting the team to shying and eliciting curses from the driver as wheels and animals' hooves slipped on the treacherous surface and then he was scrambling up the bank. The teamster yelped again when I ran past in pursuit but this time his yelp was one of alarm and then he was gone and I was

kicking through frozen slush as I chased after my prey.

He was dodging through the trees and scrub, close enough that I could hear his panting gasps and the breaking of branches, close enough that I could see his wide eyes when he looked back.

Dodging through bushes, around trees, branches and twigs scratching at my face and hands and then the trees were gone and there was a steep earthen berm rising ahead of us: an artificial-looking hillside of white that the Rris was pelting up. He slipped once, continued on all fours and I felt my own legs about to give out as I gave it my all to reach the crest.

Part of the town floodwall. I was gasping white clouds that lost themselves among the chill fog swirling in the air when I reached the crest and looked down on the vast expanse of the icebound lake. At the shoreline a thick slush of broken ice churned at the stones; further out larger floes jostled and cracked and groaned, shifting with the movement of the water. There was a guard tower there: a squat, multifloored edifice of old stone standing lone guard over the shore and the end of the palace fenceline. I saw movement behind the crenellations at the top: heard voices shouting but didn't hear what they were saying because the staggering Rris I was pursuing halted, then rounded on me.

He was panting like a steam engine; his breath an almost solid cloud wreathing gaping jaws and animal eyes. He crouched, spreading arms with bared claws and lips drawn back from those glistening teeth.

“You...” he snarled and gasped air. “You... nothing but trouble!”

“You think I’ve been trouble?” I panted back, clenching my fists.

“Huhn,” he grinned, snorting steam as he started slowly circling. “I should’ve made sure that first day, in the barn.”

“You killed that farmer.”

He just grinned. I sidestepped, watching him warily as we slowly orbited one another. “He worked for you and you killed him.”

“He panicked. He was more trouble than he was worth.”

“And his mate.”

“Ahhh, she was more reliable,” he snarled again, a pure animal sound as he started circling. His tail was bottled from under the servants tunic, lashing furiously. If he still had the pistol he hadn’t had time to reload, something for which I was very grateful. “Still failed to lay the blame on you though. Pity: it’d would’ve been a very satisfactory end to your meddling.”

“My meddling?” I hissed incredulously and felt my own snarl turning into something that distorted my face. “You involved me! You chased me! You attacked me! You hurt my friends! You tried to kill Chihirae! I really don’t like that.”

He froze on the spot, every limb vibrating with tension and his eyes gone completely black. “This... Then what do you want? Money?”

“What I want,” I growled back, “is you. Dead or alive, you are coming with me.”

He yawned. It wasn’t a gesture of derision or contempt as it might have been in a human but rather a hostile gaping of the jaws to bare incisors at me. “You should have taken the money, ape. I’m going to tear the rest of your face off.”

“Big words, furball,” I flexed my fists. “You can try.”

He did.

Slowly, his head tipped - as though he were cocking his head in curiosity - and then he launched himself at me with a shriek that a human throat could never manage and I barely had time to swing and I struck something and his claws caught my shirt as he hit me and I went over backwards with him atop. Snarling fangs drove toward my face and I just screamed at the ingrained terror that pulled forth and swung wildly, striking him on the side of the head. He dug claws in, one hand scrabbling on my jacket while the other punctured my shirt and skin. I yelled again and brought a knee up to dislodge him and we were rolling over and over through the snow and ice that covered us and adhered to his fur until I was able to plant my foot in his gut and kick and he went flying back.

Halfway to my feet when the fury tore into me again, a flashing blur of claws and animal snarls and I was bleeding from a gash across my cheek and more cuts

on my hands where I'd tried to block. Striking back to catch him a crack across the jaw that sent pain shooting through cold-sensitized hands and then we were grappling and his teeth were going for my throat. I just reacted from adrenaline-fueled fear, drove my forehead into his muzzle and impacted with a crunch and a yowl and he twisted away with blood staining the fur around his nostrils then smoothly came around in a strike at my throat. I caught his hand, he clawed at my legs and I twisted and we fell.

Rolling in a struggling tangle down the lakeward side of the floodwall, through snow and ice, over stones concealed under the windblown drifts. Struggling, both of us with teeth bared. Over and over, the world flashing through the peripheries of my vision while I fought to keep his claws away from my throat until the world dropped out from under us and the ensuing drop ended in an impact that jolted the breath from my body.

We'd tumbled off an old retaining wall: a drop of about half a meter down onto ice-slicked stones and gravel of the lake beach. He was scrambling to his feet, shaking his head and sending droplets of blood flying from his nostrils as he snarled again and launched himself. I swung a fist and the impact against his jaw sent pain shooting through my hand but he was staggered and I swung again and blood flew again as his head rocked back.

Again and again. He was down and his hands were up to try and block as I swung. Just a blood haze of hate, swinging and pummeling at his face over and over. Even when he was no longer moving I kept hammering until the pulse was an angry pounding in my ears and the freezing air made my heaving lungs ache and I just couldn't raise my arms again. I slumped, gasping air that burned in my throat and sinuses.

Oh, christ.

My hands. My hands and knuckles hurt terribly and I couldn't move them properly. The blood on them: some was mine, some... And when I looked at the motionless figure on the frozen ground beneath me its features were no longer recognisable through gore and torn fur.

I stared. An exhausted emptiness in my heart as I looked at the still figure laying amongst drifting white now stained with crimson.

And when something - a movement in the tail of my eye, a feeling, something - made me spin I saw a semicircle of Rris watching me through the mist. Soliders, probably from the watchtower. They were watching me with ears flat against their manes and weapons trained.

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The commandeered goods cart rattled into the sweeping drive in the front of the palace, the unfinished wood and metal of the conveyance looking decidedly out of place in that manicured splendor. Soldiers and guards were already sprinting toward us with their clawed feet kicking up sprays of snow. The officer in charge of the squad who'd found me snapped to attention as a Palace commander hustled up and looked at me. Words were exchanged and the commander's ears went flat before he barked orders.

I ached. My hands were burning and cuts and lacerations all over my body were stinging and throbbing while drying blood caked and stuck my clothes to my body. It wasn't something I had time to worry about.

Guards in the wagon, those who'd found me, flinched back when I clambered

over the tailgate to drop to the snowy drive. I almost fell as my legs gave way and I had to catch myself on the wagon before limping off toward the main doors. Palace guards laid their ears down and got out of my way.

There was distant shouting ringing through the marbled halls. Guards were stationed at junctures around the place while nervous-looking servants tried to look unobtrusive. I hurried as best I could through the now-familiar corridors while a crowd of guards trailed after. Sentries didn't try to stop me and just recoiled when I came past. I was too fixed on my objective to care.

The stairs hurt and by the time I reached that last corridor my head was swimming. The guards posted outside the room there saw me coming and one ducked inside. When I staggered up to the door Chaeitch burst out, already taking a breath to say something and then he just stared. I pushed past. "How is she?"

"What... Mikah... What happened?" I heard Chaeitch demanding. "What happened to you?"

Chihirae was laying quietly with her eyes closed, the sheets over her chest rising and falling slowly with her breath. I could feel scabs tearing and scratches throbbing when I gingerly sat on the mattress beside her. Chaeitch's ears wilted when I touched the sleeping Rris.

"She's all right," he offered. "They gave her something to make her sleep. Some stiches tore. There was some bleeding, that's all. We got here in time. Mikah?"

I gently stroked her muzzle and cheeks. Slack in repose, but soft like velvet under my fingertips. I felt a faint surprise when I realised she was beautiful to me: no longer just an alien.

It seemed like a long time later when I felt the touch on my shoulder. I looked up at Chaeitch through swimming eyes and when I blinked I felt heat run down my cheeks. Muscles in his face twitched and his ears went back in distress. “You need a doctor,” he told me.

“I’m not leaving her.”

“Mikah, please. Look at yourself.”

I looked at my hands: the blood, the cracking scabs and growing bruises. And they were shaking violently; even when I clenched them and felt the pain from lacerated knuckles shooting up my arms. When I closed my eyes the room felt like it was swimming, hot and cold prickles chased over my skin: the exertions of the past couple of hours catching up with me.

“Mikah?”

“Don’t feel so good,” I mumbled and tried to stand and my knees refused to support me. Chaeitch cursed and caught me as I folded back to the bed. I just needed to rest for a second. I lay back at Chihirae’s feet and closed my eyes while the room spun around me and somewhere in the distance Chaeitch was calling for a doctor.

“Sir?”

The young Ris trooper was half-hiding behind the door, shifting uneasily. “Sir, you wanted to know when she woke up. She is. That is, she’s awake sir.”

“Thank you,” I said and the guard hurriedly backed out.

I lay back in the unfamiliar bed and sighed, wondering what stories were circulating about me now. They’d half-carried me out of Chihirae’s room to the nearest spare one just down the hall. I’d lain quietly while the doctor tended to me. Those ministrations hurt, but it hurt more to move. And with the adrenaline flushing out of my system and the shivering traces of shock already set in, it was so much easier to lie there and let the world flow around me. But afterwards I’d called the guard in and given those orders; he seemed intimidated enough to obey them.

They’d taken my gore-soaked clothes when they set me to bed. I gathered the bedclothes around and grimaced as I gingerly stood, then limped toward the door with my makeshift wrap trailing on the floor. The entire squad of guards in the hall actually stiffened and watched with wariness as I made my aching way the few doors to Chihirae’s room. I knocked gently, then went in.

She was lying still, a couple of pillows propping her up so she could stare out the windows. Someone must’ve brought them for her: Ris don’t use pillows for sleeping. At least I didn’t see the one that’d been pressed across her face. A blocky little Ris-made stove nestled into the niche where a fireplace might have

once been was radiating enough heat to keep the cold at bay, enough that she didn't need the heavy eiderdowns. She lay with her arms on the blanket and the bandages across her chest and shoulder glaringly visible.

"Hi," I ventured.

She lolled her head around, blinked. "Mikah."

I stood uncertainly. Was she angry? In pain? I just stood in agonising silence.

Then she smiled and patted a hand against the sheet. "Don't look like that. Come here."

I did so, feeling my feet freezing against the marble floor, my legs wobbling as I crossed the room. Chihirae's eyes widened as I sat at her side, wincing as stinging gashes made themselves felt. "Oh, red tie you, Mikah. What did you do? What did he do to you?"

"Hell, You should see the other guy," I almost smiled.

She lifted a hand as if to try and brush aside the blankets draped over my shoulders, then visibly winced and let it fall again. "Open those."

"You don't..."

“Let me see,” she said quietly in that deceptively calm tone.

I swallowed, then quietly moved my hand, the sheet. She hissed and her ears lay flat.

I closed the sheets and said quietly. “A fine pair of invalids we are, a?”

She gave a little twitch of her jaw. “You can’t keep doing this. The way you get yourself torn up... Your luck’s going to run dry.”

“You think I’m lucky?” I forced a smile for her. “Looking at life from this side I certainly wouldn’t say that.”

“Mikah... you don’t... I wasn’t joking about it.”

I looked down at the dressings on my arm and across my knuckles. There was a strong smell of alcohol: the antiseptic used on the scratches. “Sorry. I mean, it’s something that seems to happen a lot. For better and worse. Your claws and teeth... you’re a sharp people.” I waved a slow shrug. “I think I’ve said that before.”

She didn’t answer right away but I saw her eyes flickering: from my hands to my face, down again. “You killed him?”

That... was something I'd been trying not to think about. I remembered the numb exhaustion and the figure laying there, the guards leading me away, but I never checked. I sighed. "I don't know."

She didn't answer. I saw her close her eyes and little muscles around her jaw twitched.

I'd left her. She'd been hurt and I'd left her. Then I'd run a Rris down and mercilessly torn into him in a way that must've seemed horrible to them. I'd done it before, that time long ago in WestWater, but that had been self-defence.

This time it'd been nothing but revenge.

"He hurt you," I whispered. "He was the last. I know it. If he'd lived... there would've been more. I had to end it." I clenched my hands, embracing the pain as a penance that couldn't possibly do anything to undo what I'd wrought. "I had to."

"A?" she said without opening her eyes. "You had to. And what about you?"

I blinked. "I don't understand."

"Mikah..." she started to say, then sighed: a sound that seemed to come from her bones and when she opened her eyes they were full of hurt. "Oh, Mikah. I know."

“I’m sorry,” I said. Confused, with the uncomfortable feeling we were talking at cross purposes.

“I know,” she sighed again, staring past me at the roof. Then she focused on me and asked, “It’s really over?”

“This time?” I nodded, “I think so. I really think so.”

“Huhn,” she lay still for a few seconds, then gave a small chitter. “Not worrying all the time. No guards and bars... What are you going to do with that freedom?”

I opened my mouth to answer, and found I couldn’t. The idea of freedom like that... after so long it was almost an abstract concept. And that thought was disturbing enough that I had to shake my head. “I don’t know,” I confessed. “Try to live something like a normal life, I suppose. If that is possible.”

“You?” She bared her teeth in a careful imitation of my smile. “Normal?”

“Hai,” I protested.

She chattered and then froze when I leaned over and carefully planted a peck of a kiss on the end of her muzzle. I felt her flinch and started to draw back but fingers insinuated themselves behind my head and held me still while she dabbed her tongue against my skin: a series of butterfly touches before she patted my hair and released me, panting slightly from a movement that must’ve

hurt her wounds. “Never normal. So strange,” she whispered. “Bare skin and hidden mind. I wish you could’ve been Rris.”

Those words brought back memories: of someone else who’d said that, of emotions I felt myself and desperately tried to keep buried beneath rational thought and denial. I’m not sure she understood when I laid my cheek against hers so my tears dampened her fur.

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“I heard she’s going to live,” said the voice as I closed the door to my rooms behind me. I had a flash alarm before I recognised the figure sitting quietly in the window niche: Hirht. Huh, the guards hadn’t told me he was waiting.

“Yes, sir,” I said as I slowly limped across to my bed and sighed as I sat down, my back to him. I was feeling exhausted and I had a feeling I knew what was coming; I didn’t need it.

“And what about you?”

“Me sir?” I sighed again and started to raise my hands to rake fingers through my hair. My hands ached, I let them fall to my lap. “I’m fine.”

“Fine huhn? Look at yourself Mikah. You can hardly walk. You’re shredded. You left a lot of blood out there; I’m told that the beach is red in places.”

“Oh.”

“Oh?” I heard him snort. “You’re going to keep doing stupid things like that?”

I shuddered and didn’t look up. “Sir, I really hope that’s the last time I have to do anything like that.”

“But why? You didn’t have to risk your hide. The guards had matters in hand.”

“No. They didn’t. He would’ve gone and he would’ve tried again.”

“But Cho’tai’s dead. He wouldn’t have any reason to.”

“I think it was personal. Even though I only saw him that once...” I shook my head and had to ask, “Who is he?”

““Who was he’,” Hirht corrected quietly. “You killed him. You didn’t know?”

I just shook my head again, too tired to fumble with Rris hand gestures. I could feel him staring at me and the sensation raised the hairs on the back of my neck. “Huhn,” the Rris king growled eventually. “We don’t know who he was. Most likely a smuggler. A runner. An in-between. You risked your life for that.”

“He hated me,” I said, remembering the venom in the Rris’ eyes. “He would’ve tried again and again. He wouldn’t have left me in peace; everyone around me would be in danger.”

“You believe that?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know that he wouldn’t. Can you tell me for sure he wouldn’t?”

A long hesitation before the voice behind me admitted, “No. I wish I could, but no.”

I leaned my tired head into my hands. “How often? I mean... how many times will this happen? Would Rris try to kill me just for what I am?”

Another hesitation, then a gusting sigh. “You know, Mikah, a storm brings changes: It blows away the deadwood and dust of the past, but it also breaks things. People know that. There are those who’ll feel threatened. How they’ll react to that... I can’t tell you.

“What I can tell you however, is that your impulsiveness hasn’t helped anything. You killed someone, Mikah. Quite viscerously. It’s not the kind of thing that people forget. There are already rumors festering through the Palace, probably the town as well by now through the town. You know that sort of reputations’s not going to put people at ease around you.”

“I suppose I’ll just have to live with it.”

“You don’t regret it.”

“No. I did what had to be done.”

“A,” I heard him murmur, then heard a rustle of cloth and fur shifting, then almost inaudible footfalls on carpet. When I glanced up his highness was standing over me.

I just shook my head. “And now what do you think of me?”

“I think I know you.”

“Do you?” I said.

He cocked his head, then reached out a single hand and touched my hair. Two of us, each trying to prove something: him touching something that killed Ris, myself trying desperately not to flinch from those claws. Just a couple of strokes before he drew his hand away and looked thoughtfully at his fingertips as he rubbed them together. “Always wondered what that felt like,” he mused and then fixed those unreadable eyes on me again.

“You don’t think like us,” he said quietly. “Odd sentiments in that head of yours. I don’t pretend to understand them exactly, but you have your own way of

caring for someone like that teacher. You won't run amok, you won't hurt people without cause. I can understand that."

"Thank you, sir."

"She is quite attractive though, I'll grant you that," he rumbled thoughtfully. "You've had sex with her?"

That straightforward question hit me where I wasn't expecting. I felt muscles ache when I looked up incredulously, started to tell him to fuck off, then sighed. "No. No sir. She certainly doesn't feel that way about me."

"No? Huhn," he took a step back, tipping his head from one side to the other. "That upsets you?"

"That? No, not really. I mean it's her choice, her life. It's just knowing that even she's sometimes uncomfortable around me..." I trailed off and let him make what he would out of that.

"So even the ones you call friends are afraid of you sometimes," he stared, then his eyes flicked aside.

"Sometimes." It was too easy to remember the times Chihirae or Chaeitch or Rraerch would look at me with trepidation or even fear in their eyes. "A, sometimes."

“Huhn,” I heard him breath again. “That hurts you.”

“A. Of course. But I think it’s something I’m going to have to live with, isn’t it.”

“I think so. I’m sure it’ll get easier with time. Speaking of which: the future. Which path do you want to take? What are your plans with the teacher?”

“Plans?” My mind was an exhausted blank. I closed my eyes and laid back, staring into the nothing which beckoned with promises of rest, but no answers were forthcoming.

“Mikah? You alright?”

“Just tired,” I said to the aching darkness behind my eyelids. “The future. I hadn’t even considered that.”

“Give it some thought,” I heard him say. “Now, I think you could do with some rest. You certainly look like you need it.”

“Sir,” I mumbled and there was a long pause before I heard the door close and I was able to lie back and just give in to the utter bone-numbing exhaustion.

A heavy, unchanging snow fell silently from the black of the night sky. Like magic, the flakes appearing from the darkness of the sky only to vanish once again when they merged with the drifts laying in the pools of light on the balcony outside. I exhaled, watching the ghostly clouds of my breath swirl among the flakes, not affecting them in the slightest. A few individual flakes landed on my sleeve. I held my arm up, watching the flecks linger for a few seconds before dissolving to a dark spot on the black fabric.

Almost time.

I brushed a few more flakes of snow away and stepped back into the room, closing the balcony doors then adjusting the fit of the Rris-tailored suit. The black pants and jacket over a plain white shirt were an acceptable addition to my wardrobe, even if they weren't quite the right proportions and the cut was decidedly peculiar. "You look good in that," a cheerful voice offered.

I turned and then gave polite duck of my head to Chihirae leaning against the doorframe. "Thanks," I smiled carefully, "You're not so bad yourself."

She seemed to mull that over for a split second, then returned a Rris smirk. "That's a compliment, isn't it."

It was. The tunic, jerkin and pleated skirt she was wearing were in shades of red: from almost brownish ochre to bright red trim. It might sound garish, but on her it worked: Gold and red, amber eyes and muted rusts. And the collar hid the ragged fur and skin over those healing wounds from a couple of weeks ago.

“You’re ready to go?” she asked.

“A,” I waved an affirmative. “I hope this goes better than the last.”

“Huhn,” she huffed. “His highness said you’ve had a bad run with these affairs.” She leaned against my chest and reached up to brush at my face, perhaps flicking some errant hair back. “We’ll try to change that tonight, a?”

“You’ll be all right?” I asked and couldn’t stop my glance at the patch of ragged fur visible through her neckline. She noticed.

“I should be asking you that,” she said, sounding a little reproachful. “I think my hide’s a little tougher than yours.”

She’d been shot. Yet now, scarcely two weeks later, her wounds were rough patches under scraggly fur while my scratches were still angry red and tender. I found it unnerving and a little unfair. She touched my hand where I’d been stroking the fur of her neck. “I think we’d better go now. Before they send someone for us.”

Nevertheless, there were still a couple of guards tagging along behind.

Once again the palace was ablaze with lights of all descriptions. Servants hurried around, replacing candles and oil and wicks. From an inner hallway I could look out across the central courtyard where drifting snow filled the night and turned the windows on the far side into warm glows in the nothingness.

The lower halls were more alive, with Rris everywhere.

It was another diplomatic reception: a honorary celebration for the Bluebetter ambassador I was told. Apparently it was to commemorate the end of their southern border wars over forty years ago, an event which had caused ripples through all the known Rris lands and established the current border geometries.

It was a valid enough reason. I also suspected it was a chance to show the ambassadors of other lands that after the incidents and accidents of recent months, I was still intact. Nobody ever came out and said that to my face, but as we walked those last few corridors I felt sure that I was a showpiece of some kind. I was almost accustomed to the sight, sound and smell of a room of milling Rris, but Chihirae looked decidedly uneasy as we entered the ballroom

The diplomatic persons and embassy staff were present, as was the usual retinue of upper crust merchants and industry leaders. Again the tone of the room changed as I entered. There were those who just stopped what they were doing and stared; those who pointed and started to urgently chatter to their associates.

Chihirae glanced at me. I could see that movement out of the tail of my eye.

“Just relax,” I whispered to her.

“Easy to say,” she returned as we moved into the throng. They parted around us. “How can you stand this?”

“Practise,” I said, pursing my lips slightly in the best approximation of a Rris smile I could manage.

Perplexion creased her features: “What’s that look?”

“Never mind,” I sighed. Head and shoulders above most of the crowd I could already see figures I knew: a couple of ambassadors, lords and ladies, merchants and guildmasters and industrialists. Several working their way through the crowd in our direction. “Just... be calm. Relax. Be polite. That’s all I can really say.”

Her reply was interrupted when another voice cut in: “Mikah.”

Kh’hitch was standing, waiting, his hefty bulk swathed in wraps that made him look like a particolored pillow. The guards flanking him were a lot more conservative, in polished steel armour and livery fluttering from their razor-edged halberds. “Glad you could join us, Mikah,” the advisor said. “There are a lot of people who would like to talk to you.”

“Why am I not surprised.”

His thin black lips flicked to show teeth. “Don’t. Mikah, don’t. That attitude of yours causes trouble.”

“Which he seems to be good at finding,” another Rris voice offered. I knew

him: K'hesh, the Broken Spine ambassador with the longer, lush fur of Northern Rris and clothing of expensive cut and garish color. "I'd wondered if we would be seeing you again," he said. "Your hosts have been exceedingly tight-jawed about you recently."

"Things have been busy recently," I said.

"A." He looked me up and down, then his gaze flicked to Chihirae and I got the feeling he was weighing her up. "There were a few stories circulating."

"As I think Mikah should," Kh'hitch interjected smoothly and quickly. "There are a lot of people who want want to talk to you tonight."

"A," K'hesh said as Kh'hitch started us moving and moved to insinuate himself between myself and Chihirae.

"Hai," I snapped and took a single step closer to her and K'hesh recoiled violently. Rris flinched. Kh'hitch 's hand came up to forestall the guards. I ignored them. "Chihirae," I said.

She looked around at the Rris around, at their expressions, then she caught my hand in hers. "Still making people nervous, aren't you. You know, it might be for the best if I left you to settle your business."

"You're sure? You won't be out of place here?"

“You’re asking me that?” she chittered slightly. “Don’t worry, you furless giant, I’ve seen a couple of familiar faces.” She patted my cheek and Rris watched her melt back into the crowd. I saw questioning glances as more than a few of the watching representatives doubtless tried to figure out what our relationship was. Let them wonder.

As the evening wore on I started to envy her choice. It was dull. It was dull, arduous and a strain as I made the rounds and talked with Rris after Rris. There were questions and requests; asking about my health, about my work, whether promised schedules would be kept. I answered what I could while often Kh’hitch would step in to field something he thought too delicate to leave to my judgement. There were several thinly veiled invitations to accept other kingdoms hospitality, a bribe, and also something I’m pretty sure was a sexual come-on from a female guildmaster. I skirted those as tactfully as I knew how.

After several hours of that my throat was decidedly raw and the feline features in the room were blending. So much so that when a Rris asked me if I could do with a drink I started to politely decline, then blinked several times before I recognised Hirht.

“Oh. Sir. Thank you, a drink would be welcome.”

A couple of furrows wrinkled the fur at the bridge of his muzzle and he flicked a quick gesture at the nearby guards; they moved to keep orbiting petitioners at bay. “You’re all right? You sound bad.”

“Too much talking,” I rasped.

“A,” he flicked his ears and glanced at Kh’hitch. “I did warn you about that.”

“Apologies, sir,” Kh’hitch replied.

“Huhn,” the King snorted as a servant bearing a drinks tray emerged from the throng. He picked a couple of crystal glasses of wine and handed one to me. The liquid was amber, steaming slightly. I sipped and found it tart, heated and spiced. A Coke would have gone down well about then, but what the hell: it was wet and it warmed me.

“You’re improving,” Hirht said and I fell into step beside him as he started strolling through the crowd. “So far nobody has shot, struck or even shouted at you.”

“Imagine how happy that makes me,” I said.

He gave me a sidelong look and snorted again. “And the teacher seems to be settling in well.”

“A?”

“See?” he nodded.

I looked toward the corner he indicated where Chihirae’s red outfit stood out through the crowd, her figure sleek, groomed fur gleaming in the warm light

from the chandeliers and she was talking with Chaeitch. I saw her laugh. I saw him touch her face and she leaned closer.

I felt the smile freeze on my face. "I see," I said as the crowd closed in front of them and I turned away.

Hirht's muzzle creased again as he looked from that scene to my expression and buried his reaction in a sip from his glass. "Huhn. She cares for you, you know that."

"A," I said as we walked again, out onto the terrace. The night was black, the moon and stars lost behind low clouds. Snow drifted from the arch of blackness down into the pools of light around lamp sconces along the balustrades. A myriad more lamps dotted the snowbound meadows around the palace and in the forest beyond that; flickering like fireflies through the icy trees and bare branches. Frigid night air nipped at me with invisible teeth that stung against bare skin while Hirht's breath ghosted in the air before him.

"There've been a lot of people asking after you. It seems that there are more every day. Questions, requests, pleas, demands... you're a hot coal and juggling you's not an easy task."

"I can only do so much, sir," I said. "I was an artist, not an engineer or doctor or scholar. And there's only one of me."

"A," he acknowledged and leaned up against the balustrade, brushing snow from the beveled and carved marble so he could set his wineglass there. "Unfortunately."

I gave him a look: I bet they'd like a few more humans around. Actually, so would I. I sighed and he flicked his ears. "Don't worry, we understand you have your limits. There won't be a repeat of what happened."

"Thank you."

"Anything you need, Mikah. Just ask."

I sighed and took the plunge:

"Sir," I said, glancing down into the dregs of my own glass. "What you asked me a while back... if I knew what I wanted to do with my life."

"Huhn, a." I saw the silhouette of his muzzle raise, as if looking into the clouds. "I recall."

"I think I know. I think I would need your permission though."

"Anything you want. We'll do all we can."

So I told him. He listened quietly and attentively and seemed a bit surprised when I finished.

“That’s it?” he asked.

“A. That’s it.”

“Huhnn,” he scratched his muzzle gently. “That poses a few questions, but I’m sure something can be arranged. What about your teacher?”

My teacher... I took a deep freezing breath that I felt needling in my lungs, then exhaled a glittering cloud. What I’d seen... what’d I expect? She’d found someone she knew in a room full of strangers. Of course she was glad to see him.

“She... She’s got her own life. I think you’ll have to ask her what her choices are going to be.”

Hirht stared out across the frozen landscape while the snow fell around us, stipling his fur. “A,” he said after a time. “A. I’ll ask her.”

—v—

The early spring drizzle died away as the late afternoon sun peeked through the grey overcast covering the city, stroking the higher rooftops with a gold glow. Water and the occasional scab of ice or melting snow were falling from roofs and guttering. Rivulets ran down the streets, washing through the drifts and piles of frozen slush.

I sat back in the carriage, in the warmth of the little kerosene heater, and watched the city passing as we rattled through the streets. Shops and stalls were still open, a few damp Rris going about their business. It was a scene I'd seen before, a route I'd travelled many times and by now was normal, familiar. Enough so that I could relax and take some of the edge off the exhaustion accrued after a long day.

Northbound. Through the commercial districts up to the boulevards where the first green buds speckled the bare branches of the old trees. Up to the Rocks and then through familiar streets: homeward bound.

It was an estate on the shore. A wooden house overlooking the lake: huge and rambling, with dark slate roof and turrets and scrollwork on the eaves and mullioned windows. There were sprawling grounds running down to the water, with unkempt meadows and wooded with aged deciduous trees. No way I'd have been able to afford a place like that back home, but here it was well within my means.

I'd had a lot of the place rebuilt. Doorways originally built for Rris were made taller. There was insulation in the walls and central heating with hot and cold running water. There was still a lot of work to be done, tasks which would have to wait until finer weather came around. For instance, hopefully this summer we'd be able to install a couple of prototype wind turbines on the lakeshore and then there'd be electricity as well.

And there was the guardhouse.

Hirht had been surprisingly amenable to the idea of me moving away from the

palace. There had been a few stipulations attached, one of those being the guards. That hadn't worked out as badly as I'd feared: they kept their distance, watched the perimeter of the grounds and mostly left me alone. Still, there were over a dozen of them barracked in the new guardhouse at the gate to the estate.

When the carriage had crunched to a halt on the gravel drive I stepped down into the bite of the evening air. Spring growth was budding on the shrubs around the front porch, the weather vane atop one of the turrets facing out to the lake. A warm glow shone from the front windows: the servants already had the lights on. They had adapted quite quickly to my tastes.

Tichirik opened the door for me. In the heirarchy of the household staff she was ranking. Sort of analagous to a butler I suppose and doubtless a spy for Hirht, but she was polite, professional and ran an efficient household. "Good evening, sir," she said, ducking her head.

"Evening, Tich," I smiled as I wiped my feet and stepped into the hall.

"We weren't expecting you so early, sir," she said. "I'm afraid your evening meal isn't prepared yet."

"That's fine," I shrugged out of my coat and she neatly took it out of my hands. "I just want to sit for a while."

"Hard day, sir?" she inquired as she went to hang my coat up.

“Huhn,” I chuckled as I headed for the living room. “Long day. Is Chihirae home yet?”

“Ah, sir!” Tichirik interjected as I opened the door. “Mistress is somewhat...”

Lamps were glowing softly, the fire blazing while on the hearth discarded clothes were strewn around the two furry figures wrapped together. Two forms moving like animals rutting: one kneeling, the other atop, fur locked in teeth and claws clutching at the rug... They jumped as I barged in and Chaeitch reared back in startlement, interrupted in his task and I learned more about aroused Ris male physiology in that second than I really needed to. Chihirae sat up on splayed knees, her eyes wide and dazed-looking.

”... indisposed.”

I stared at them, feeling my jaw drop and something else inside me plummeted. “Sorry,” I said and turned and left them.

“Mikah?” a voice called from behind me.

“Sir?” Tichirik was looking aggrieved. “I was trying to tell you...”

I just took my coat from her unresisting hands and headed outside again. I really needed to be alone for a while.

The sky was grey. The lake was grey, with a cold wind urging rapid little waves against a grey stone shore. Broken ice floes cracked and shattered themselves along the waterline, melting back into the element they'd come from.

I sat on a weather-smoothed slab of boulder and stared out across drab world that matched my mood.

Chihirae had stayed with me. She found employment as a tutor for a merchant's cubs but she stayed with me and her companionship was welcome. In the evenings she gave me lessons to improve to help me understand the world I was in a littler better: history, geography, lessons in vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. And in the months we'd been living here I suppose I might have grown to take her for granted.

Of course it would happen. She was a Rris woman. An attractive one I'd been told. Of course she'd find a guy sometime. I just hadn't thought it'd be someone else I called a friend.

I looked down at my hands: worn, with calluses on the palms and scars along the knuckles. For a split second violence against Chaeitch flashed through my head, a thought of which I was instantly ashamed. That primal ape screeching in my mind again.

In hindsight it was pretty obvious: They got along well, they were both single... Perhaps I just hadn't wanted to see it. And I hadn't expected to find them like that. That'd been a shock. But they were of the same people, the same kind. Their relationship was right and could work, they could have offspring and understand one another's needs whereas I was an outsider and an alien. I understood. Up in my head I understood.

But those ape instincts still hurt.

“Mikah?” a soft voice spoke out over the lapping of the water. I turned my head to see Chihirae not quite hiding behind a pine trunk, nervously shifting her weight from foot to foot. “He’s gone. He thought it’d be for the best. Are you all right?”

I nodded and she cocked her head, then came closer. Near freezing weather and she was just wearing a pair of rustred breeches. As if of its own accord my gaze flickered from her worried eyes to her crotch before I looked away, embarrassed. “Mikah... that really upset you that much? I’m sorry. I never thought it would.”

“No.” I shook my head and rubbed at my face. “No. It’s not you. It’s me. I just... I’m not angry. You and Chaeitch, I can understand that. It’s just... He is something I can never be; He has something I never can.”

A silence. Then: “Mikah? You’re jealous?”

The green-eyed monster. My amber-eyed friend. “I know it’s absurd. I know it in my mind. I understand it. But my body, the rest of me feels... I feel like I’ve lost something. I suppose...” I struggled for some way to phrase it in Rris terms, into something she could understand something a dark figure had told me on a tragic night came back:

“She was right,” I said, staring out across the water. “I need.”

“What?”

“I need,” I repeated. “She told me... Mai told me. She said I need. That I bond to people in a way that isn’t normal. Not for Rris. She was right. You’re right. I’m jealous... and I’m afraid: I don’t want to lose you.”

Silence. I felt like I’d just made another terrible blunder. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” I felt a hand touch my shoulder, briefly. “Why?”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt you and Chaeitch. I don’t want to stand in your way. If you want him, then all I can do is wish you the best.”

Water hissed on shale; a breeze stirred branches; somewhere an icicle cracked and fell. “Mikah, spring is nothing to apologise about.”

“Spring?”

“A. I know it can be awkward.”

“Spring doesn’t affect me,” I said quietly and didn’t have to look around to know she was wearing a startled expression. “I’m not like you. Spring doesn’t mean the same thing. They didn’t tell you.”

“I... ” she started to say, then in more subdued tones, “No. No, they didn’t. I suppose I should have known, after Westwater, those mood swings of yours. You mean you feel... you’re like that all year?”

“A,”

“Spring all year,” I heard her sigh. “I don’t think I could take that.”

“I don’t think it’s the same,” I said.

“Huhn,” she rumbled thoughtfully, then a hand touched my shoulder again. “Do you want to come back to the house? You must be cold.”

“Not right now,” I shook my head. “Just a bit longer. I’m trying to get my head around a few things.”

The hand lingered. “You’ll be all right?”

Why did they always ask me that? When I looked at her I could see moisture from the mist beading in her fur and she was watching me with concern foremost in her expression. “A. I just want to think.”

A hesitation, then she gave my hair a stroke and gracefully rose to her feet and

headed back toward the house. Not without a glance back over her shoulder and then she was a tawny gold figure vanishing into the trees.

Silence. Solitude. I sat by the grey lake and watched the waves lap the shore; watched the cloud-faded orb of the sun sink to pale red and then vanish beyond the horizon; watched for a long time as I tried to lay those disquieting emotions to rest. It wasn't easy. I can't say I entirely succeeded.

—v—

I made my way back through the cold and misty darkness, just following my nose and the welcoming glow of the house lights through the twilight. The french doors opening onto the meadow were hanging open, with lamplight spilling out across the verandah flagstones.

Tichirik was waiting for me inside. I don't know how she knew I was coming but she was there with a towel folded over her arm and a disapproving expression. "Sir," she said as she closed the doors behind me, "you know the cold isn't good for you."

"Thank you," I said, shrugging out of my coat and tossing it across the back of a rather expensive piece of furniture. "I'll remember that."

She handed me the towel and then followed as I started heading back toward my rooms, wiping away cold mist that'd beaded in my hair, my beard and across my face. "Sir, there's food if you'd like it. I can have some sent up."

I started to say I wasn't very hungry, then realised what a lie that'd be: there was a gnawing emptiness in my gut. "Yes, please."

"Very well." She stopped outside my door. "Will there be anything else?"

"No. Thank you."

"Sir? If I might be so bold?"

I hesitated with my hand on the knob. "A?"

"Sir, there are females who can provide sexual services. If you desire I can make some enquiries..."

"No," I said, perhaps a little too abruptly. "No. Thank you, but no. That didn't work out very well last time."

"I see. I'm sorry sir. I'll see about your food."

I thanked her and watched her ramrod straight, so-proper figure stalk off down the hall and then sighed before retreating to my room. The central heating was doing its job well and the air was comfortable, warm. The spacious bed had been turned down, the lights were dim. Comfortable for diurnal ape eyes. I wearily stripped off and left my clothes strewn behind me as I headed for the bathroom.

Showers have never been de-regieur in Rris homes. I'd had one specially installed in my ensuite and it was at times like that I was really glad I'd done so. I leaned against the tile walls and let the hot water hammer down, working the tension and stress and cold out of my shoulders. I stood like that for a long time while water sluiced over me and formed rivulets around scar tissue, splashing and washing down the drain.

Steam spilled out around me as I stepped from the bathroom to the bedroom, scrubbing at my hair with a towel. The clothes I'd strewn across the floor were gone, a robe was folded neatly on the end of the bed and there was a covered tray set on the desk: Some of the benefits of my position.

Tichirik knew me well. The meal was light: a marinated venison cutlet with potato slices and a single glass of wine. Not a lot of a meal, but it was hot and it was all I needed. And afterwards I stood at the windows and sipped the remains of the wine. There was a moon out there now, just peeking through broken clouds.

It was her life. It was her world. I couldn't interfere. To make her suffer for my wants, that was just selfish.

Then the glass was empty. I studied the cut crystal, sighed, then laid it aside with the ruins of the meal. The gas lamp hissed softly when I turned it down: the mantle faded from white to orange, dimming to red before it died. In the darkness I returned to the big bed and slipped between cool sheets. The pillows were something else I'd missed.

And couldn't sleep. I just lay there in night and shadow with dark thoughts

churning in my head.

There was a noise in the night; like a door closing quietly. I opened my eyes to silence. There was grey moonlight coming in, lighting a patch of floor just in front of the window but leaving the rest of the room in blackness. A darkness that didn't feel empty and something that wasn't a shadow moved.

"Who's that," I croaked as I felt my heart start to pound furiously; as I scrambled backwards, trying to buy a little more time to defend myself. "Who's there?"

"It's all right," a voice hastily replied and I tried to find the spot of night it'd come from. "It's me. Oh, rot. It's Chihirae. Mikah?"

"Chihirae?"

"A." The mattress moved as another weight settled on the edge. "It's only me."

"Oh, christ." I closed my eyes and leaned back against the headboard and pillows. "Chihirae, don't do that. Please."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you." I jumped as a furry hand touched my arm, the old knot of scar tissue on my shoulder, then laid gently on my chest. I knew those cool pads on her fingertips could feel my heart still racing. "I frightened you. I didn't mean... rot. I'm sorry."

I still couldn't see her face, but her hand a was dark spider on the pale skin of my chest. Her touch was warm as she laid down alongside me. Like those nights so long ago in Westwater. "What were you doing?"

"I just wanted to look at you. To see if you were sleeping all right." There was a movement in the darkness, as if she were gesturing. "After today, you seemed upset. I wasn't sure how you were doing."

I touched her hand, feeling the softness thickness of her winter pelt, the underlying strictures of muscles and tendons and bones. All alive. So like mine. So different. "I'm all right."

"You got your head around those things?"

"I think so. There's such a difference between knowing and feeling. I never understood that before. I'm not sure I do now." I sighed and felt her fingers under my own, the hard little crescents embedded in their tips. "Perhaps it'll get easier with time."

"A," she rumbled quietly, almost sadly. Her hand twisted in mine and I felt her touching my skin and gingerly exploring that place where my little finger had once been. "Not Rris," she said in those same tones, then asked, "You're really envious of Chaeitch?"

"How could I not be," I said to the darkness. She squeezed my hand a little

“Mikah, there is one thing I think you might be forgetting. I’m not like you.”

“I had noticed.”

The hand squeezed again. “I mean, I’m Rris. We don’t ‘need’ like you do. Chaeitch and I... it’s just spring. It’s just sex.” I felt her roll over and her hot breath washed over my bare shoulder. “I’m not going away with him. I’m not going anywhere.”

And I... and I felt like a complete fool. Aware of our differences and yet I still persisted on thinking like the human ape; of thinking of her as human on a level I wasn’t even aware of.

“Mikah?” she sounded concerned again.

“I... I never thought of that,” I said in a small voice.

Chihirae’s hand stroked my arm. “I’d noticed. You’ve already got a lot to think about.” She chattered very softly and I felt the heat of her breath on my shoulder, then the tip of her tongue touching my skin where a crossbow quarrel had once stuck me. “Water. Salt and ash. Moss, that’s the other scent. Moss after rain.”

“Chihirae,” I said, aware of what was going on and not entirely wanting it to stop. “You know... what you’re doing... I mean it’s... arousing.”

“Huhn,” she rumbled and nuzzled at my neck. “Is it?”

“But, you said you didn’t want... that.”

“Maybe I changed my mind.”

“Chihirae... Chihirae, hold.”

“Huhn?”

I stroked her hand again. “Please, you’re a little distracted at the moment. Is it you talking or the season? I don’t want to be part of something you’re going to regret later.”

“Hai,” I felt the mattress shift and her low voice burred almost in my ear. “You think we lose our minds in spring? I’ve just been doing some thinking of my own.”

“Your own?” I murmured.

A pause as she digested that. Then: “A. My own. The palace had nothing to do with it. I thought, that after all we’ve been through... In a way I suppose we are bonded. And after seeing you today, I thought you might want the company

tonight.”

I held her hand in both of mine, clasping the warmth. A moment I’d thought about, wondered about, dreamed about. Now it was here and I felt that same trepidation that Mai had stirred: questions, concerns...

A moment too long.

“You don’t want to?” she asked quietly and I couldn’t read anything in those tones. I wished I could see her face. In the darkness I fumbled and touched coarser and longer fur. Her chest ruff. Then fumbled my way up to a throat pulsing with breath and blood, up to a velveteen cheek and muzzle.

“I think...” I started to say with a voice that caught in my throat. “I think...” Then sighed. “I think too much, a? Yes. Chihirae. I want to. I want to very much.”

I could feel her smile. Then feel and hear the movement of sheets as she came closer and fur pressed against me as she lay beside me. A leg rubbed against mine, her hand explored further.

“I thought that happened in the mornings,” she whispered, touching gently.

I shivered. “It can make exceptions.”

She chittered softly and I scratched at her ribs; gently, the way Mai had shown me.

And that night I taught my teacher. I taught her what Mai had shown me and what I'd shown her. I knew the Rris female body now, but Chihrae still had to learn about me. I taught her, I loved her; and when she yowled and shredded a pillow at her height I finally knew that the nights with another woman hadn't been lies.

Spooned together in the night, in the heat and the scent of the afterwards. A small body embraced in my arms, tight muscles quivering as two hearts raced in synchronicity and breathing slowly returned to normal. A blissful eternity before a small voice said:

“Chaeitch said ... it was different with you.”

“It was all right?”

“All right?” A quick chitter, almost dazed sounding. “A. All right. Very all right. Like my whole body sneezed.”

“I think that's good.”

Another chitter. A hesitation, then a gentle rasp of a tongue against my arm. “Again?” she murmured.

So there were a few other things I had to explain. But there was time enough. For recuperation, for play, for love and rest.

And much later I lay in the silence, listening to the breath of sleep from the figure against me. She stirred slightly when I disentangled myself and swung out of bed to pad across to the window. Beyond, the grey light was coming and going as clouds chased each other across the face of the moon. The trees stirred and rustled in the darkness.

And I stood there and took stock of my life: Where I'd come from, where I might go. And when I'd summed it up I touched the glass and thought of someone far from here.

"I forgive you," I whispered in Rris and turned back to the bed.

The breathing had changed but there wasn't a word as I laid back down again. But as I closed my eyes a warm body snuggled up to my back, an arm looped over my side and warm breath stirred the hairs on the back of my neck. I closed my eyes and welcomed sleep, knowing that for the time all was right with this world.

—v—

Epilogue/Prologue

The end? No.

Just the beginning. Of that part of my life at least.

I've lived a unique life. I've been from one side of this world to the other. I've seen things no human ever dreamed of. I've lived through hell and high water, despair and the highest hopes. I've seen friends come and go. Seen life and death of all description, acts of horror and humanity from a people who aren't human.

But they're my people now.

I've tried to chronicle my life as best I can. I began where I thought best: where an old life ended and a new one began. I've tried to be accurate; I've told it as best my memory allows and if there're any mistakes or inconsistencies they're mine and mine alone. Time has passed and it has the habit of stealing the details, but there have always been things that stayed with me, and it's those facets of my life I've tried to imprint on these pages.

I hope I succeeded.

I know I won't be here forever. And whatever happened to me all those decades ago is, to the best of my knowledge, unique. As is my life that followed those hot summer days in the hills. Maybe these volumes will help somebody understand what happened. Maybe they'll be able to unlock those doors between worlds.

So many maybes. For now, I've lived my life. It's been longer and fuller than I'd ever imagined and there's so much more to be told.

No regrets.

End

“And the question there were many,
Like how can you survive,
When it’s the moment you’ve been waiting for,
This is the moment of your life.”

Simple Minds

And the Band Played On



Of course the Rris have their own calenders and time-keeping system. It's the one I now use myself and pivots around the solstices, dividing a Tropical year into ten 'months' of approx. 36 days each with a leap-year every ten years. However, for convenience's sake, during the course of this account I'll translate to Western Standard time.