

Daughter of the Stone

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Special gratitude to the Nashville Writers Alliance members who, more than a decade ago, faithfully critiqued the early drafts of this book. And thank you to editor, Dave Field, for smoothing the wrinkles.

--K Cheatham
Helena, Montana

Daughter of the Stone is for
uppity women everywhere—
and those who wannabe.

Uppity

definition: “putting on or marked by airs of superiority”

translation: resourceful and self-assured

Wannabe

definition: “a person who wants or aspires to be someone or something else...”

translation: someone who dreams

*definitions from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th Edition

translations by Kae Cheatham

Prologue

Tala lies unmoving and concentrates on the thin sheet covering her. Her mother, Pubra Stenard, comes to the doorway to check on her and Tala hopes her mother won't detect her alert thoughts. She pretends to be asleep. Yet how can she sleep when the ship shudders and moans in the wind? They should have never landed here. It's horrible to be perched atop a huge plateau so far from real land! Not that she knows what real land is; all her eleven years have been spent in this ship.

Pubra moves away as an outer door opens, and Tala hears her father, Dannen Nalobirin.

"It doesn't matter what I say," he growls, "They're going through with this exodus." The words make Tala curl onto the mattress with fear. "The rock we're on is totally immovable and impervious to erosion!" She can hear him stamping around, locked in exasperation. "And the ship is stable!"

"Your findings didn't make them listen?" comes her mother's anxious whisper.

"No." He slaps the table in anger; sarcasm fills his tone as he continues, "Our great leader, Vadlin, has convinced the others that these storms will send us over the edge. Weather calculations show only five more days of storms at worst. We've suffered through twelve, what are a few more? But Vadlin and his henchman, Wolkum, have planned the going through with tonight's move."

Tala cringes. They will move out of the ship—her home—to go (she can't bear to think about it) into a hole in the ground; to live inside this rock where it's always dark. And what of the explorers who

went over the great escarpment to examine the land below? So far below. What about them? She hunches herself tighter on her bed.

“Listen, Pubra. You must keep our Tala and all the children we’re caring for together. I’m going to stay with Vadlin and the hi-techs. They’ve already muttered about leaving the sick and the old ones behind.”

Mother Herreth! Tala envisions her grandmother.

“My mother doesn’t want to leave the ship, Dannen,” Pubra says, fear in her voice. “She’s certain the explorers are alive—that we should wait. I can hardly get her out of that stupid laboratory for meals!”

Dannen’s reply is gruff. “The entire ship’s systems will be shut down, Pubra. If you don’t want your mother left here to die, you’re going to have to think of something.”

That might be the solution, Tala thinks, brightening. She will go to her grandmother Herreth. Take other children with her—her friends whose parents are exploring down the escarpment. Certainly the leaders won’t leave them all behind! It would give more time for the explorers to return...time to change plans. She eases from her bed.

~ ~

“Hurry!” Tala carries her bag of belongings—the one packed to take underground. Eight of her friends are behind her as they run down the stairs and along dimly lit corridors.

“Not much further,” her friend Brenard encourages.

“And Mother Herreth will let us stay with her? Let us wait for our parents to return?” comes a very young voice.

“Yes. Hurry, before someone sees us,” Tala urges. She flits around corner after corner, slips left into another hallway.

All the lights are off. Fear grabs her for a moment: Maybe her grandmother is leaving with the others. But no. Herreth believes in her stone. She says it tells her the explorers are alive—that Brenard’s parents and the others will come back. That’s what they have to believe!

Light blooms around them. Tala and her friends stop and gawk at the approach of four men and Tala’s mother, Pubra. They have Tala’s grandmother in tow. “Grandmother!” Tala wails, ignoring her mother’s anger at seeing her.

“What are you doing with her?” Brenard demands. He is twelve, but he sounds older.

“Making sure this old woman gets off the ship. And you too, brat.” A man cuffs Brenard.

“Stop that!” Herreth Stenard orders. “And we can’t go yet. The others aren’t here. We have to wait.”

“Wait, and you wait alone, old woman.” the man snaps. “You seem sturdy enough to make the trip, so start moving.”

Tala and the children are herded in front of the group while two men open doors and look for stragglers—hidiers, as Tala had planned to be.

“Vinsen. I can’t go without Vinsen,” Herreth says, trying to turn.

“There’s no one else down here,” the leader growls, jerking the woman along.

Tala knows what her grandmother means. “I’ll do it.” She tries to dart around the adults, but is yanked back by her mother.

—*Stop it!*— Pubra’s command is a powerful telepathic message. —*I managed to get help to save your grandmother. They’ll leave us all if you keep acting up.*—

—*But Vinsen...The stone!*— Tala protests, squirming in her mother’s grasp.

“It’s all right, little one,” Herreth says. Tears trickle along her cheeks. “We’ll probably all join the stone soon enough. Soon enough.”

PART I-Always Dark

1

Dwinn Somuron's muscular legs propelled her at a brisk jog along the murky plateau. The thick soles of her knee-high hunter's boots created little noise on the hard surface. She looked like a boy hurrying across the dimly-lit terrain, especially wearing shorts and with her long hair braided and coiled over her ears. The dynasty forbade this hairstyle for women. A female hunter wasn't allowed, either. But the people of her village, Herrethstede, often ignored dynasty rules and showed tolerance to those with rebellious tendencies. Beside her, like a knee-high shadow, loped a furry four-legged djugat. It moved nimbly over the rocks, while silvery eyes, luminous in the twilight atmosphere, were alert to the gray surroundings.

In this netherworld where Dwinn and the djugat lived, the light rarely brightened. A craggy rock wall enclosed the underground continent and extended to a ceiling of ice and purple rock. It was that rock top where the ship carrying Dwinn's ancestors had crash-landed more than one hundred years ago. The netherworld air was refreshed through myriad fissures, caverns and tunnels that riddled the dense barrier and wove through to an outer world. But those connections formed a labyrinth no one had successfully negotiated.

In this underground bioregion, the soil was grainy and often fallow. Most importantly, the people had found no ores from which to make metal. During the six generations since they had descended into this world, they had adapted agricultural products to multiple uses to compensate for this lack. There were no domesticated ani-

imals. Djugats, aborigines of the isolated world, were sentient, tool-using creatures—autonomous and hostile to most people.

At a boulder that marked branching trails, Dwinn's companion veered left and made a series of melodious sounds.

"Thank you, Going Far," Dwinn said. "I'll tell him." Dwinn made soft sounds toward the creature. In her mind, pictures emerged of the two of them traveling on the plains, setting traps and capturing pronghorns. "Yes," Dwinn said/thought in response. She concentrated hard to return the image. Mental contact with the djugats was not easily attained, although Dwinn was better at it than many people. "In two sleep times we'll go hunting." The creature warbled farewell and loped into the darkness.

The gas lamps of Herrethstede glowed below the plateau, highlighting three rows of work centers and living quarters on the perimeter of the town. Although the tanning sheds were deserted, smoke curled up from the curing barns. One area near Dwinn's shelter was particularly bright.

The ceremony's already started, she lamented, and quickened her pace.

Dwinn had left the village not long after awakening and gone to a hidden camp several kilometers distant. From the smoke hut there, she had packed away more dried meat and done little else, not wanting to miss any of her guardian's retirement festivities. Vinsen Alyain's hasty decision to relinquish the village healer position had concerned Dwinn. She knew he grieved the recent death of his wife, Betree, but when Dwinn returned from her last hunting trip, preparations for Alyain's unexpected resignation were already underway. She expressed her surprise, but he had offered no explanation.

He's going to be sent to an elders' village, Dwinn worried. Area syndics often shunted older people to these subsistence locations so they could claim them as dependents and earn more stipends from the dynasty.

But he's not old! her thoughts persisted.

Distraught, she clambered down the rocky course leading into the village. Two older women—skin smooth and chalky, their short hair bound in bright yellow cloths—stopped their work at the village ovens to wave at her. Dwinn nodded a greeting. She slowed her steps, not wanting to incur a reprimand about raising dust from the desic-

cated pathway. The polished tiles on the front of the headmaster's building—the only domicile with a permanent roof—gleamed in light from gas lamps and portable gas fronds.

Three girls, their short hair uncovered, looked up from where they tended spits at the side of the building. “No catch this time, noble hunter?” came a sarcastic call.

“The great Somuron returns early from the plains, and with an empty pack. Tsk, tsk,” said another as she laughed.

“I'll not look to that hunter when my fertile time comes,” spoke the third.

Dwinn tuned out their gibes and hurried past dimly lit shelters. Ahead, people thronged the yard before the suite of roofless rooms where she lived with Vinsen Alyain. Just the two of us, she thought, stifling a pang of despair over Betree's death.

The shiny ceramic linings of the hanging gas lights flickered warmth to where numerous children sat cross-legged in a half circle around Alyain's couch. Major station holders from her village and most of their mates looked on. Station holders from distant plains' areas had even come, including three merchants from Purcrev as well as that town's healer's apprentice. Dwinn pushed through the crowd and was surprised to see three men dressed in the customary twill clothing of coastal districts. They stood not far to her right. Straight postures, attentive manner—she sensed at once they were upper class. The tallest wore his thick hair (whitish as was everyone's except the very young) pulled into a single long braid down his back. Another of slighter build and darker complexion had a headband decorated with spawner scales that held his loose shiny hair in place. Men never cut their hair, fashioning it into various styles, most of which denoted a talent guild or social status. An intricate orange comb held the twisted silver-sheened hair of the third coastal man. Dwinn couldn't recall which talent guild the comb represented.

Probably something hi-tech, she thought with scorn and turned her attention to her guardian.

—*I'm sorry I'm late,*— Dwinn projected to Vinsen Alyain. —*Going Far sends its respect,*— she continued.

—*Enjoy this building. The child is doing well,*— Vinsen sent back. For both of them, telepathy came easily, belying the special effort it took. Many people in this remote village were adept.

Vinsen Alyain, green-turbaned, in leather shorts, smiled and nodded toward an adolescent boy who spoke. The youngster's face was calm, eyes viewing far beyond where he sat. He was a distant cousin of Dwinn's, descended from Nalobirin, the man who established Herrethstede.

"I must find a place without restrictions," the boy was declaring.

"Who are you?" Vinsen asked in his soothing, rich baritone.

There isn't time for this, came a precise and anonymous thought.

Dwinn frowned. With all the mental thrusts emanating from this gathering, she was surprised to have one come so clearly to her. She wondered from whom it could be. The people of Herrethstede knew how to be specific in their mental sending, and rarely let thoughts stray.

The boy swayed, staring. "I will go far away from Rendef and his rules."

"Are you Nalobirin?"

"Yes." The boy nodded slightly. "Dannen Nalobirin will not be enslaved again." From his intense expression, Dwinn was certain he was speaking from what had been witnessed, from the vision inherent in his genetic makeup and passed on to him from ancestors; he wasn't just repeating something he had heard.

Another of Dwinn's cousins, Izen Wasko, stood near the group of children. Izen was her second cousin through her mother's family. His albescent hair was laced with short-colored strings that marked him as a weaver's apprentice. Dwinn stepped to his side, surprised to see him since he lived in a larger town over a hundred kilometers away.

"I was hoping you wouldn't be here," Izen grumbled, giving her a disapproving glance. *Her presence always creates tension*, was his unchecked thought. But not the same as the other fragment she had sensed.

"I wouldn't miss witnessing Uncle Vinsen's retirement," she said. Izen had limited skill with mind-thought, so she didn't attempt silent communication. "Why are you here?" Gray eyes in his dark face always reminded her of her mother. Dwinn's eyes were an unusual light amber, like her father's.

"I've moved my family here to Herrethstede for the cyclone season. It's safer," he muttered.

Dwinn nodded. The land endured one period each year of heavy rain, coldness and incredible winds. Flooding caused people to lose their homes; village crops were ruined; in urban areas looting was

commonplace. Herrethstede was higher than the plains and didn't incur serious environmental problems; it was remote enough not to suffer the lawlessness.

Her younger cousin relaxed back from his recall. "He did well," Dwinn said to Izen.

Izen gave a slight snort of disdain. *It's all so pointless*, was his stray thought.

Vinsen Alyain straightened suddenly and stared across the gathering toward the plains. Dwinn looked that way, too. But when she glanced back, her guardian had called on another boy to speak his recall of Nalobirin and Herrethstede's beginnings. Alyain seemed preoccupied, barely noticing as the youngster leaped to his feet and began a statement; the words sounded rehearsed. Dwinn became uncomfortable, annoyed when the Alyain didn't quiz him. Another boy was called on, and Dwinn frowned when her guardian didn't praise the adolescent who spoke from the deeply ingrained memories of an ancestor—the original witness to the event described. Alyain's worry seemed to increase with each moment.

Suddenly he asked, "And who here can speak for the Stenards?" It was his usual way of ending a session, but the abruptness of his question made Dwinn wary. "What recall did they leave us?" Alyain went on.

"Stenard is a female line," one of the visitors declared.

"You don't think it can be done?" Alyain asked the merchant. The man frowned. "Herrethstede is named for Herreth Stenard. A wise woman. She advised Dannen Nalobirin. In Herrethstede we're not afraid to say we believe in Collateral Talent.

"Who?" Vinsen Alyain asked again, looking toward Dwinn and Izen, the most mature of the Stenard line. They held generations of Stenard witnessing.

Dwinn sensed Izen's discontent, but assumed he would speak since he was older than she.

Get this over with, came that loose, intense thought wave. Dwinn focused on the pensive coastal stranger with the orange comb in his hair, certain the thought came from him.

"I can see. I recall!" said an elated young voice.

Izen straightened and leaned forward. *My son!* His thought came as clearly as if he had spoken. Pride exuded from him, drowning his previous disgruntlement about Vinsen's question.

At five years old, Retti Wasko's hair still held only a slight shimmer of the silver which would eventually hide the true color. Looping brown waves glistened around the shoulders of his finely-woven tunic. His smooth-skinned face showed awe.

"I—" He pushed to his knees, obviously entranced as he stared beyond Vinsen Alyain. "The noise!" Retti covered his ears. Dwinn pressed forward, intrigued by the intense energy of her little cousin. "Everyone is afraid...running. Something terrible!" He whimpered and gasped. "We have to leave! They're trying...trying to move the ship."

"The refugees?" someone whispered from Dwinn's side. "Is he remembering leaving the ship to come under?"

"They can't help us," the boy cried. "They're sick. They can't..." Retti's breathing was rapid.

Many backed away, respectful of the intensity Retti projected. Dwinn, drawn by his words, tried to pull up the history he was recalling. She moved to Retti's side, certain what he was experiencing must also be in her.

"Vinsen, what's happening?" Retti cried. Adults gasped at his use of the healer's first name. Izen attempted a reprimand. But Retti was immersed in recall. He grabbed Dwinn as if for support.

Flashes of coral light consumed Dwinn's thoughts; a high whine cut into her mind, darting and stabbing. She flinched while brightness streaked like tiny insects, distorting current perceptions and immersing her in a recall so vivid she lost contact with her surroundings. In her vision, the original witness struggled to a narrow rectangular window—this forebearer spoke through Dwinn and Retti both: "The Harteks. They must have died."

Herrethstede villagers gasped.

Dwinn pictured prone shapes of giant-sized scale-covered bipeds being pushed off a long gang plank by some men. Harteks...their former masters. She didn't feel Izen pull his son from her arms. But even without her young cousin, the recall persisted: She was in a room with other women who reeled with discomfort. The assault of spectral brightness and noise continued.

She braced her hands on the ground, fell to her side and moaned, unconscious to present reality as the view from the ancestral witness rolled in her mind.

"Who are you?" Vinsen Alyain asked the question, but she barely

heard him as a scintillation continued to prick her consciousness like tiny explosions. It veiled the other envisioned women in lambent light.

“Who witnesses this?” The dim voice from the present caused Dwinn to shake her head. “If you have a name, say it!” Hands gripped her arms.

“Vinsen?” she asked.

“You aren’t Vinsen. Who are you?”

“It’s Herreth, Vinsen. What will we do? If the Harteks are dead, what...?”

“Dwinn!”

Her thoughts whirled. Then she was looking at her own hand. A remembered object glimmered from her palm. “Vinsen!”

“Dwinn Somuron!” The sharp voice caused the image to waver. With a shudder, Dwinn saw the face of a robust older man with heavy white eyebrows. But that’s not Vinsen, was Dwinn’s thought. Worried brown eyes peered at her. “Dwinn!” he called.

Visions of her sparkly palm reeled through her mind again before the image ebbed. She slumped forward, tired and confused.

Vinsen Alyain held her. “Here, girl. Relax.”

A flurry of conjecture came from nearby strangers. “Girl?” the tall coastal man said, confused as he perused her hunter’s garb and hair style.

“Bring her some food!” Alyain called. “There, there,” he comforted.

“That’s the oldest witnessing I’ve ever heard!” someone said.

“Could it really have been Herreth Stenard at the time of the Harteks’ deaths?” came a question.

“It’s all a sham,” said one of the strangers. “Trying to tout Healer Alyain’s abilities.”

“This is his retirement ceremony! He has nothing to prove,” came a retort.

“Collateral Talent is in all of us. We all know and learn from our mothers as well as our fathers!” declared the headmaster.

“Stop it! Stop, all of you!” Vinsen demanded from where he held Dwinn.

Izen stood in the crowd clutching his dazed son and directed his gray-eyed anger toward Dwinn. “Why do you always break the rules? You shouldn’t have said anything. You shouldn’t have touched him!” The boys’ mother pushed to them, shock on her haggard face.

"Izen, the boy will be fine in no time," Vinsen said. "Talk to him. Don't let him fear his ability."

Izen continued to glare at Dwinn. "You're a breeder. Have your own child to use as a catalyst!" He sank to the ground, cradling his son.

Dwinn took the warm tuber someone thrust toward her. She had to hold it with both hands; her arms felt weak as if she had been shucking segren for several work times. Recall was often a strain, but this was more severe than she had previously experienced. Perhaps because of how far back she'd reached. She heard people discussing that, and her last image from the vision remained with her: a glittery pebble, a stone, all sparkling in her palm. She shook her head, unable to fathom the whole occurrence, and bit into the pasty white root she had been given.

"It truly appears that Dwinn and Retti have recalled the very moment of our people's freedom!" Alyain helped Dwinn to her feet.

Dwinn tried to control her trembling. She ate more of the sweet tuber. Everyone knew how generations of their ancestors had been enslaved by the Harteks. When their overlords mysteriously died, the people were suddenly on their own in unknown space. Recorded history was based on that instant freedom, but no one had publicly built the story or reached any recall of that event.

A female! That's incredible! came the unchecked thought from the coastal man with the orange comb. He had pushed forward, awe and excitement bristling from him. *The embodiment of what Alyain plans to prove!*

—*What do you mean?*— she silently asked.

The man stopped as if hit by a wagon tongue. He rubbed his forehead, his thoughts suddenly jumbled and filled with self-reproach as he frowned at her. Dwinn trembled inside, amazed by the contact she had generated with him.

"Dwinn isn't exceptional," Alyain was saying. "Everyone holds recall!"

"But she needed the boy to bring the vision," someone argued.

"And the boy remembered from his female ancestry," Vinsen declared.

"He may have been coached," a woman said.

"By whom? Who has ever expressed this witnessing before?" Alyain gave everyone a challenging look. "And Dwinn?" he asked. "You think she was also coached?"

No one answered. Dwinn glanced at the crowd. Some were passing judgment, she could tell. It was easy to determine who believed that women, as well as men, held ancestral memories. Those who did believe in Collateral Talent nodded their silvery heads emphatically, while murmured denouncement came from the skeptics—mostly from the visitors.

Dwinn swallowed some of the tea an apprentice had brought her. When she was Retti's age, her parents had told her that everyone could hold knowledge of the past—even girls. All during her life, odd dramas often dictated her thoughts. Before she was eight, she would tell her parents; after that age, her guardians always listened, sometimes corroborated her visions from their own experienced recall. That encouraged her.

Vinsen sighed, his hand on her arm. — *Your abilities are so strong. Would that I could pass my station on to you.* —

Awe at Alyain's compliment flooded her, but she saw an expression of deep despair as the older man quickly drew from her, turning his attention to the crowd. "We have gathered here to witness," Alyain declared. "To ingrain this changing of station to memory. Let me announce, for all to hold as truth, the person who will inherit my healer position. And then we shall feast!"

Finally! came the clear thought, *We must be on our way.*

Alyain moved onto a dais and introduced his apprentices and the several men who had petitioned for the Herrethstede healer position. One was from Purcrev and the others were unknown to her. She frowned, having expected at least one of those coastal men to be included, but they stayed among the crowd.

Bruy Mirrisen stood with the other petitioners. He smiled at her. She stifled her of resentment as she wished Vinsen *would* name her as Herrethstede's healer. She knew chemurgy and pharmacology—had observed Alyain at his work since she was nine. Vinsen had told her that all her skills were quite advanced.

Vinsen finished praising the candidates and smiled at the audience. In the expectant silence, he carefully unwound the green turban he wore, letting his curly white hair fall below his shoulders. He tied it back with a green string, indicating his retirement. From a basket he took another green cloth, holding it reverently.

"In respect for tradition and with no sons or nephews of my own,

I keep strength in this station by passing my position to Bruy Mirrisen.” He stepped to the slender man.

Bruy was Izen’s age, late twenties. His black eyes gleamed appreciatively. Dwinn sensed a reserve in the applause of the crowd. She glanced at Headmaster Conna Rabriol’s thoughtful smile. Zoria Dobray do-Quatl, Herrethstede’s birthing woman, lowered her head, her displeasure obvious.

—*He does this for you, Dwinn. Don’t you understand?*—

Startled, Dwinn looked at Bruy Mirrisen, knowing the communication had come from him. Bruy loosed his wavy hair from its apprentice queue and caught the ends in the green cloth Vinsen presented him. Two young women hurried forward to help wrap the status symbol around his head.

Bruy humbly thanked his mentor. He promised the two apprentices they would continue in their positions. “I was not born with this talent, but have studied hard. Even so, I will need knowledgeable assistants. All our combined efforts won’t equal the abilities of Vinsen Alyain, a Priman, one who was bred from before Freedom to this art and knows the basics innately through generations of ingrained wisdom. But I will do my best to continue his most honorable station. I want nothing to change.”

With these last words, he looked directly at Dwinn, his calm expression unrevealing, but she realized he wanted her to stay a fixture of the healer’s compound, that he intended to pair with her. He had never openly approached her during his six-year apprenticeship, but she had touched his thoughts; some nights she would awaken to feel his dreams wandering her room, hovering over her bed.

“All hail to Priman Vinsen Alyain, Master Healer!” Bruy declared.

Everyone cheered. The mead pot was carried around and people filled their cups.

“And success to Herrethstede’s new healer!” the headmaster called.

“I pledge to serve you well,” Bruy said, smiling toward Dwinn.

2

Cups were again raised, with hurrahs all around. Dwinn, however, got a chill, and not just because of Bruy's possessive look. The entire event was too sudden, too forced. She turned away, seeking the man who had become the secondary figure in this celebration. He seemed to have vanished. The area was brighter now, because the town's portable frond lights had been carried in from the council grounds. The huge bulbs of gas sat at the perimeter of the area, with long translucent tubes towering up. The light they created flared over an array of steamed vegetables, trays of roasted pronghorn and smoked lizard. Various breads formed pyramids over tops of baskets. Girls hurried with platters of food to the clusters of men who laughed and talked in the bright light. Just to clearly see people's expressions, not have to squint to make out colors and textures, gave most people pleasure, but Dwinn felt no gaiety at all.

She pulled up her hunter's shorts that had a tendency to shift low on her hips, and pushed around people, searching the crowd for Vinsen. She finally glimpsed him in the dark of her shelter where he hastily removed items from a large valise and packed them into a sturdy old satchel. He laid several cloths in the bag and closed it, turning quickly when she reached him.

"Ah, Dwinn," he said, smiling. "I love a good festival, don't you?"

"I do not like this one," Dwinn said. "It's tainted, and I want to know why."

Alyain fingered the five-chamber herb pouch he wore on a shiny cord around his neck. Covered with iridescent scales, the swirl of colors formed the Alyain family crest. He looked beyond her to the crowd. Dwinn glanced there, too, seeing the three coastal men moving toward them. Alyain held up his hand for them to wait.

"Dwinn, I need to tell you why I've given up my station," he said to her.

"The singles law," she said angrily. "You've been ordered to move."

"With what I've recently perceived, that's very possible. But the original reason was to go to Rendef City. Chabris Vadlin has requested

that I help her prove her rights to the dynast position through Collateral Talent.”

Dwinn stepped back with shock. “You would help a dynast? Even this fem dynast? She’s still a Vadlin!”

“Dynast Illin proclaimed Chabris as his successor in open court. Remember, Dwinn, she’s been influencing law well since before Illin died.”

“Her lowering of taxes hasn’t gotten her any favor with the syndics,” Dwinn grumbled. “She’ll never win sanction.”

Alyain drew Dwinn into her shelter, his hushed voice having an anxious sound. “She’s the leader we need to turn this society around. Something must be done to keep her cousin from usurping power.”

Dwinn shriveled inside, an icy knot threatening to consume her. The woman’s cousin was Genn Wolkum, Commander of the Royal Guard who, twelve years ago, was responsible for the deaths of Dwinn’s parents. Last year, Illin’s funeral pyre was still smoldering when Genn Wolkum laid claim to the dynast position, stating his right because he was Illin’s nephew, son of Illin’s full sister. He had reminded the court that only male genes could hold and transfer talent. The Master Healer supported him, declaring that this transfer of talent would be with Wolkum even through a dormant female generation, such as Illin’s sister.

“I felt compelled to help,” Alyain stated. “Life has been much less repressive since Chabris has been in charge.” He shoved the satchel he had just packed behind the pile of loose clothing at the head of Dwinn’s bed.

“What’s that?” she asked of the bag. She took off her knife belt and tossed it on her bed.

“Don’t ask. Forget it’s there. Hopefully I can reclaim it shortly. If not, it’s yours to do with what you will.”

Dwinn’s pulse quickened, not liking his pessimistic tone, but she wouldn’t try to glimpse his inner thoughts. It was simple to do with some people, but to knowingly make a read was considered impolite. Even if she had decided to read Vinsen, his advanced skills would easily block her.

“Well, how are you going to get to Rendef City?” she asked, worried over his plans.

“My escorts are already here...from Coantra,” he said, moving back toward the festivities.

Dwinn studied the three men in coastal clothes as she followed. Coantra was on the coast. They must be the escorts, she thought. They were unarmed except for short segrenex knives, and she wondered how effective an escort they could be against the outlaws on the plains, or against the royal adversaries who might learn the reason for Vinsen's trek.

"Now you listen to me, Dwinn." Vinsen gripped her elbow. "It's time for you to alter your ways. You'll have to, you know."

"You expect me to accept Bruy's..." She clenched her fingers. "Hospitality? Is that why you named him to your station?"

"He's my oldest apprentice."

"He's too conservative," Dwinn snapped. "He thinks the appointment is more than that and so do I."

"He's inclined to pair with you. I've sensed his feelings, as you must have. You will need him."

Dwinn wished Aunt Betree were here; Aunt Betree had discouraged Bruy's interest as much as Dwinn ignored it. Privately Betree had told Dwinn, "You, especially, must find a man you can respect. Men and women hardly ever agree, but with respect, good things will grow." Dwinn certainly didn't respect Bruy, with his condescending manner and exacting ways.

"Be sensible, girl," Alyain went on. "Your breeding time is nearly over. Where will you be then, with no mate or child? You'll have no position at all. I can't bear to think of what Syndic Pown will force on you. You must breed!"

Dwinn pinched her lips together hating the thought of more children subjected to this hopeless existence. And what if she bore a girl? A pawn. A breeder with no rights and even less hope. That was the one positive thing about the fem dynast. Although Chabris was a Vadlin, the woman made her own decisions and was attempting to bring a different standard to the land.

"Here." Vinsen took the five-chamber pouch from around his neck. "This is yours, Dwinn, my—my only heir." The metal cord he placed in her hand signified his Priman position. His voice dropped to a whisper, "Hold to your beliefs no matter how you're forced to live. Bruy can't contain you, I know that; he probably won't even demand that you pair with him, and his adoration will allow you more freedom than you'd have with someone else."

“You act as if you aren’t coming back!” she gasped.

He frowned. “Any aid given to the fem dynast could be dangerous, Dwinn. That’s why I’ve made these preparations for the village, and for you.”

His embrace nearly crushed her. She buried her head against his shoulder, acutely aware of the scent of soap, the smoky odor of his cape, and the hard strength of his arms around her. Dwinn squeezed closed her golden eyes, but the tears oozed through, large and hot as they trailed along her cheeks. She tried to blink them away, feeling vulnerable, as if she had shrunk and time had regressed to twelve years earlier when Vinsen Alyain had turned her from the shock of witnessing her parents’ excruciating deaths. At that time Vinsen’s gentle hands had pulled her face to his chest, his deep voice soothing, his mind talk communicating the event was over, to let go, time to start anew.

Vinsen moved away from her, his expression grim. Dwinn fisted away her tears and pushed the heirloom pouch into the deep side pocket of her fringed hunter’s jerkin. She hurried behind him as his long strides carried him to the three coastal men. They were younger even than Izen, and Dwinn wanted to stop Vinsen, tell him he couldn’t possibly trust himself to them, although the medium-height man with the headband seemed so full of energy he was about to burst. The one with the orange comb exuded obvious concern. The tallest, with hair fixed in a braid, reminded Dwinn of Izen. His bright eyes took her in, obvious with his sensual interest. She stopped in her tracks, feeling exposed in her boots, shorts and sleeveless top. He smiled, showing dimples and strong teeth.

Dwinn flushed and quickly turned away, bumping into Tala Girmon do-Rabriol, the headmaster’s mate.

“Syndic Pown is coming!” Tala stated. Her alarmed thoughts went out to all of the Herrethstede people. “And with royal guards!”

The fear that swept Dwinn threatened to topple her. When the royal guard last visited Herrethstede, Dwinn had been eight years old. She had witnessed sadistic mute guardsmen beat her mother, Retirra Stenard, and drag the woman off to Rendef City where Dwinn’s father, Kez Somuron, was already prisoner. Many wake times later, Dwinn stood dazed before a brightly lit Vadlin Palace as Royal Guard Commander, Genn Wolkum, bound both of her parents to the legs of the triangle that framed the huge blue and yellow emblem of govern-

ment. Her parents hung on those metal struts until they died: her father accused of sedition, her mother—one of only three women ever framed—charged with attempting to poison Dynast Illin Vadlin. Dwinn had witnessed it all, making the events vivid in her eidetic memory.

A hushed tension had consumed the gathering, then whispers began when they realized the steady pounding of a drum. Vinsen Alyain turned, his face ashen.

—*You knew!*— Dwinn projected to him. His occasional prescience was well known to her. —*You expected them!*—

—*You must leave!*— Vinsen silently insisted. —*Them discovering you dressed in hunter's clothes would do you no good at all.*— He drew a long breath before going to a pallet where he cut a piece of his favorite fruit from a nearby tray and ate it slowly, methodically, savoring every bite. Dwinn was too horrified to move. He glanced up, pressing his hand sharply at her. —*Go now!*—

But it was too late. Frond light marked the approach across the village grounds. From the perimeter of the orchards behind the healer's units, guardsmen emerged carrying globe lights. Their bone-constructed vests, glittering with spawner plates, clacked as they marched in. Bright blue pantaloons with yellow side stripes poofed over the tops of their high leather boots.

Dwinn's heart pounded a ragged rhythm in her breast. The hatred that roiled through her took dominance while fear lingered like a film around her thoughts. Women grabbed up their children as the guards strode into the meeting area. The gathering broke into family groupings, with men going to their mates and daughters to give them sanction and protection from the intruders.

—*Lower your head. Maybe they'll overlook you.*— This silent suggestion was from Bruy.

Dwinn glowered and took a belligerent stance: hands on her hips, legs apart.

An adolescent boy jogged into the assemblage and pounded an impressive drum roll on the instrument he carried. "Make way! Make way for the honorable syndic, Takari Pown!" he cried.

The additional frond light carried by the royal light bearers revealed bright-red cloth on the necks of many of the guardsmen, marking them as mutes. Dwinn fought to hide her trembling. A baby began a fretful cry as the nervousness of the villagers increased.

Six syndicmen led the way for an ornate sulky pulled easily by a single drayman. The drayman stopped the two-wheeled conveyance and rested in his harness. The slight figure of Takari Pown stepped out, flanked quickly by three of the syndicmen. Dressed in a tailored reed-cloth tunic over tight leather pants, he surveyed the layout. "Good festival, citizens," Pown greeted in a petulant tenor. "Best fitting for the arrival of a court representative."

Another sulky pulled up beside the first. Eight royal guards attended the extravagantly dressed passenger. "Give honor, good people," Pown said. "To Hock Wolkum, son of the noble Lord Genn Wolkum, Commander of the Royal Guard, heir to the dynast position."

On hearing the name, Dwinn's stomach soured.

The attending guardsmen whipped out their swords and saluted, the metal flashing bright in firelight. The ruling dynast controlled weapons of metal. The mutes, an elite corps of enforcers, all carried metal swords.

Dwinn gritted her teeth when Genn Wolkum's son strolled into brighter light. Donned in pantaloons of shiny material, tailored shirt and brocaded vest, he wore impractical high-heeled boots. His powdered face held an arrogant expression as he ignored the obvious disension that surfaced from the wording of Pown's introduction.

"He is representing the Rendef Court!" Pown insisted when no one moved.

"Homage to our syndic and the Court representative," Headmaster Conna Rabriol quickly said.

Dwinn buried her dangerous resentment while she murmured the phony praise with everyone else. They bowed from the waist, arms extended and palms out.

The guardsmen's swords rasped as they were put back into their keepers.

"What brings such prestigious people to our humble village?" Rabriol asked.

"The laws of the land, Headmaster," Pown responded, strolling past clusters of people toward the food. "Which you seem to constantly ignore. For that the town is fined twenty-four tunic-size skins, class A. I'll collect them from your stores as I leave."

"Twenty-four skins!" a tanner cried. "That's robbery!"

"Enough!" Pown ordered.

Unconsciously, Dwinn backed up, only to be prodded forward by a stout stick held by a mute guard. Terror flooded her. She fought against dizziness.

“The mutes are sons of Harteks!” came a call from deep in the orchard. A guard spun that way, but the heckler wasn’t visible in the always dark landscape beyond the lights.

Pown plucked meat from a serving tray, his metal bracelets clinking. The syndics who governed the eleven economic districts were often favored with metal trinkets and tools. Then he pulled a scroll from his waist pack and unrolled it.

“I’ll read it,” Hock Wolkum said, taking the edict from the syndic.

He stood beneath the light of two arcing fronds and cleared his throat. “By the law of our people as instituted in year one fifty-six of our freedom by the righteous Dynast Terrick Vadlin—my forefather.” He glanced around for dissenters, an amused expression on his broad, fleshy face. “It is hereby decreed that in order to preserve our resources and control population in our increasingly crowded world, all persons unencumbered by mate or family and beyond the basic age of breeding shall be committed to a Living Cave.”

“That’s pure murder!” Rabriol blustered. “Living Caves haven’t been used for more than two decades!” Other laments came loudly.

“If the assigned are without heirs,” Wolkum read on, his voice rising over the clamor of the crowd. “Their possession and chattel shall become property of the glorious dynasty for the benefit of all. It is to enforce this law that the royal guard and court representatives come to collect one Vinsen Alyain, respected healer of Far Town, age fifty-four years.”

“No!” someone wailed. A young boy broke from his family and ran to Vinsen, hugging the man’s knees.

Misery wrenched through Dwinn like scald from hot oil. She put her hand to her mouth to stifle her moan.

“Since he has no heirs nor living relatives, his property shall be collected by the royal guard. This warrant is duly sworn by Lord Bonner Sith, Master of Laws, at the approach of the second harvest season in this year of our freedom, two hundred and fifty-nine.”

“This is absurd!” someone cried.

“The scabby laws are nothing but a curse on the common man,” called another.

“Enough! You’ve all heard the order,” Pown said. “The transport wagon is waiting.”

“Who ordered this warrant?” someone demanded. “When Dynast Vadlin took reign, she rescinded the Living-Cave ordinance as well as death by framing!”

“Who are you to question dynasty law?” Hock Wolkum growled.

“Sgirro Lalann, senior heir to the syndic of Coantra district. Did Dynast Chabris Vadlin request this warrant?”

Dwinn stared with amazement at the bold coastal man with the headband. His tall companion with braided hair wasn’t in sight, but the other man knelt beside Alyain, speaking quietly. Dwinn’s anguish surged, despair over the sentencing and for her own loss of this man who had raised her since she was eight. Aunt Betree was gone, and now this! She moved quickly behind Vinsen, her strong hands gripping his shoulders.

“I should like some guarantee that this is a valid warrant,” Sgirro Lalann went on.

“It’s much more valid than if issued by Chabris *Leely*.” Hock Wolkum stressed the fem dynast’s proper female name. “She claims to be dynast, yet holds no symbol of power except a misappropriated name.” He laughed harshly. “The Master of Laws has even refused her the royal sigil!”

The awful sigil, Dwinn thought. She had seen the official stamp from that dynast authority on her parents’ death certificates.

“He hasn’t given it to Commander Wolkum, either!” someone shouted.

“Leely has no Vadlin talent!” the pompous court man insisted. “No female inherits any recall except baby raising! You can’t possibly believe she would know the way to the dynasty mine and have a successful pilgrimage!”

“Then who authorized this order?” Headmaster Rabriol asked, taking up Sgirro Lalann’s question.

“The Master of Laws swore out this warrant,” Takari Pown said peevishly. “And since this is my district and not your father’s, young Lalann, I am the only person who could question that. I swear it is a valid warrant.”

“But—” Lalann was stalled by his friend with the orange comb. They both glanced at Alyain and lowered their eyes.

Hock Wolkum looked around, relaxing a bit. In a moment of acuity, Dwinn read his harsh thought: *This will be the end of her challenge*. She frowned, uncertain of the meaning. She hated the man's gloating manner. "These circumstances are most grievous," he said. Dwinn knew he didn't mean it. Vinsen took Dwinn's hand, gave it a squeeze. "But by law, I must collect certain items." He produced a paper. "We have a list of the healer's possessions that will be taken into custody; petition for their return to Far Town can be made—"

"A moment, Lord Wolkum." Alyain arose gracefully and walked forward. His composure made Dwinn's nostrils sting and eyes brighten with tears. "I have only the clothes I wear," Alyain said.

Wolkum glowered. "You're the town healer. Besides your ample lodgings and their furnishings, all of your papers, research and pharmacopoeia must be put in safe keeping with the Master Healer until—"

"Can't you see there's a correction for your warrant?" Headmaster Rabriol interrupted. "Vinsen Alyain is not Herrethstede's healer. He has passed his station on to Bruy Mirrisen. We all witnessed the transfer. This festival celebrates that event."

Fury radiated from Hock Wolkum, reddening his face even through the powder. His fist clenched the paper he held, and a guard moved forward as if the Court's man had been threatened.

"Then he leaves nothing?" came the syndic's mild question. With the fine he had levied of twenty-four skins, Syndic Pown had gained more from this trip than the Court. "It's as if he knew." Pown glanced around at the Herrethstede residents who exuded sudden pride as they realized how their healer had subtly defied the dynasty.

"I want the healer's possessions," Hock Wolkum growled.

A guard, his throat swathed in red cloth, carried several books out of the healer's work shed. Bruy tried to wrench them from the mute's hand and was pummeled to the ground by the guard's clenched fist. Another mute grabbed one of the healer's apprentices and held a convulse pistol to the young man's head.

People gasped. Dwinn held her breath, stunned to see a nerve-killing gun. "Witness!" someone called.

"Everyone remember for the future!" someone else took up.

The mute stared intently at Hock Wolkum, waiting for an order.

"You'll make more enemies than your father would want," the

syndic said to Hock Wolkum. "There are people here from other districts."

Hock Wolkum hesitated, then waved off the mute. He helped Bruy to his feet, brushed him off, looking distrustfully at the crowd before he glanced through one of the books. He tossed it down.

"Shall we go?" Vinsen Alyain said, pulling a short cape around his shoulders.

The residents took cue from Alyain's calm manner, although many were weeping. Tala Girmon do-Rabriol stepped forward, bowing to Alyain. "May you go to eternal light, noble healer."

"I'll travel with you to see that there are no more problems," the orange-combed man said.

"Who in all darkness are you?" Hock Wolkum demanded.

"Lusaar Gurs—"

His friend jerked his arm and stepped forward. "He's with me."

"Name!" Syndic Pown ordered as Hock Wolkum's anger increased.

"Gursenni. Lusaar Gursenni."

Syndic Pown glanced around at the belligerent crowd. "Well, come along if you like," he said, obviously not wanting trouble.

Townpeople's crying increased. They bowed to Alyain, some reaching out to touch him. Children had to be pried from his legs. "Walk in light, Lord Alyain," came calls.

"Go to brightness, most revered Priman."

"You are the Master Healer. None will be better."

Dwinn tried to smile at the honor given her guardian, but found it hard when she knew he was being taken to his death.

—Nothing is final, Dwinn. Your first mother knew that, and by her words, we will meet again.—

Dwinn lurched slightly, taking in Alyain's mind talk. Betree had said something similar to Dwinn before she died. As then, Dwinn felt breathless, her mind floating, limbs light. The stone. That's what they both meant.

"May you join the stone," the birthing woman said. Others concurred, "Yes. Yes!"

"In the final light, we shall meet again," Alyain responded.

With walking stick in hand, Vinsen regally moved away, flanked by Syndic Pown and Lusaar Gursenni. Syndicmen followed, restraining the crowd. The grieving grew louder. The draymen turned the

sulkies, waiting for the dynasty officials to get in and follow the procession. Dwinn stayed back, planning to lose herself in the shadows when the others left and took the lights with them. She intended to follow the transport wagon and be with Alyain until the end.

Strong hands gripped her shoulders. She jerked with surprise as she was pushed forward. The guard's touch became softer, caressing her arms. A spasm of fear went through her. She tried to wrench free, but the mute caught her about the waist, painfully twisting one arm across his muscular body as he carried her toward the sulkies.

Hock Wolkum stared curiously as Dwinn was forced before him. She lowered her head, not wanting her fear or defiance to show. The mute cuffed her chin, snapping back her head. She glared directly at Hock Wolkum.

"What's this? A female in the clothing and style of a hunter?" Hock Wolkum pulled open the jerkin, ripping the laces, and examined Dwinn's smooth womanly form.

Dwinn knew the crowd had turned to look. Humiliation drained her strength. Under different circumstances, Alyain could possibly have protected her. Izen, her only adult relative present, would never admit their blood tie; and she doubted Bruy would stand up for her, not even if she had already promised herself to him.

Hock Wolkum jerked loose one of Dwinn's coiled braids. The thick plait drooped to below her shoulders, covering one small dark-tipped breast. Dwinn barely breathed. Perhaps she would be committed to the Living Cave, too. Better than being conscripted to the Rendef City brothels.

The area around them brightened as a gas frond hissed nearby. Behind Wolkum stood the Herrethstede headmaster and other men. The dark eyes of Lusaar Gursenni held hers, bringing the hot flush of embarrassment full to her cheeks.

Soft fingers turned her face; Syndic Takari Pown studied her with a slight smile. "She's demented," Pown said without concern. His lack of anger stunned Dwinn. "Even calls herself Somuron."

"Somuron! The name of that heretic?" Hock Wolkum asked.

"It's said the girl's from his loins, but she's harmless," Pown said.

"A female in any talent position is illegal and loathsome!" Hock declared. "I suppose she actually attempts the craft!"

"She's a good hunter," came a voice.

Hock whirled to see who had spoken. Even through her fear, Dwinn sensed that he was being prompted, told what to do next. By whom? Certainly not Syndic Pown.

“Where is her man who allows this!” Hock Wolkum blustered.

Pown laughed. “No man could legally pair with a hunter; and those who *have* taken her effected no pregnancy.”

The syndic’s knowledge about her shocked Dwinn.

“Then she’s worthless,” Hock Wolkum declared. “A free for all. Fresh meat for the royal guards’ harem.”

The mute who held her pulled her to him. She flinched, appalled by the implication of his groin rubbing against her hip. Mutes’ lusts were often unabated and savage.

Hock Wolkum grinned. “But Corf, here, wants a taste now.” The court man’s malicious gaze crawled over Dwinn’s partially-exposed body. Hock chuckled. “Corf will show her the proper position for a female.”

The mute held Dwinn closer and she was aghast to realize no one dared stop him.

—*As soon as this is over, cut your hair and go to Bruy’s bed,*—Alyain instructed.

“Nothing can rightfully be done without a warrant,” warned Lusaar Gursenni. His stare bore into her. *Now here’s a golden-eyed mystery,* was his thought. Dwinn couldn’t believe how easily she could read him. *Much too alert to be insane. Especially after what I witnessed earlier.* “And this dutiful population wouldn’t think well of your raping one of their villagers, no matter how outlandish she appears,” he was saying.

“He’s right. Let her go,” the syndic ordered. Dwinn went cold as she sensed Syndic Pown’s thoughts and realized he already had plans for her: Once she passed breeding age and had no children or mate, he was free to do with her as he wished, and he was anticipating her presence in his bed. *Another harvest season, and she will be mine,* came his thought. “Although she should suffer a little for her improprieties,” Pown calmly added.

The mute jerked Dwinn around and she was staggered by a slashing pain just below her collar bone. Someone yelled, “NO!” While falling, Dwinn realized the mute’s metal knife was striped by blood; pain flooded her senses like a piercing scream. She pressed her hand on her chest, barely hearing the muttered alarm of the crowd.

Lusaar Gursenni grabbed the guard's wrist, his ferocious stance causing others to back away. The mute wrenched free and swung his knife, the tip passing close to Gursenni's chest.

"Corf, don't! We don't need that kind of trouble," Hock Wolkum said to the mute.

Intense throbbing commanded her, but Dwinn noticed Sgirro Lalann grab Lusaar Gursenni and pull him back. The muscular guard, Corf, relaxed his tense stance and stood taller. He appeared to be laughing, although his only sound was a broad hiss. He leered down at Dwinn, eyes an eerie pale blue in his almond-colored face. His long hair, braided in many rows, hung over his shoulders like silver whip ends. Dwinn's vision blurred.

"Let's get on with what we came for," Hock Wolkum growled.

Don't leave me, Dwinn thought. Vinsen Alyain couldn't come to her now, he was gone; condemned to the Living Cave. With closed eyes, she regulated her breathing and tuned out the buzz of surrounding sounds. She could heal herself; she knew how, but mental anguish continued. —*Uncle Vinsen, don't leave.*—

—*Bruy can help you.*—

She was dimly aware of Bruy bending over her, but in her mind she saw the rugged, angry face of Lusaar Gursenni.

3

Lusaar plodded through the Always Dark, listening for a sound of reprieve. The fifteen syndicmen who had traveled with him and his two friends had camped only six kilometers from Far Town. They should have overtaken this group by now to fight for Alyain's release.

Two men carrying the bulky, bright gas fronds had moved a distance up the trail, leaving the wagon with its seven prisoners in a gloominess similar to Lusaar's thoughts. The creak of the axle grated

at his nerves. He glowered when a guard, wanting the men to increase the prison wagon's pace, hit the lead drayman. Other guards strolled ahead or stood watching the sweating, belabored workers whose feet, in sturdy boots, slipped and twisted on the narrow trail. Lusaar knew these draymen, young and strong though they were, couldn't continue this way. Decisively, he went to the wagon.

"Ho!" he cried, quickly pulling the lever to set the brake. "Take a rest."

Two draymen apprentices jammed stops behind the back wheels. Lusaar unhooked a water skin and passed it to the leader of the eight men. Even in the dim light, sweat glistened on their pale brown arms and legs, and darkened their poorly-made tunics and short pants. One man slumped down, pulling his harness partner with him.

"What do you think you're doing?" the guard leader demanded. The frond carriers made their way back to the wagon, brightening the area. "Cyclones! Lord Wolkum's son is expecting us. He said to stop for nothing."

"If you don't like it, order some of your men to help move this wagon up the hill. These draymen will collapse if they don't get a break." Lusaar studied the man, sensing his shock at the idea. "I thought not." The royal guard ranked at the top of the unskilled labor guilds, whereas draymen were just two steps above household chattel.

"Dray leader. When your men are rested, we'll go on," Lusaar said to the man who commanded the workers.

"Aye, sir."

A strange one, this Gursenni, Lusaar imagined the man thinking. He rubbed his forehead, not liking the illusory scenes and thoughts that often developed, but he hadn't learned how to break himself of the habit. He had even imagined that girl hunter back in Far Town had once asked something and called out to him.

Far Town was the government name, he realized, while the people there called the place Herrethstede—a name Lusaar hadn't heard before. Herreth, like the person whose recall that girl hunter called up. Lusaar wondered if that amazing display had been arranged to impress him. He glanced at the unfortunate prisoners and turned away to sit on the roadside. If only he could hear the steady tramping of his colleague's syndicmen. The Living Cave might not be too far away.

Lusaar had left Coantra imbued with the crusade to make Dynast

Chabris the undisputed ruler of the netherworld and to end practices such as this. Vinsen Alyain had agreed to supply the proof Chabris needed—evidence that a talent and recall could be inherited by females as well as males. A radical idea, but Lusaar had heard of it from too many sources to totally dismiss it. Then that outlandish girl had demonstrated the ability.

He sighed, another remembrance from Herrethstede coming to him: the mute's bloody knife, the girl hunter on the ground wide-eyed with shock. He could picture her long silvery hair unbound and sweeping over her shoulders as she slept.

Lusaar shook his head, disoriented. *She wears her hair in braids, he insisted to himself. Thick braids rebelliously looped over her ears.*

She had thrust her hand to the cut. Blood formed a dark line on her skin; and the entourage had walked off with the land's best healer in shackles. Lusaar hoped the town's new healer was competent enough to help. The cut most certainly had been shallow, incising the skin and welling with blood. She held a defiant look, even then.

A wonder, that one, Lusaar thought. Too bad she'll probably be sent to a guards' pleasure house to breed, her offspring used as chattel.

She'll be paired before that happens.

Lusaar put his hand to his head, dismissing his sharp idea that the thought had come from Vinsen Alyain.

"Keep those fronds closer!" the guard leader called as the draymen stood. "We don't need more excuses for a slow down." He glowered at Lusaar.

The yellow lights marked their way as the draymen strained at the wagon traces. Large stones on the path caused some stumbling, but the pace was considerably faster. Lusaar stayed beside the wagon, walking between the globes attached to the fore and aft. The smell from the seven caged humans was pungent, but Lusaar had remained alongside the entire trip, refusing to let these people be total outcasts. Three guards brought up the rear.

Where in cyclones are Lalann's syndicmen? Lusaar wondered.

"Primanson Gursenni." The hushed voice belonged to the healer. Lusaar wondered how the man knew his father's status as a Priman. "Your thoughts have surely been perceived. I'm prepared for the worst."

"What?" Lusaar tensed.

The mutes are telepaths, came an abnormal thought, like words sweeping to Lusaar's mind. He peered at the healer who stood with his fingers clenched on the bars. Lusaar glanced suspiciously to where the guards tramped along.

"Thank you for interceding for my ward. You did a great service," Alyain said.

"Your ward?" Lusaar put his attention to the trail.

"My mate and I took her in after her parents were killed."

"And her name again?" Lusaar asked, unable to deny the intrigue he felt for the girl.

"Dwinn Somuron," Vinsen said.

"Somuron."

It had been eight years since Lusaar learned about Kez Somuron's radical insistence of equality among guilds. The man had also advocated open exploration to locate another source of ore. The idea had appealed to Lusaar. Finding another metal source could advance technology and revive his family's little-used talent of trionics.

"It would also diminish the dynast's power," Alyain said as if they were in conversation.

Lusaar gritted his teeth, knowing the man was correct. Supplying metals was what the dynast's pilgrimage was all about. Only the dynast knew the location of the ore, and the amount of new material found was believed to indicate the coming year's fortunes. The only smelter was in Vadlin Palace.

"Somuron is a male name," Lusaar said brusquely to change his heretical thoughts. "Your girl shouldn't go by that. What is her line?"

Vinsen Alyain hesitated. "She's a Stenard, but chose not to let her father's name and talent become extinct. Much in the way Chabris chose to continue the Vadlin line, even though it drove your father from her bed."

Lusaar jerked toward the healer, amazed at his knowledge and affronted by the man's boldness. Stepping off the trail, he didn't follow until the wagon was several paces ahead.

Yes. He had been born of Chabris Vadlin. She should be called Chabris Leely do-Gursenni, but when her brother, Dynast Illin's only son, disappeared Illin asked her to move back to Rendef City. Lusaar had been thirteen years old and he remembered well his father's horror at the idea. There was no position for Krandil Gursenni in Rendef

City. No title, except as Chabris's mate; no apprenticeship to a royal tronics position. Krandil refused to move to Vadlin Palace where he would have been shamed. Yet the man was shamed anyway by Chabris leaving without him. Krandil berated Chabris, and spoke disparagingly about the fact that she gave him only one child. Then came the added scandal of Chabris withdrawing from the pairing contract. It could be counted on one hand the number of times a woman had done such a thing. No matter that she was the dynast's spawn and her father had encouraged her to do this! Dynast Illin's female son, she was often called, while Krandil Gursenni insisted that Chabris was insane.

Lusaar had no choice but to stay with his father where he belonged. Females had no property or title, and a son was—by law—his father's responsibility. Yet he couldn't deny his fascination for this woman who would defy law, who took her own father's name, and now went on to take his position as dynast.

That was what appealed to him about the girl hunter. She designed her own path rather than shying to the expectations of others.

He glanced ahead at the wagon, recalling Alyain's comment that he was resigned to the worst. Lusaar shuddered. It won't happen, he thought. Lalann's men will get here. It can't happen!

Several kilometers later, when the Lalann syndicmen still hadn't overtaken them, Lusaar was relieved to learn that the Living Cave was yet another wake time away. They entered the camp Hock Wolkum had set up on the barren edge of a rock plateau. Glow fronds lit the area. Beyond the arc of the lights, the rocky region extended for several kilometers with little vegetation. Streams surfaced intermittently before the plateau butted the immense wall that formed the perimeter of this world. Wolkum's large tent had been erected with an ornate chair and table arranged for him. A cook fire burned brightly off to one side, and servants bustled around, creating an elaborate comfort for the man.

At the edge of the plateau, Lusaar could see nothing beyond forty meters, although he sensed the long drop to the plains below. He tried to view the place strategically, deciding how the Lalann syndicmen might attack. Five of them were armed with convulse pistols, those nerve destroyers the guards had in abundance, but which few syndics were allowed. Lusaar had developed the weapon himself from his

tronics talent. With this surprise, he was certain Lalann's men could win the prisoners' release, especially that of Healer Alyain.

—*Don't count on it. Your plans have probably been found out and stymied.*—

Again the thought came from external origin. He looked to where the guards urged the prisoners from the wagon. Vinsen Alyain helped down a senile woman, his back to Lusaar.

Someone cried out. Lusaar jerked around, surprised to see the guard captain cowering on his knees before Hock Wolkum and the mute, Corf. "Crestun's the leader," the man declared. "He stopped. I didn't tell him to."

Guards rushed to the leader of the draymen. They dragged him to the prison wagon and tied him to the side, his back to the camp. The man offered no resistance as he was stripped to the waist.

"What's going on?" Lusaar asked, striding over.

Corf's whip cracked out and splayed a wide strip from the hapless drayman's shoulder to his waist. Blood flowed in rivulets on either side of the slash, shiny in the gas light.

"Great suns!" Lusaar clenched his fists.

The other draymen turned away. Two prisoners began sobbing, although the man tied to the side of the wagon only gasped when the whip fell on him again.

"It's your fault, Gursenni," Hock Wolkum said as he approached. He laughed suddenly. "Corf says you're next, for giving orders to my stock."

Corf says? Lusaar glanced from Hock Wolkum to the mute wielding the whip. The odd thought resurfaced that had come to him earlier...had been given to him: the mutes are telepaths.

"Is that who you take orders from?" Lusaar barked without thinking. "That grinning sadist, Corf?"

The muscular guard whirled, his multitude of thin braids whipping around his broad face. The leather lash he held spun, straightened, snapped swiftly. Only Lusaar's quick reflexes saved the flesh on his cheek from being flayed. His tunic was cut at the shoulder clear through to the skin. Shocked, he ducked and rolled, expecting another attempt, but the mute had turned back to his original victim.

Hock Wolkum ordered. "Hold him, Tocarren." The captain hustled

over, his convulse pistol aimed at Lusaar's head. "There's something about you I don't like," Wolkum said.

"Precisely what I was going to say," Lusaar retorted.

Hock Wolkum's booted foot caught Lusaar in the midsection. Lusaar fell, a sharp pain lancing from his lungs and across his back. He fought to catch his breath, bile in his throat. He managed to sit up, and focused on the unconscious dray leader being dragged to his companions. They were ready with water and cloths to aid him when the guards dumped him in a heap near their small fire.

"Next?" Wolkum sneered.

Corf started toward Lusaar. Lusaar's eyes narrowed. Why not? he thought. If I brought this beating on that poor dray leader, then I deserve one too.

—Don't be a fool! Corf could kill you. What good would you be to anyone then?—

The vivid rebuke unnerved Lusaar. It had been external, even though it mirrored his own subliminal thought. He struggled to his feet, spasms from Wolkum's kick still knotting his stomach, and groped for an idea of how to proceed.

Standing straight, he turned toward Hock Wolkum. "You might want to think this out, Sir Wolkum." He spoke the title and name without respect. "Your father won't appreciate your alienating a Priman; my father controls the majority of his guild." Lusaar just hoped Hock didn't know how insignificant the Tronics Guild was. "He and Syndic Lalann will both be quite upset if I should return home with any injuries."

Corf grabbed Lusaar's tunic in his big fist. Lusaar was a bit taller than the mute, but the silent man was tight with over-developed muscles; even his fingers, which gripped Lusaar, were hard and knotty. Lusaar quelled his fear and kept an unflinching gaze on Hock Wolkum. "Don't forget, Coantra is a most profitable and influential district," he said.

Some of the bluster seemed to leave Hock. He rubbed his hands together, nervous. "Let him go," the man finally said.

Lusaar recognized fear in Lord Genn Wolkum's pompous son. He's afraid of his father; doesn't want to cross him, Lusaar realized.

—You should be afraid, too.—

Lusaar looked at Corf. The mute gave his hissing laugh.

"I said, let him be!" Hock ordered, more strength to his tone.

Corf yanked Lusaar toward him and then shoved so hard Lusaar's feet left the ground. The force propelled him several strides away from the mute. When he crashed to the hard ground, his head snapped back. Again, breath banged out of him. Ringing occurred behind his eyes; he fought to stay conscious. Time had no definition and it seemed forever before he managed to pull himself to his bedding. With shaking hands, he took up a water skin. After a sip of liquid, he assessed his injuries: whip-cut shoulder, bruised ribs and back, a growing lump on the back of his head. All the while, he kept seeing the hatred from the mute's ruddy face, the same mute who had cut the girl hunter.

Genn Wolkum encouraged such harsh actions, Lusaar knew. He had heard stories about the commander, stories that paralleled atrocities by Dynast Terrick Vadlin. Terrick the Terrible, that man had been called. Lusaar wondered if maybe Genn Wolkum *had* inherited some Vadlin traits.

Lusaar swallowed more water from the skin. Beyond the edge of rock the gray sedge on the slope held a slight luminescence before blurring into the perpetual dark-gray light of this land. He stared into that murky distance, hoping rescue was on its way. His worries kept him awake long after the frond lights were gutted and the whimpering of prisoners was replaced by snores. He tried not to call attention to himself as he tossed and turned; eventually exhaustion overtook him and he slept.

~ ~

The amber-eyed girl sits with a group of small children. Long braids hang over her shoulders and she fingers a red scab that is barely visible above the top of her vest. She glances around, eyes intense. Who is it? she asks. But her mouth hasn't moved. Such smooth skin, wan as is everyone's in this underground land. He can see the gentle arch of her eyebrows; the whitened sheen of her long hair. Strong legs are folded beneath her as she sits on a mat. She plays with a toddler, swinging the child up and laughing; he soon goes off to play with other children. She nods, smiles, raises her hand as if to feel the air. —*I am confounded by you. Come back to Herrethstede.*—

Lusaar jerked on his bedding, swatting the air to remove the image. His heart pounded as if awakening from a frightful dream, but he knew he'd been awake for many moments. Dwinn, he thought. Never had he seen a female with hair so long—so thick. *What a beauty!* His pulse still pounded from the strange vision. His curious response to this girl alarmed him.

He stared across the camp and drew a sharp breath when he realized that no syndicmen had interrupted the quiet sleep time. It had to be near first bell—that time when most everyone commenced a new series of activities. After all, wasn't Dwinn up and dressed and tending children? His thought galled him and he gritted his teeth, trying to reduce the wake-dream to proper perspective: an insignificant wandering of the mind; a fantasy brought on by a restless sleep and revulsion at what this wake time would bring.

Lusaar scowled toward Wolkum's tent. A dark blot reclined in one of Hock's elaborate chairs. Lusaar squinted, realizing it was the mute, Corf, lounging there as if he had privilege, a cup of morning brew in his hand. The man turned his head toward Lusaar. Lusaar could imagine his malicious leer.

Rolling to his side, Lusaar looked over the ridge to the plains, hoping to make out a small flicker of light, a slight movement of shadow against darkness that would indicate Sgirro and the syndicmen were close. He saw only the usual Always Dark, heard the buzz and chitter of insects, and whimpering from one of the prisoners.

After a quick breakfast, a five kilometer trek got them to the Living Cave. The dray leader who had been flogged was dutifully at his position with shoulders squared and giving no sign of his wounds. Lusaar had said nothing to him for fear of increasing the man's problems. He studied the high mortar blocks angled from a natural wall to a tubular gate. Fire baskets showed the alternating royal yellow and blue in the thick segrenex pipes. A flag with the triangular royal emblem hung over the entrance, limp in the still air.

A guard hurried from the smaller of the two huts near the gate, rumpled clothes hanging loose on his older man's emaciated frame. Lusaar gritted his teeth, knowing Vinsen Alyain was a better physical specimen than this man. Hock showed the official papers to the unkempt guard. Lusaar peered toward the gate. He could make out little in the darkness on the other side, but he knew what was there: a

cavern of amogules. These people would be placed alive in a cavern of amogules.

Lusaar had hunted amogules as a boy, spiking the purple globs from crevices and plopping them into pails of saline solution. They shriveled and died in the mixture and the resulting pulp was sometimes sold for industrial use or molded by children into balls for various games. This hunting was a regular occupation for boys from beach towns. The creatures had never seemed particularly harmful, but he knew amogules could be dangerous, especially the large ones that oozed into spawner nests and consumed the kettle-sized eggs. He had heard of a man having his foot destroyed by one, the skin and tissue dissolved from the bone. Terrick the Terrible had developed a use for these deadly parasites; had fashioned the caves where prisoners were taken to be consumed alive.

"There'll be no wait," the guard said. "Haven't been any condemned through here for sixty wake times." Lines crowded around his tired eyes and protruding mouth.

"Unload the wagon!" Hock Wolkum ordered. "And strip them!"

Guard leader Tocarren yelled to his men: "Unload the wagon!"

"Strip them?!" Lusaar trembled with thoughts of this degradation. "Are they to be left with no dignity at all?" He felt inadequate that he could do nothing to help the condemned.

"Goes faster for them if they got a lot of skin exposed," said the old guard. "Best you don't stay around too long. Once they get inside the gates, get gone. Make sure them drayman apprentices don't see, neither." Shaking his head, the man rubbed his hands nervously along his dingy pantaloons. Lusaar sensed dissatisfaction from him.

When Lusaar got to the wagon, many of the prisoners' fear had risen toward panic. Healer Alyain opened a compartment in the handle of his walking stick and passed something to each prisoner. They all held shocked expressions, even Vinsen Alyain, as they ate what he had given them. They fumbled to maintain some poise; a few cried. Lusaar pulled a cape from the pile of clothes and put it around the shoulders of the woman who huddled on the ground, sobbing and trying to hide her nakedness. Vinsen Alyain, stripped to his loin cloth, was calming the man who was babbling about huge spiders riding a cyclone.

"Well, it appears your little rescue plan didn't come off," Hock Wolkum said in an amused tone.

Lusaar jerked toward him, anger souring in his throat.

—*The plans can be remade. Don't let remorse make you ineffective....Think!*—

Lusaar swallowed his hard bitterness, afraid his expression might reveal what was happening in his head. He had no definition for it. Thoughts not his own, imparted to him by another? *No*. His subconscious, perhaps driving him to be less pessimistic.

Corf hissed a laugh as if he knew something special and herded the naked prisoners to the gate. Lusaar followed.

Three hooded men in dark leather jackets, pants and boots emerged from the larger guard house. The old guard lit torches for the hooded ones, then opened the gate. Most of the condemned had calmed and Lusaar assumed the healer had given them a narcotic. Vinsen Alyain had been the only one who was fully prepared for this moment. Even then, the man had thought of others.

And he will die, Lusaar thought dejectedly.

A hooded guard led the way while the other two each escorted a prisoner. Their torches showed a barren stretch of rock, but stairs etched the back wall. They took the stairs to a path that sloped higher than the block walls. It curved to bars at the mouth of a huge cave. Two of the torches were set in holders beside this barred opening. The leader pulled open a small gate and herded the condemned into the cave. The senile one and a woman in a stupor had been the first; it wasn't until the escorts had returned halfway to the bottom of the slope that Lusaar heard whimpering, then a cry of protest. The flickering torch light gave a distorted view to the cave entrance, but Lusaar saw the inside walls ripple.

The next two prisoners were escorted up the wall. One of the condemned screamed when they reached the top and tried to climb the cave gate. For a few moments the frantic person fought off the stout stick wielded by the hooded guard who stayed at the top as the escorts returned to the bottom. The guard soon won, pushing the man in the chest so he fell off the bars and was lost in the morass of parasitic darkness. Lusaar flinched, sickened as the feeble cries were quickly smothered.

"I'll go with these people," Vinsen Alyain said to the hooded escorts. "I promise, there'll be no trouble." The woman huddled against Alyain's side and he held the hand of the other remaining prisoner.

Hock Wolkum and Corf sauntered over to Alyain. “Healer, I know how you’ve been worried about that girl-hunter ward of yours.” He grinned. “Be assured, Corf will take good care of her. Real good care.”

Lusaar’s shoulders knotted, his fingers clenched to fists. Corf gave a sibilant chuckle. He looked from Alyain to Lusaar, disdain in his ice-blue eyes. When he strode away, the glow fronds were also carried off, leaving Lusaar in the feeble light of the entrance. He recognized Vinsen Alyain’s fearful expression. The healer looked at him beseechingly.

“What can I do?” Lusaar asked, his frustration making his question harsh.

Alyain didn’t answer—communicated nothing to Lusaar.

“Come now,” the healer said to the people clinging to him. “This is not truly the end of us.”

“Yes. We will join the stone,” the man muttered in a quavery voice. He stood a bit straighter.

“We will live in that final light,” Alyain said.

Lusaar wanted to grab the healer’s shoulder and pull him back. *No, not him!* His hand reached out, but the three were moving through the gate.

“You should move on, sir.” The older guard had come to Lusaar.

“We’re losing something important with this man,” Lusaar said as he admired the straight posture of Vinsen Alyain. It was more than his knowledge about Collateral Talent. Something in Alyain’s character seemed to represent the missing ingredient in the way people looked at life. “‘Live in the final light,’ Alyain said.”

“A common phrase,” the old guard said.

“Yes, but from him it seemed so poignant.”

In the torch light, the healer’s muscular arms and legs showed no loss of strength, no age. He helped his two comrades forward.

The guard plucked gently at Lusaar. An unexpected compassion filled his tone. “It’s not good to watch a loved one go.”

“I barely know him.” Lusaar stepped closer to the gate, his eyes never leaving the proud figure of Vinsen Alyain. “But it would be cowardice to turn away.”

I shall witness this man’s going, he declared to himself. I’ll witness and tell his ward of his courage.

Lusaar gripped a smooth rail as the three were herded into the

ominous cave. The floor seemed to undulate in torch brightness, the prisoners' legs and feet unseen. A small shriek came from the woman and she grabbed Vinsen as he marched them steadily into the blackness.

Lusaar's thoughts continued, When I return to Herrethstede, I will tell Dwinn Somuron how bravely her guardian met his fate.

4

"We're too late. Cyclones! I knew it!" Sgirro ran to where Lusaar walked down the rough trail four kilometers from the Living Cave.

Five syndicmen jogged behind Sgirro, whips and long metal-tipped swords ready for action; their narrow, bone-constructed breast plates clicked weakly in the dark. Lusaar held his globe light higher, distraught by their disheveled appearance, but glad to see people he knew and trusted. He'd left the Living Cave as soon as the top guard removed the torches and started down from that death hole. But the grip of the awful place still held Lusaar rigid with anger and horror.

"When that last group stopped their fight and took off, I knew what had happened," Sgirro said, tucking a strand of wavy hair into his headband. "Lusaar, we were attacked on every route we took! First by Pown's men and then by the royal guard." Sgirro signaled the men at ease. Many of them gratefully slumped down, their brown twill pantaloons, trimmed in syndic blue, blending with the dark of the ground. The men passed a water skin and activated the fish spines in their globes to produce weak lights. Segrenex staffs tilted at odd angles. Lusaar was aghast that he had thought these men could win against the efficient and well-armed Royal Guard.

"Oryn left Far Town to mobilize your troops right as the guards arrived. The element of surprise should have been ours." Lusaar frowned. "Where is Oryn?"

“Oryn got a slash on his thigh and is trying to act like he’s dying.” Lusaar drew a deep breath, his dark eyes intense on Sgirro.

“Oh, it’s not much,” Sgirro dismissed. “He’s in camp with the others—probably drunk by now.”

“Were others injured?”

“A few.” Sgirro paced, his energy unabated by defeat. “Blazing suns, it’s like Wolkum knew what we had planned!”

“He did,” Lusaar said sullenly. “He laughed about it when we got to the Living Cave.”

Sgirro groaned. “If we hadn’t had those five convulse pistols you made, we’d all have been slaughtered. How could they have known?”

“It’s the mutes.” Lusaar sighed, frustration draining his strength. Even pride in the intricate electronic weaponry he had created didn’t assuage his dark thoughts. “Alyain said they’re telepaths.”

“Mind talkers? But Dynast Terrick declared that subversive decades ago!”

“These are dynasty men, Sgirro.”

“A preposterous concept! It’s bad enough they’ve been rendered voiceless and—”

“And who knows how they’ve been trained; since they’re dumb, a lot of people would pay them no mind at all and never suspect them of silent communication or reading thoughts.”

“But surely officials would know.”

“You mean syndics like your father? Not necessarily. Did your father know the Living Cave ordinance was still being utilized? Did he know ahead of time that Dynast Illin would name his daughter as heir?” Lusaar rubbed his forehead with his hand, feeling the grit on his face; weariness penetrated him.

“Alyain told you about the mutes?”

“Yes, and I have no reason to doubt him.” Especially when he, also, used that mental talent, Lusaar thought with certainty. He shifted his travel pack and wondered how a person learned such a skill. Perhaps it was a talent in certain family lines; perhaps now extinct, dying with Alyain.

Sgirro slumped down, letting his travel bag go in a heap beside him. “And Alyain’s gone. Truly gone.” His usually strident voice was tempered with remorse.

A moment of bitterness coursed through Lusaar as his memory

produced vivid pictures of Vinsen Alyain staunchly walking the others into the cave of death, of that stately man comforting the prisoners along the trail, of the Herrethstede healer stepping forward to answer the fateful summons. And he remembered Corf's salacious smile before he left the Living Cave and Wolkum's words, "Be assured Corf will take good care of her."

Her. Dwinn Somuron. Rule breaker, perhaps mind talker. She's crying now; weeping for Alyain, Lusaar thought. The lucid vision of her despair was stunning! He could picture someone patting her shoulder. She jerked away.

"Did Alyain say anything to you about...about Dynast Chabris?"

Lusaar shook away the image of Dwinn and pursed his lips. Yes, he thought. Alyain spoke about Chabris, but the conversation wasn't of importance to Sgirro.

"I mean, there were supposed to be some books." Pragmatism edged back into Sgirro's tone.

"He certainly wasn't going to mention or even think about that with those mutes around. The only thing he said is that plans can be remade. That we shouldn't let remorse make us ineffective." *Think!* Alyain had stressed.

Lusaar rubbed the back of his neck. Alyain hadn't said that. It had been in Lusaar's head from Alyain's head. He frowned, glancing at the nearby men, wondering how one could tell who could and who couldn't communicate with thought.

"You know, Hock Wolkum and the guard got to Far Town not long after we did and they had to come from farther away. That suggests some sort of tip-off to me," Sgirro said.

"Probably someone in the palace. Someone Chabris trusts and shouldn't," Lusaar muttered.

Lusaar thought about Chabris' circle of allies; it seemed to be shrinking. Lord Sith, the Master of Laws who guarded the royal sigil, hadn't declared allegiance to either Chabris or Genn Wolkum, but it appeared Sith had signed the warrant for Alyain's death. Had Sith finally taken sides? It was highly unorthodox for the man to refuse the dynast heir the royal sigil, but then, that was the question: could Chabris, a female, be considered a legal heir? If she could recall something definite from her male ancestors—something that she wouldn't have been taught—that would give evidence of Collateral Talent...*Like*

what Dwinn displayed in recalling the Harteks' death. If only there were proof!

Lusaar loosed the orange comb, his hair falling to below his shoulder blades before he reworked the knot.

"We have a lot to talk about," his friend said. He stood and began rummaging in his travel bag. "Plans to remake."

Lusaar sensed a touch of intrigue in Sgirro's tone. It irritated him. "Let's get on to your camp," he said brusquely. Lusaar could tell Sgirro's practical dogmatism would be overbearing. He wanted to hear Oryn's flip but honest emotions. He signaled the syndicmen to order.

"But Lusaar," Sgirro gripped Lusaar's shoulder. "I have—"

"Not now!" He shrugged from Sgirro's insistence. "We need to start the wounded home—get them proper healing." The syndicmen assembled themselves and started off in unison, displaying a discipline Lusaar hadn't suspected. Sgirro sighed and Lusaar started down the trail, not sure he wanted to remake plans right now—not ever!

In the small Lalann camp, Lusaar found Oryn much as Sgirro had described: sprawled on a pallet, a strap tied around his wounded thigh, a flask half empty in his hand. A gas frond burned brightly, creating a ring of light around Oryn's relaxed figure.

Oryn greeted Lusaar with only a long studious look from his gray eyes, then he turned to Sgirro. "You see, I told you that last fight was a waste of men." His smooth voice wasn't at all slurred by the drink he had consumed. "I knew it had already happened."

"Pack the camp. We're going home," Sgirro called before snapping at Oryn. "I don't give up on something just because it gets difficult."

"It was a point of practicality. Everyone was too tired to attack that pass, but you wouldn't listen to alternatives. Three of the four men killed were killed there."

"Men died?" Lusaar agonized.

"It was the only way to get through to this part of the plateau!"

"And it was already too late!" Oryn insisted.

"Be quiet, both of you!" Lusaar said. His two friends were very different, tolerating each other through Lusaar's mediation, but right then, Lusaar was too tired to referee their bickering.

“Was it bad for them?” Oryn asked when Lusaar slumped beside him. He handed Lusaar his flask. “You stayed there. You watched the whole thing?”

Lusaar nodded. “I witnessed it, as the great healer would have said, and kept the name of Genn Wolkum firm on the whole grisly scene.” He took a drink, the heavy rich liquid burning his throat and empty stomach.

“And the upshot of it all,” Sgirro said. “We have neither Alyain, nor his books, and not a clue as to where we can find proof of Collateral Talent.”

“He said nothing to you?” Oryn asked Lusaar.

Think! Lusaar shook his head.

“Maybe that new healer could help us.”

“I doubt it. No one seemed enthusiastic about his appointment, and neither Pown nor Hock Wolkum were suspicious toward him,” Sgirro said.

“I wonder why Alyain passed his station on to him?” Lusaar mused.

“Probably to ease some village politics,” Sgirro said.

“Or protection for the girl hunter.” Oryn put in. “Sgirro told me you nearly came to blows with a mute over that female!” Oryn grinned, dimples showing. “I noticed her before the guard came. Quite unique with those long bare legs. Looked as strong as a chattel girl. And she goes by Somuron?”

Sgirro nodded. “She’s direct from Kez’s loins, as Pown put it.”

“And took on her sire’s name as well as his station; looped braids, leather clothes and all.” Lusaar closed his eyes, seeing her as clearly as if she were sitting with them, her amber eyes wide and alert.

“It’s a wonder she wasn’t committed to the Living Cave along with Alyain,” Oryn said after another swallow from the flask. “What with the rumors about someone getting workers all riled up about political status. I’ve heard talk of a kill squad to wipe out the name altogether.”

“Where do you hear tripe like that?” Sgirro grouched.

“Interesting things get spoken in taverns after folks have a bit too much to drink.”

“I wonder what you’ve let slip.”

“You say a kill squad out for Somuron? When did you hear this?”

Lusaar asked, stunned by the thought. From what Alyain had said, Dwinn was the only person using the Somuron name.

“Right before we left Coantra.”

“We’re getting off the point,” Sgirro said. His smooth full features seemed pinched with concern as he drew a paper from an inner pocket of his travel bag. “Lusaar, my father told me to give this to you if anything went wrong. This is plan B.”

Lusaar frowned and leaned back on his travel pack. He broke the seal and unfolded the paper. Holding it so the light fell on it, he immediately recognized the handwriting and shot a curious look at Sgirro before reading:

My dearest son,

Of all the letters I've written you, this one is most difficult. Let me first say that I care for you more than anyone, and I will understand whatever you decide.

We're in grave times when progress is about to swirl away in a cyclone of Wolkum tyranny. I've tried not to impinge upon your life any more than any other sharing person would. I feel I know you well through your words, and through what friends and observers report to me on occasion. That I could see you would be a most welcome thing, and perhaps if you're able to bring Healer Alyain to me, that dream will be realized.

There is, however, a great chance this plan will fail. And if it does—if that noble healer is unwilling or unable to help me prove my genetic rights—there is only one way to save our people from Genn Wolkum's ruthlessness. Lusaar, you must become Dynast.

“Great cyclones!” Lusaar exclaimed, jolting with shock at the words. He sat forward, leaning over the paper, eyes wide.

I know this is imposing of me, but I see no way to keep our culture from returning to the base savagery that marked Terrick Vadlin's reign. Yes, that which even colored most of my father's—your grandfather Illin's—reign. At this moment, horrible injustices are being meted out as Genn Wolkum attempts to bully his way to power. But the same theory on which he bases his right to leadership makes you a most

valid—no, a more valid—candidate for the position. By the Master Healer’s own theory that genetic memory is passed on even through a dormant female line, Genn Wolkum can claim heredity only from Rendef and Terrick Vadlin. You, on the other hand, being grandson of the late Illin and not merely his nephew, have three dynast heredities imprinted in you: Illin, Terrick and Rendef.

Lusaar’s mouth was dry and he gripped the paper, wanting to fling it away, to deny the words and more specifically the logic. But, breathing heavily, he read on.

Perhaps if Healer Alyain can’t come to the palace, he can at least teach you how to reach and temper the Vadlin talent you hold. All things considered, this is actually the best solution for our culture, because even though you’re young, most syndics and officials will find it easier to accept a young male than any female.

I’ve included this letter in a packet to Syndic Lalann and have also made him aware of this request to you. I know you’ll have his support if this plan must be implemented.

*May you show strength of all the suns Beyond, Lusaar:
Until we meet, wherever, I am always,
Your loving mother,
Chabris Leely-Vadlin*

Lusaar read parts of the letter again, not believing, not wanting to believe. Finally he looked up at Sgirro. “You know what this says?”

Sgirro nodded gravely. “Basically.”

“Well, by the suns, I don’t,” Oryn said. “What in all darkness has you looking so sick?”

“Nothing we care to talk about here with all the extra ears around,” Sgirro growled.

Lusaar handed the letter to Oryn even though it was obvious Sgirro didn’t approve.

Oryn read the letter, then capped his flask. “By this, it seems you’ve been communicating with her for a long time,” Oryn said.

“Since I was fifteen.”

“You must be joking!” Sgirro blurted. “How, and not have your father strangling you?”

“The letters were smuggled in servant packs. Leely women, mostly—her cousins and aunts.”

“That’s almost as dangerous as what she proposes in this letter,” Oryn said quietly. “What are you going to do?”

Lusaar merely shook his head, still numb with shock as he took back the letter.

“The plan makes sense,” Sgirro declared.

“Ha! If Genn Wolkum finds out...” Oryn released a long sigh.

“Lusaar doesn’t have a choice,” Sgirro said. “I was relieved when Wolkum’s son didn’t recognize Lusaar’s name.”

“But Genn Wolkum is certain to realize who Lusaar Gursenni is and the threat he brings,” Oryn argued.

“It might as well be met head on,” Sgirro declared.

“I’d never be able to learn Vadlin talent even if it were possible. I’m too old for that.” Lusaar gripped the letter in his fist, not caring that it wrinkled. “And Master of Laws Sith will surely question my knowledge. People want a pilgrimage, and Wolkum has already come out with statements and innate knowledge that certifies he’s in touch with Vadlin talent.”

“It doesn’t really matter what you can touch, Lusaar, it’s the principle that counts.” Sgirro leaned forward and glanced suspiciously toward the syndicmen who were at work breaking camp. He whispered, “When all said and done, you qualify. You qualify with closer lineage than Genn Wolkum.”

“But the pilgrimage! I don’t know anything about it.”

“Chabris will tell you. Just like Dynast Illin told her,” Sgirro hissed.

“It’s suicide,” Oryn muttered.

“Hush, spawner brain. What do you know about politics?” Sgirro snapped.

“Politics be damned. It’s pure logic that warns me!”

Lusaar got up and walked to the dark edge of the camp. His departure put Sgirro and Oryn to silence, and Lusaar slowly smoothed the letter in his hand. He was unable to see the words, but a vivid awareness of them pounded at his sensibilities: *You must become dynast...*

“We have the injured comfortable, sir,” a syndicman said to Sgirro.

Lusaar turned back to his friends. The fighters had formed three columns, with two injured men strapped to litters to be carried among the nine walking. Their lights threw cream-colored brightness in the gloom. "And the camp is packed, ready to go."

"Except for Oryn's stuff. Get with it, man." Sgirro stood, taking on a lighter style. "These syndicmen aren't chattel to do your work." He shoved at the pallet with his foot.

"I'm injured! By the suns, Lusaar, tell him to quit bullying me," Oryn said, continuing the diversion.

Lusaar joined the sham and held a globe light over Oryn's leg as Sgirro continued to poke at the prone man. "Oryn, there's hardly any blood on your trousers. Get up."

"You two are terrible! Goading a wounded man." Oryn got up with a big show of difficulty.

"Well, there are no pretty wenches around to indulge your dramatics, so cut the act," Sgirro said. He closed the gas jets on the frond lights. Brightness slowly ebbed.

"That's what I need. Pretty wenches!" Oryn declared.

"They're waiting for you in Coantra," Lusaar said as he helped his friend fold his bedding.

"True. True. What great incentive to feel better." Oryn jiggled his leg in a mock dance, his braid flopping on his back. Some of the syndicmen snickered, but Lusaar could tell it really did hurt when Oryn gingerly put weight on the leg and shouldered his travel pack. "To better things." Oryn grasped Lusaar and hugged him soundly. Even in the dim light when they parted, Lusaar could see the worry in his friend's gray eyes. "To women!" Oryn declared more frivolously.

Lusaar fell in step with Oryn's limping stride, his thoughts far from this grubby convoy of defeat. He had failed this mission so completely, it stunned him to think of tackling his mother's request. He knew the premise for his challenge was sound, but doubted he could ever pull it off.

Don't let remorse make you ineffective.

That strangely come-by phrase gnawed at him, and as he trudged along, he tried to change his thinking. Perhaps he could yet find Alyain's books—that would be the best. He could get the books to Rendef City, give proof of his mother's rights. Then people would certainly rally to

Chabris. Theories began percolating in his mind. He couldn't grasp them, but pressure of vague ideas filled him with restlessness.

~ ~

Lusaar stooped in the darkness beside his partially-covered globe light, and stared at the lights of Herrethstede. Now that he was here, he wondered if his spontaneous plan were valid. To the right of the silhouetted town structures, lights marked the segren fields. Among the towering stalks of grain, small glows from globe lights moved, worn by people working the harvest. No matter what else, every town had segren fields—the mainstay of the economy. A crop tithe was paid to the local syndic and the resin was owned by the dynasty. The amount a town was required to produce was arbitrarily decided by the syndic.

Two bells sounded from the headmaster's grounds. That signaled the end of a work time. It was awkward to measure time in this place where the light rarely changed, but the first dynast, Rendef Vadlin, had established a routine based on the system that had run the starship so many generations before. One bell coincided with when most people began their regular routines: the beginning of a wake time. Two bells was when most people ended their public endeavors and settled to their homes, ate, slept. Third bell occurred during most peoples' sleep time.

Lusaar watched the lights in the segren field. No change occurred in the pattern of the glows, indicating the field work would extend past this designated time. Lusaar was glad of that; he just hoped the headmaster would be at his lodging.

When Lusaar told his friends to go on to Coantra without him, Sgirro and Oryn had been frustrated. They quelled their curiosity only when Lusaar told them he wanted to avoid any attention from syndicmen or the Royal Guard, and the less Sgirro and Oryn knew, the safer for them. Thus silenced, Lusaar's friends only gave him irritated stares before they continued toward the ocean while he headed back for the upper plains.

Plans can be remade, Alyain had said.

Lusaar pressed his palm to his forehead. Spontaneous assumptions and fanciful imaginings of other people had plagued him all his life, and he had diligently disregarded them, only now to realize they were possibly telepathic thoughts. His father, Krandil, had never dis-

played such ability, nor had anyone around him until he came to Herrethstede. He wondered if this were part of the Vadlin talent his mother wanted him to pursue.

And that's why I'm back here, he thought, forcing a calmer mood. To see a telepath who might be able to prove the theory Dynast Chabris needs. A female telepath; Alyain's ward for twelve years. No telling what she could know, including how I can reach my Vadlin talent.

Lusaar also felt obliged to warn the girl of the plot mentioned by Oryn—to wipe out all Somurons.

If you're not too late, his conscience nagged.

With that self-goading, he stood and settled his light into his shoulder harness. His muscles ached from his brief rest, but he strode resolutely toward the town. He had covered the one hundred and forty kilometers to here from the camp in less than six bells.

The upper plains region seemed darker than along the coast, and the town's shelters appeared one dimensional as he tried to determine the distance to them. Four strides later he could see their depth and encountered the smell of tanning vats as if it formed a wall. Wrinkling his nose, he hurried his steps, wondering how long it took to get accustomed to that. Six strides later he was standing in dim light from the gas-fed wall baskets. He moved directly toward the headmaster's house. The central ground was deserted, with not even a child at play or a female at the row of drying racks he passed. He smelled smoke and noticed a funeral pyre where the town had held a lighting ceremony in honor of their lost healer.

By the time he reached Headmaster Rabriol's door, Lusaar's shoulders were tight from the touch of many gazes. They chilled his skin. The headmaster stepped out just when Lusaar raised his hand to knock on the door. "Yes?" the man asked.

Rabriol's demeanor seemed hostile. Lusaar wondered if he could be trusted. He struggled to change the thought, certain that Alyain and Dwinn weren't the only telepaths in this remote village.

"Headmaster Rabriol, I can see you know we were unable to rescue your noble healer. My apologies and condolences for the loss."

"It's what I expected. Rendef City people always bring harsh times."

Lusaar swallowed hard, guilt and resentment scratching at his reason. "I'm not from Rendef City."

“Hmm. But you represent certain political factions. I know why you came here for our respected healer.”

“But my coming had nothing to do with the guard’s arrival.”

Rabriol gave a mirthless laugh. A hot flush crept to Lusaar’s face as he recalled Sgirro’s worry that the Court had been tipped off to their mission.

“You didn’t return here just to tell me about Priman Alyain,” Rabriol said.

“No sir. I’ve come to see Dwinn Somuron,” Lusaar said.

“Somuron? That line died with Kez.”

“Then...ah, Stenard.” Lusaar was certain that was the female line. “Dwinn Stenard,” he said. “A girl of breeder age.”

“No Stenards here. You can find them over in Gryland, although I doubt there’ll be any that aren’t paired.”

“Are you telling me the girl hunter has paired with someone so quickly? It’s only been five sleeps since I was here.” The thoughts of her paired truly vexed him. It would be difficult to talk to her about theories of talent with her mate around.

“I’m saying, there is nothing or no one of interest to you in Herrethstede, Primanson Gurseenni,” Rabriol rumbled.

He remembers my name, even my status, Lusaar thought, not sure why he hadn’t realized that would be. The circumstances of his last visit were fixed in everyone’s minds for generations to come.

“Could you direct me to your healer?” Lusaar hoped he wouldn’t get the same hostile response from everyone. “I’ve a chafe on my shoulder,” he said about the whip cut Corf inflicted, “and should like to purchase a salve.”

“You know where his facilities are.”

Lusaar nodded and looked critically at the headmaster. “Should Healer Alyain’s ward, a girl named Dwinn—should she come this way, warn her that her life may be in danger.”

Puzzlement marked the headmaster’s placid expression, and Lusaar wished he could know that man’s thoughts and ascertain with which political front Rabriol aligned.

As he started away, the air seemed dense, ready for cutting. Lusaar had no imaginative inputs about anything, no sense of mental contact. He was experiencing the dead air of a cautious people. He wished he could create that mental protection, then he smiled, knowing

he could use their skills and his ignorance to his own advantage. I offer no harm to Dwinn, he thought strongly for anyone to read. If they would peer into his mind and pry in his thoughts, let them know his commitments. *I want to protect her, if I can. I don't want any harm to anyone in Herrethstede.* He strode through the sullen village.

A slender man near his age sat cross-legged before the healer's hut. The green turban around his head looked dark in the murky light. Lusaar tried to recall the man's name.

"Bruy Mirrisen," the man said, working a small bone paddle in a ceramic dish. He ladled a gooey mixture into a skin bag and got up, offering the bundle to Lusaar. "Your salve. That will be three tri sides." The man's eyes reflected yellow flickering from the fire basket on the wall, his dark face gave no hint of friendliness.

Lusaar counted out the triangular tallies from the string he wore under his tunic. He added a valuable ten-sided disc and handed them to the man. "I need to talk to Dwinn Somuron. Do you know where she is?"

The man rubbed the extra disc of segrenex, then returned it to Lusaar. "Apply the salve sparingly three or four times between sleeps. Improve your strap padding and sleep with the sore uncovered." The brittleness of Mirrisen's voice indicated more than affront at Lusaar's attempted bribe, as if the edge of some other anger had seeped through. "Good travels to you, dynasty man," Mirrisen said.

"Dynasty man! I have no connection with..."

"You're a hi-tech. Same thing." The healer turned away.

The rigid hostility in the town was beginning to unnerve Lusaar. That it would be connected to Alyain's untimely death, he could understand. But this! Hi-tech prejudice! When the refugees came into this place, those men with the starship hi-tech talents assumed authority and many people resented that. Lusaar had learned to ignore the reproach he often received because of his father's tronics talent, but he hadn't expected this small town to hold those old prejudices.

He crossed the empty grounds with another worry, too, hoping the hostile responses of these people didn't indicate he was too late to protect Dwinn. His heart pounded as he realized the ceremony remnants he saw on the council grounds could have been for her! Died from Corf's knife wound, or already felled by an assassin.

In the shadows beyond the outside wall of a curing shed, he stared

into the darkness, his globe creating a ring of whiteness on the cleared ground. He steadied his nerves, more willing to believe these people were defending her or even disowning her. A much more palatable reasoning, although neither did him any good.

Perhaps she's gone to Gryland, to her mother's line, he thought. He pulled an oilskin map from the pouch on his belt and began unrolling it.

"Lusaar Gursenni? Don't turn!" the female voice insisted when Lusaar started to swivel toward the sound.

"I'm Gursenni," he replied, matching the woman's hushed tone.

A knot of paper fell onto his map. Lusaar took it, opened it and read:

Follow the bluff on the field side of town until you reach the third hot pool. Climb to the plateau. A djugat will guide you from there.

Lusaar swallowed his surprise. *A djugat?* Lusaar had rarely seen the furry quadrupeds that lived in this land. He had heard tales of djugat ferocity and cunning when they came in contact with people. Dynast Terrick had sent out expeditions to capture the aboriginal creatures, and after great loss of life, a party finally returned with one. But it starved to death of its own accord and became a specimen for the Master Zootech to examine. The thick gray hide of the little creature was stuffed and placed in the novelty hall of Vadlin Palace.

"Will this creature lead me to Dwinn?" Lusaar asked. Silence. "Are these directions to..." He stopped his whisper, realizing no one was behind him. He looked around anyway. No one.

And how do I know I can trust this secretive person? Yet he had to. It was his only lead.

He lowered his globe so light swept the ground only in front of his feet. He'd have to go around the segren fields without drawing attention from the workers. The challenge invigorated him. After that, the third hot pool—climb to the plateau and a djugat would lead him.

A djugat! His thoughts balked at the idea, but he continued his stealthy trek, anticipating a meeting with Dwinn.

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