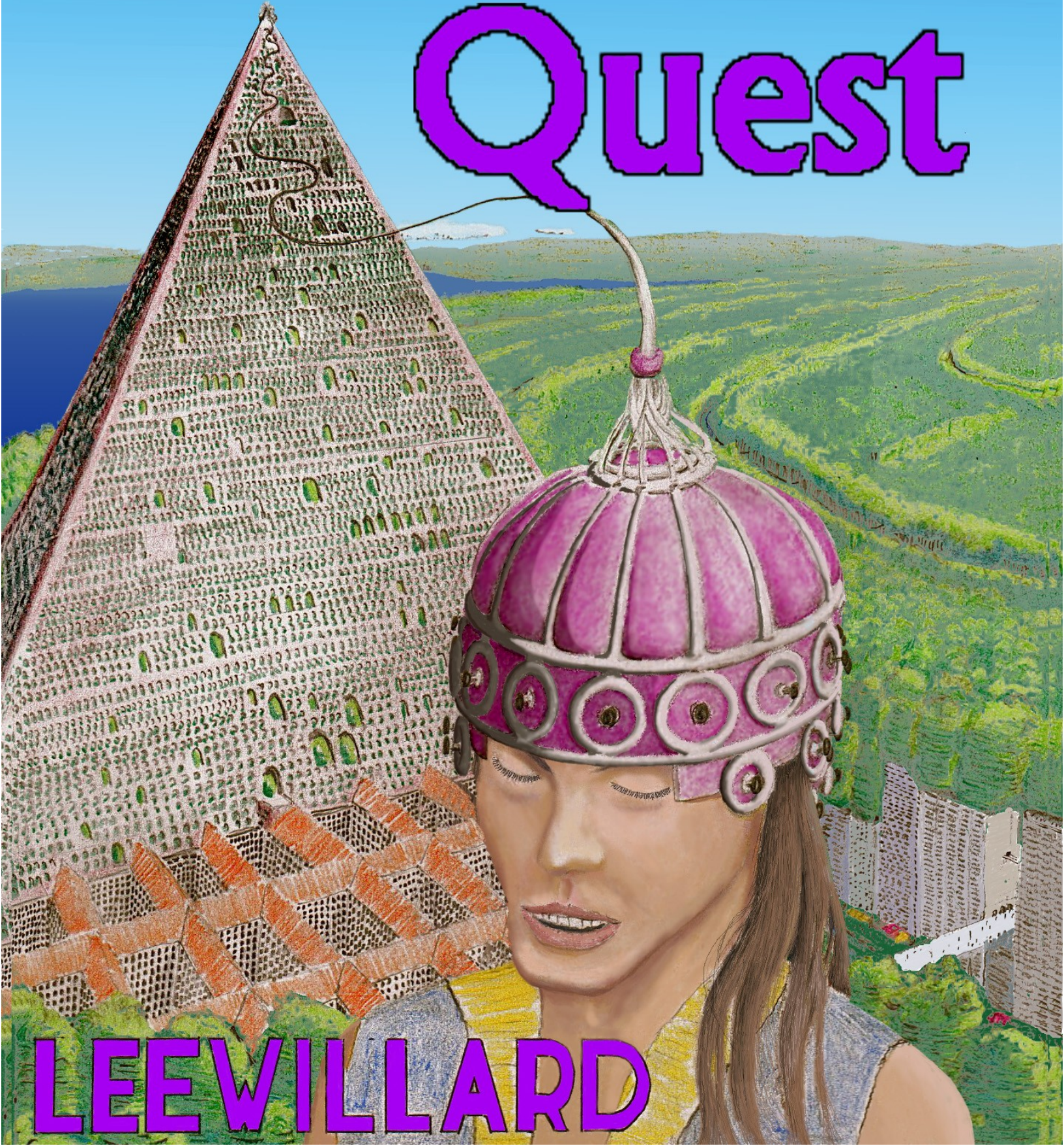


The Tdeshi Quest



LEEWILLARD

The

Tdeshi

Quest

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This work is dedicated to Beverly, who in many ways was the inspiration for the Ava character of this and many other tales of Kassidor's starship age.

Background information on the planet Kassidor and other stories by Lee Willard can be found at www.kassidor.com

Cover sketch by Lee Willard

The Tdeshi Quest

She wanted to learn of the person who was born in her body. He wanted to learn the fate of his one-time lover and best friend's daughter. Can they work together to find out? Can she forgive the institution that gave her new life when his suspicions that Tdeshi was deliberately terminated start to look like fact? And how do you eliminate someone when the Instinct prevents harming a fellow human being?

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Foreword

A Few Notes on the Translation

Please understand that while Kassidor is very Earthlike compared to Mars or Venus or especially Neptune, its natives do not actually speak English. As much as possible we have tried to translate the native language into English of similar formality, slanginess and correctness but there are some places where that is difficult.

Names of people and places have not been translated for the most part unless the literal translation means the same thing in both languages. The animals and plants native to the planet are completely different and have no ready translations into English. In cases where the name translates without changing it's meaning, it is translated or half translated, when the name won't translate well, the name in common Kassidorian is used.

Idiomatic expressions have been substituted in both directions. Where an English idiom sounds more appropriate, it has been substituted, even if there was none in the original.

This translation makes use of some English words that don't translate very well. Smaller units of time that are physically arbitrary have been translated to hours, minutes, seconds. The 'day' and 'year' however have implications of light and dark and seasons. These are vastly different on the planet Kassidor.

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

- day** [sin] The time from waking up, to waking up again. This happens three times a week in the Kassidorian calender. The word day is also used to mean the time when one is awake [ko].
- week** [vak] The time Kassidor takes to rotate on it's axis. 84hr. 39 min. relative to Kortrax as seen from the surface. Divided into three 'days' (Morningday [Koyahn], Afternoonday [Kovar] and Nightday [Kozor]) and three 'sleeps' (Dawnsleep [Viyeen], Noonsleep [Vistee] and Dusksleep [Vikhone])
- year** [voy] A period of time, 64.46 days, that Kassidor takes to orbit Kortrax. There are 18 or 19 weeks in the year, but in the text this will be 30 or 31. Seasons are four or five weeks long.
- decade** [Yen] A period of time equal to about 6½ Earth years. 36 years of the planet Kassidor, 100 in base 6.
- century** [Yeeng] A period of time that is actually equal to 229 Earth years. This is 36 decades, 100 decades in base 6. This is 1296 years of the planet

Kassidor.

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

kayak [tay] 2-person boat grown from a floating pod in the lon phylum. It is as common as cars are on Earth for personal transportation in the Highlands.

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

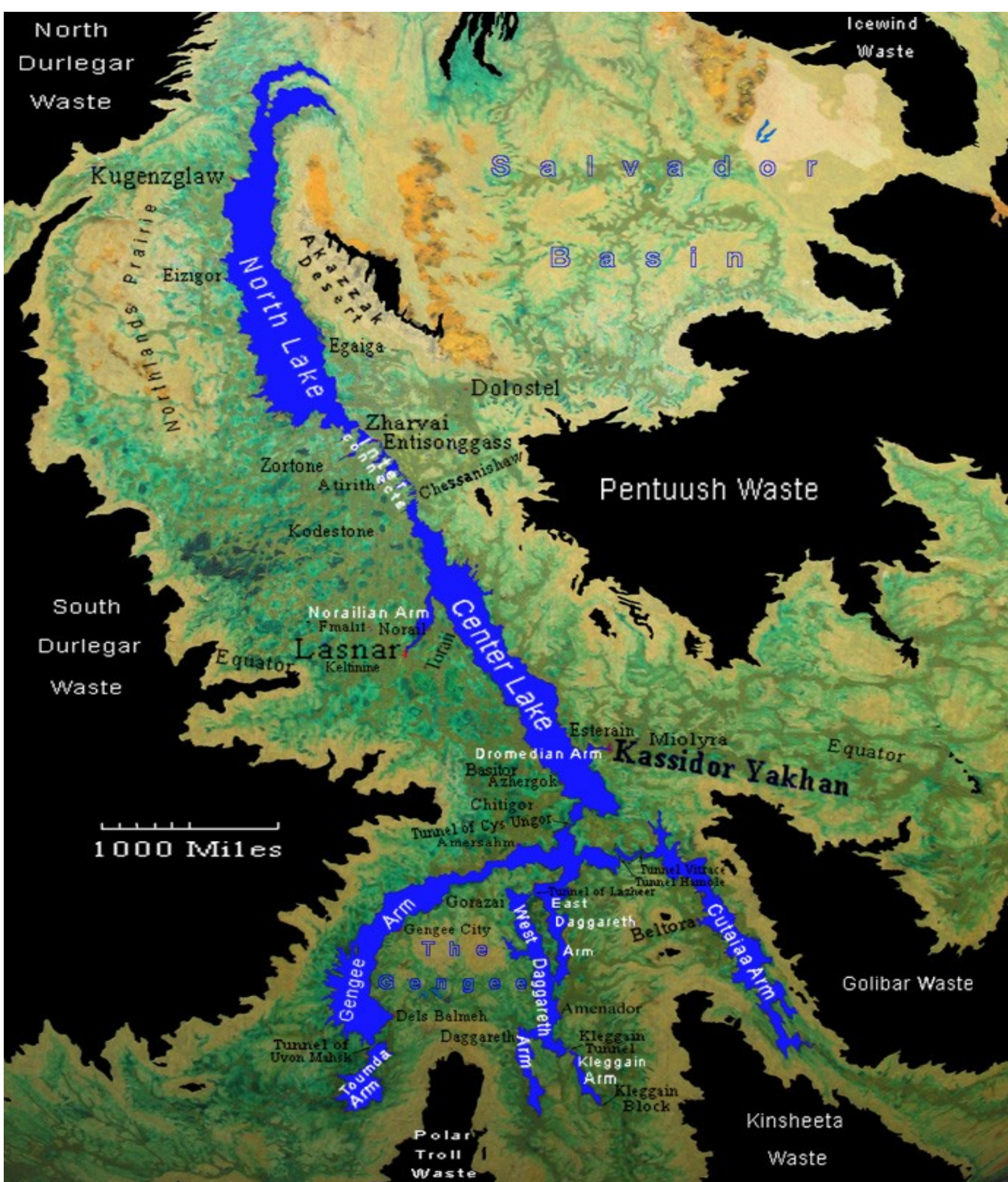
Kassidor Literally ‘All the lands’ or ‘Everythingland’ in common Kassidorian. Name of the planet in it’s main language. Most properly translated as ‘The set of all lands.’

Kortrax Native name for 61 Cygni A, their sun. It is a proper noun and addressed in the sentient gender.

Narrulla The planet’s largest and closest moon, a 100 mile egg. It orbits every 27 hr. 51 min. but because the planet also rotates, it goes around just a smidge

over twice a week. 40-mile in diameter
Onchegeela is also visible to the naked eye and
orbits the planet in a little more than three local
weeks.

Yakhan Can be translated as downtown, main hub, etc.
What it includes depends on your distance. It is
the great city of the Highland Elves, the site of the
Kassikan or the denser part closer to the center of
that city.



The Elven Highlands



Kassidor Yakhon

Preface - 83 Earth Years Ago

A Letter From Tdeshi

To: Jorma - Behind 7th Main, Beccia St
West Harbor of Sinbara town 18.167N
4.717W

I'm so sorry I haven't written to you. I've just been so busy. I still remember you and still love you of course. There's just nothing to say except I'm studying a lot. I never knew there were so many fittings being manufactured today. I'm studying gas to get a day job if I have to. I never knew how many people could be killed in a gas explosion in a heavily built up area, it's scary. I'm living with an older guy, I think he's like two or three centuries. He's taking care of me but he isn't anywhere near as good a fuck as you are. xxx. I haven't been downtown yet but I'm going to go any year now. The school here is good enough for now and very practical. I've learned a lot more about the business of artistic painting also than I thought existed. Hyondahi (the guy I'm with now) got me a lot of jobs already, I'm kind of strung out getting them all done along with the studying, but I don't want him to know that. I got to get them done now because I hear there might be a great opportunity coming up that might pay my way into the Kassikan for a

year. I don't want to dream now, have to grind the nose and all that. That's more reason I haven't written long missives to you detailing all the petty trials and tribulations you go thru in the fringes of the city. I still want to see it, (downtown) but I'm a little afraid. Sorry this isn't more organized but I'm gulping a little lunch (see the stains). When this is over we're going to make up for the lost sack time or my name ain't Tdeshi!

From: Tdeshi - 16w6 Enskenn Walk

Eleknane Canal, Sistril Lake 1.414S

0.042E

On: Nightday of Chezhervizhod, 100,00,23

An Argument Overheard

It was a relatively large room, on the fourth floor of a concrete-block building that was just starting to show it's age. The vine was just beginning to replace the weathered built-wood rail on the narrow balcony at the time. The wide folding doors to the balcony stood open in early Afternoon, making the room inside seem almost like outdoors. It overlooked this narrow canal, facing similar houses on the far side. The air was still that day, no laundry lines creaked, few charraspas rattled in the canal-side trees. It was hot, and late in Noonsleep for most people, so few paddled the canal.

In that room a slim, long-legged girl with long, straight, dark hair and a pretty butt lay nude on the bed, up on her elbows with a note pad. "O.K." she was saying, "I got all that written down. Now please, give me that drop and let me get going."

A slender, blond, Elven man was pacing the floor. "I don't feel right doing this," he said, "It's just too dangerous."

"You don't trust me," she said.

"It's not that," he said.

"Then what?"

"It's too dangerous in this form," he held a small ampule up in front of his face, well out of her reach. "I need to mix it down and make tabs."

"I'll get that done," she said, "I don't have space yet, don't you talk to Himla at all?"

"He tells me nothing," the man said. "We haven't talked since he sent you down to mule that bottle to Eleknane."

A lone U-paddle stroked by, only one passenger with the boatman. They still made good time and before long the sounds of their wake had died away.

“...problem before. So you see I can unload it and pay you back, I just don’t have space right now.”

“You can stay here,” the man said, reluctantly it seemed.

“This one trip up here was expensive, I can’t be dropping four pennies on paddle fees every class. If I can turn a copper, I can get into Novice, there’s cubicles where copper’s all the deposit I need.”

“But your class starts in little more than an hour.”

“All I could afford was a lugger coming down here. It took me over a week from Chardovia.”

“Come back when you get space.”

A lone kayak glided by in the other direction. It’s wake was gentle and soon dissipated, but then someone else came by. Time was running short, Afternoonday was pending. The woman writhed on the bed, and then rolled and got up, pressing against the man. There was conversation, some of it heated. Traffic died down again, but there would be more.

“...this scholarship,” the man shouted, “wasn’t that enough?”

The woman wound herself around the man, said things softly in his ear.

“I’m spent,” he said more softly than he had been but not as softly as she was. The woman purred in his ear again, he replied. “I know, and you’re going to need to pay for a needleboat to get there in time.”

“I’ve got my certificate on me,” she said, loud enough to carry, causing a smile and a sigh of pleasure across the canal.

Another paddler came by, then two guys the other way coming home blotto from a very late noon evening. They were loud. She watched the woman disappear from view for a few minutes while the man leaned back over the bed. Once she stood up, the ampule was handed over, and the women disappeared into other rooms. The man stood up and paced the room a few more times, the sound of his voice, but not the meaning of his words, drifted across the canal. He turned and came to the balcony. He leaned on it and looked across the canal.

By then the woman who had been listening had heard and seen enough and was gone from the window. She had to go get some breakfast on her way to a shift as a physician's assistant far down the canal, but she left smiling, satisfied that her plan was working, and ready to complete it at the stubby public dock on the canal below.

The Brazilian Expedition

As soon as they were near the field where the starship landed, Kulai had a much better appreciation for the problem. Even with the high walls, every place with any view of the ship or even the field that held it was packed with noisy crowds. There were women screaming to them, baring themselves and offering themselves. All the old superstitions and religions were represented in the crowd, many beliefs that had been discredited for centuries had resurrected themselves and had shamen here proselytizing to the crowds or conducting ceremonies. Cooks and kegmen and entertainers were set up everywhere they could squeeze in. Purveyors of every charm, trinket or talisman hawked their wares from all sides. The local residents must have evacuated because it would have been impossible to carry on life in this bedlam as huge crowds pressed in to try and catch a glimpse of the starship.

The starship had landed in the closest field to the Kassikan that was big enough to fit it, and even so, it was fourteen miles on ever-smaller canals to get here. The ship was unable to land in the water and pull up to a dock and it could not hover silently like a floater at tether. It had landed like a dactyl he'd been told, with a great wind and thunder. It had been down on this field thru a whole dark now. All thru Nightday it had remained closed while the people aboard said they were going thru a decontamination procedure before opening their portal. It wasn't til this Morningday that they were finally ready to emerge.

If it wasn't for this tunnel thru to a boat stop on the little Feeb Marda Canal, little more than an irrigation ditch, it would be impossible to get thru the gates. The Kassikan sent cargo thru the main gates of this field with great difficulty, using big locked wagons as a ruse. It kept the crowd's interest away from this stop. This stop was not the closest to any of the farm gates that could access that field, but even so it was busy and they had to mill around the tunnel's unmarked entrance until they could duck in unobserved.

The way from the station was a circuitous route thru planked-over alleys and basements. It was going to be difficult transporting patients over this. For a second he wondered if getting this assignment wasn't going to be such a privilege after all. Sure he wanted to be a part of the greatest event in modern times, but if was going to be nothing but drudgery, he could be just as happy to read about it.

Kulai didn't get to see the starship itself until they were inside the compound at the far end of the entry tunnel. The starship, up close, drowned out the noise of the throngs outside though it was as silent as dawn in the deep desert. Its presence blocked his ears. It was more impressive than the ever-present news articles about it could convey over the decade and forty it took to approach. The thing was as long as a large deep-water vessel, but was standing on three huge telescoping legs made of very thick and shiny metal. It flies, but it is made of partly of brick, but mainly of alloys who's denominations he couldn't even guess. One of the rods that extended to lower a platform with the patients on it looked like it outweighed the whole world's heavy money supply.

There were four of those rods. The rods that extended to hold the ship were vastly larger than that and were webs of metal. As the platform descended he could see that the carts holding the cushions the patients were on were SOLID circulation-grade ALUMINUM, those carts alone must hold the value of the Kassikan treasury's current balance.

The ship itself must be worth more than the whole Kassikan, all the companies they own and all the royalties they own. Maybe as much as the whole web of Dromedin Arm cities including the Yakhan. The economy would implode if that much money were put into circulation. He nervously looked to the others of the team and put the back of his hand to his mouth to make sure he wasn't drooling.

It was actually a little more the shape of a kite than a ship. About three hundred feet long, over a hundred and fifty wide, widest toward the front. Large stone and metal doors had opened in it's shoulders to reveal enormous windwheels that had flattened whatever used to grow in this field and sent it to ragged snags in the fences, along with a thick layer of topsoil. The platform had extended down from the thickest area of the ship, right ahead of and between the windwheels, where the ship seemed to be at least three stories thick.

He watched them coming down on that floor that extended out of the ship. There were seven patients, but with them were four people. The people were humans, every bit as much as those standing here on the ground gaping up at them. They were dressed a little funny and pretty much alike in shirts and pants. It was a bit stuffy in style but nothing you couldn't wear to work or shopping, he thought, until he saw

the metal. It was used for eyelets and buttons, for belt buckles and pins. They each wore a veritable fortune in various metals. They all wore patches on their shirts with the same emblems on the left breast, a circle in a diamond in a rectangle, with individual emblems on the right, differing emblems of solid metal on their shoulder straps. Two of them wore caps with eye shades, one of whom had two large pins on it of solid metal. All their jewelry was metal instead of beadwork, and all but one of them had thick metal devices on their wrists on which he could clearly see blinking but unintelligible symbols.

Two were Nordic, or mostly Nordic, the others seemed to be part Troll, part Enurate. The woman looked like she was part Dwarf as well as Enurate. She certainly had the breasts of a Dwarf woman. They were all pretty worn. Their faces were haggard and their hair was thin. The woman's great breasts hung limp in shoulder straps. One of the Nordics had very thin skin with splotches on it and creases in his face. They must have been torn up from their ordeal, it was said they had been frozen solid as a block of ice for the voyage so they must have suffered a severe form of frostbite.

The one with the most frost damage was the one who spoke. The Yingolians could speak to each other using a language that sounded like something out of the Lumpral Basin, but few of them could speak any common tongue and those that could, couldn't do so very well. This one, who might have been part Gnome as well as Nordic, could speak well enough. The committeeman brought someone from the Kassikan who had practiced their language and founded a

small Study of it. He was talking with the others. They were eager to speak with someone of this world who could speak with them.

There was a small exchange between their translator and the committeeman. Since they could not converse with the people transferring the patients, this gave Kulai and the others time to gape at the starship and muse on the wealth it must represent. They could see up into the interior, but this was just an elevator bay. They could see that the interior was made of metals also, maybe nickel, maybe more aluminum, maybe higher denominations than that? The fortunes of empires on every wall just in this elevator shaft. He wondered what possible role such elaborate trusswork could play? There was line after line of delicate, exactly-formed miniature trusses in perfect rows every inch or so in both directions on the panels, every bit of every one was metal. There was tiny metal tubing snaking all over the walls. They seemed to use that instead of common instrument hose. They never bundled them however but laid each one separately. These men did not have the strength to bend their larger pipes into place and wondered how their primitive genetic science had bred balrogs large enough to bend them?

But then he remembered more news analysis. The ‘brought here’ theory of human origin had triumphed over the ‘made by Saggoths’ theory with the arrival of the Yingolians. The Yingolians claimed to come from the planet where humans originated and had plenty of evidence for that claim. On their world of origin, humans probably had many naturally occurring, larger, related species who could be

trained for the job or maybe just ran their own businesses supplying these parts for all he knew. He'd seen several movies with lots of different human-like critters (actors in costumes) but that would probably be real on the planet where humans originated, they wouldn't even have to rent costumes.

It was going to take awhile trundling seven unconscious people all the way from the starship and down the basement hall back to the boat station. All the patients were on tubes, the Yingolians had moved a little beyond the feathered rattle stage in medicine, and had very good mechanical apparatus, though their biochemical processing skills were limited. They could not predict the characteristics of an unknown life form given the code and the ribosome for instance. They had no automated processes for producing an antigen, much less a contagious vector to carry it to the population.

The one who spoke their language told some of the nearer people what he was finding out. Kulai crowded close and found out that these brave and maybe foolhardy people had set out in cryofreeze on a century-long voyage to get here. Their medicine was so primitive that they were still ephemeral and would have needed five generations to get here if they hadn't frozen themselves. Fifty one set out, thirty eight revived, thirteen of those with brain damage so severe they were vegetables, four more lost at least one limb. That was two decades ago. Now there were twenty one healthy crewmen. Four more were now re-growing limbs with knowledge supplied by the Kassikan. That was all they had been able to carry out with equipment on the starship. Of the

thirteen brain damaged, three had recovered a little and the technology on their ship wasn't able to tell them more. The wizards of the Kassikan believed they could probably do at least some of them some good if they got them under a helmet, so efforts were made to keep them alive, but three had died during the decade and a half the starship had taken to move from first contact to their landing, so seven remained comatose.

Kulai was a reasonably educated man, in spite of his origins, he followed the news and knew about both starships. The one that arrived in the 55th century appeared to be a string of asteroids. It was hostile and secretive and haunted with ghosts. There was no secrecy about this starship. When the new expedition did arrive, a message was sent because of knowledge gained from the first expedition. This new expedition was quite surprised when they were greeted by the new Study of Yingolian Culture formed at the Kassikan just for this purpose. The new visitors showed much more respect and friendship toward the world and it's people. He could see that these were humans, not machines or ghosts, or even some related species. They were friendly and laughed with the translator.

On the official end, the exchange went on with more gestures. The committeeman who was receiving the records was pretty upset. Kulai inched closer, along with everyone else, to hear. "You have no bacterial census of any kind?" the committeeman asked, "I would give the most complete one I could. I'd have done that along with viral and retro-viral

scans if I was sending patients to such a distant region as YingolNeerie.”

The one who could speak common tongue said, “We have no means for doing such a thing, the med lab on our ship isn’t much beyond bandages and aspirin. When we left it was thought there was no chance of life in this system.”

“You should have asked for kits. It would be nice to get that done before we even expose them to the air.”

“We transmitted all their medical records.”

“Was the census data in there?”

“We cannot conduct a complete bacterial census on a living human body.”

“So why didn’t you send for some kits? We could have had them here for you Nightday when you touched down.”

He conferred with his colleagues in his own tongue for a few sentences. He was informed of something. “We didn’t know there were kits. We have never suspected such a thing was possible.”

The committeeman held up his hands, “You come sixty light years...”

“I thought it was eleven?”

“The years are different, but as I was saying, you come all that way to find that the bureaucratic foul-ups are the same.” The laughter sounded the same. He had to translate for the others and they all laughed. The student of their language laughed again when their translator had finished.

“We’ll do a complete census on them as soon as we get in, hopefully we won’t find anything to worry about. Meanwhile

lets keep them covered and minimize any exposure.” There was a theory going around that the world where humans originated might have even more dangerous bacteria than any ever encountered before. He heard someone mutter about biofilm, but they hadn’t brought any, then they would have needed breathing apparatus. Already he knew they should have done something like that, mopping up this neighborhood was going to be messy because he could tell that some of the residents were illiterate. It was getting toward lunch time of Morningday already but the air was still brisk so the patients would not be too hot if they were covered. The Yingolians with them looked like they thought the temperature was pretty low. It made Kulai suspect their home country might be deep.

Kulai tried to concentrate on his patients as he pushed them across the field when all he could think of was the fortune in aluminum he was pushing. They had to take turns carrying them down the cellar stairs of the farmhouse behind the factory who’s cellar they would go thru next. This was the start of an underground passage that was in the basements at the level of the canal. Kulai was now the leader of this lab team and stayed with the patient as the others went up to get the next. He was not about to let this opportunity go to waste. He wouldn’t touch anything that showed, because someone might notice. No Yingolians were with them, they were going to need to be censused before they could walk among the crowds. They had also created such media buzz that they were going to have to cool down before they could walk in

public. By now the eyes transmitted data to printers in most large towns and the faces of the visitors were familiar to any who were interested in them.

The patients were all in loose tunics without pockets. Their wrists all bore much bigger alloy jewelry but they all showed, but around their neck, under the tunic, several wore chains, many with pendants depicting a long-haired man. He could not be one of them because all of their hair was short and none had beards. The chains and pendants were only of gold or silver, but he would snatch them anyway. On this patient however, a little of his chain showed, so Kulai wouldn't touch it.

He desperately looked over the cart for inconspicuous loose pieces. He found two loose pieces under the mattress, solid aluminum bars each over six feet long, an inch wide and an eighth of an inch thick. Enough to buy a small town in the central Nars. He glanced around for a place to hide them, but nothing presented itself quickly. The aluminum pins that held the side rail up each had two little aluminum balls, a generous cash size, eight thousand in cash right there in front of him. If he had a spike he could easily punch these balls out, he saw how they were assembled. There was a spike, the rod which held the patient's paperwork. It was quick work for one who had practiced rifling comatose patients as long as he. Two balls from each of four pins, eight aluminums went into his pouch and the pins were back in place. There was no noticeable difference in the sea of aluminum that was this cart, billions in cash at least, if it was melted down. A sack of aluminums you'd need a cart to carry. He'd taken a mere

scraping, not a quarter of the aluminum in one rivet that held on any one of the cart's four puny little cheap plastic wheels.

This was all over in plenty of time while four more struggled down with the next patient. Two stayed down from then on as three more went back up to work with the next man down. They carried all seven down. Kulai had rotated to being alone with the last patient. He had sixteen aluminums in his pouch while he helped carry the last patient down. If he got out of this, his life would be changed forever, he would leave poverty behind completely. He was shaking inside but tried to maintain a bored exterior. He could smell his own sweat. No one was paying any attention, but most were lavishing attention on these carts.

He could tell what those little aluminum balls were for, they kept the pins from slipping out. He wondered how likely the pins were to slip out, he'd never experienced elemental aluminum in bulk form before and had no clue to its high galling property. So he worried and wanted to wet his robes thru the whole walk down the stairs and then the whole walk down the corridor. If the pin fell out he was determined to act mildly mystified and joke about pocketing it and then put it back in and whistle onward.

Nobody worried about the pins. They had no trouble other than the irrigation bags vibrating on their hooks. They had solid alloy hooks to hold the bag, but they were completely open so they cost a million times more and were a quarter as effective as common zipstrap in holding solution bags. Eldean actually had a little zipstrap on him and Femish had a knife so they were able to rig on what they needed to keep the bags in

place on the ride across the hallway. Starship floors are probably mathematically smooth while this was rough pavement on damp gravel. Kulai got to surreptitiously check that the pins on the first cart weren't coming loose while they waited.

The walk was nearly a mile, it wasn't all in recent dig-up, a lot was under plank-up in the backs of warehouses, then thru the cellars of a half dozen little restaurants, where there were two steps the carts had to be handed over. Then there was a planked-over ditch with some re-strapped crating material as a floor. The tiny little wheels had a real problem with that. One of his pins got a little loose here so he pushed it back in while worrying about the pins on the cart that had come down first. Once they got to the quay of the boat station the floor was real paving stone and the carts rolled easily. The boats were already at the quay. The patients would load and the boats would be away in as little time as possible.

They were using some experimental portable fiber-less eyes that the men from the starship had helped invent. Using those allowed the boats to all arrive within a minute of the right time. It was only five minutes from empty stop before they got there to empty stop after. He could see that those mini, portable, pocket eyes would be very popular if they could be manufactured in quantity.

The patients themselves were transferred to the boats, the carts were not. The carts could be folded and placed on one another. Hyengtán and Femish were assigned to get the carts back. He feared that none of the aluminums in those pins would make it back to the starship. He wondered if the pins

would. He wondered if they would be dumb enough to provide him perfect cover. Then he worried that they would notice that the pins on two of the carts were missing their balls and would say something because they would be worried that they would be blamed for it. He wondered if other people would descend on them and grab the carts away from them before they could interpose themselves to protect them.

Because of the size of this fortune, he swore to himself that if he ever got thru this he would never take anything from a patient or do any other questionable deed again. With this he would never have to worry about money again. The time he spent near death from the diseases the Yingolian's carried, strengthened his resolve to change his life and become the most loyal and diligent worker the Kassikan ever had. He was worried about a few things he'd done to make a few extra coppers already. As a rich man, such a history could cause a hard fall.

Part I. Investigative Team

1. She Returns

Jorma was at the Stone Seaside pub just after duskmeal of week Venurat in the spring of year 100,21,15 when he heard the voice of postman Naarb'n from across the room. "Hey Jorma, I think Tdeshi's back."

He hadn't heard that name in a good twenty decades. Jorma had to hear about it, but not via distant shouts. He forced his way thru the dusk crush at one of the most popular inns in Sinbara town. It was quite a bit of effort getting to the far end of the keg counter, enough to make him fill his mug on the way by. This place is renowned for its beer and yaag, but not for quiet conversation. He'd brought his own mug for the evening, he was hoping he might find one of the neighborhood women lonely.

This pub was right in the center of town, almost under the suspension bridge that reached eight hundred feet across the channel to North Island, the well-wrought stone of the bridge tower was the end wall of this building. They were in a large room grown behind the two great shaftwood trees of guestrooms on the street side. There was a big crowd in here, probably just about everyone who roomed here and everyone who had duskmeal here. The panel-leafed ceiling sloped, there were some lofts in it. The room was a great square with tap rails along the middle half of one side with the passage to the rooms and the street between them. The decor was a bit rough and rugged, the floor was dirt, the walls were stone or

bark or just open. There were mats for the dark, but with a crowd like this they would be up til the last of the innkeeper's crew closed up for Dusksleep.

In the lofts two floors above was the door that opened on the upper circle where the suspension bridge took flight, down here the front porch was on a little scrap of muddy beach where everyone pulled their outrigger up. The center docks began just east of here, under the bridge. The West Harbor docks began just beyond Captain's Row. That was the block of five-story stone homes overlooking this beach on the west side of the tiny park.

Most of the people in those 'yaks must be in here, he thought, the place was packed and he had to go way out around the crowd at the rails to get to the end Naarb'n shouted from. There didn't seem to be anyone familiar here this moment, but there were some women he should get back to once he heard what Naarb'n had to say.

Jorma still remembered Tdeshi, even though it had been such a long time ago. She was the daughter of one of the dearest friends he'd ever had in his life, the guy who brought him back from his last big burn-out. He and Tdeshi had been lovers for a time, but soon after that, she disappeared in the Yakhan. He remembered she was pretty, would be one of the prettier women here. She was tall and slim and elegant with long, flowing, dark hair. She had a powerful voice and an authoritative air, both her speech and her eyes showed her intensity.

He could see that she wasn't here, at least not with Naarb'n, as he finally worked his way near enough to talk.

“Have you seen her?” he asked as he belted up beside him.

“I think so,” Naarb’n said, “but she didn’t seem to recognize me. I started out all ‘great to see ya’ and her head pulled into her shoulders so I cooled it. I thought maybe it was just someone that looked like her. So next she pulls out an address and asks where it is and if I could show her on a map because she was from out of town.”

Jorma knew Naarb’n paused for effect so he prodded him on. “Yeah, I’m following this so far.”

“It was your old address from back then, when you leased Leand’s back field and cabin. Her address when she stayed with you.”

Tdeshi had written him once at that address since she reached the city, he had written several times. Tdeshi should remember it, it was her address when she boarded the livestock boat leaving here. Still, twenty one decades is a long time. “But she didn’t know you?” he asked, mystified.

“I don’t think it was an act either. I could have sworn she was Tdeshi, she had a lot of the same grace and the cool. Heavy on the cool. She sounded a lot the same, more of that lazy city accent, but still the same voice.”

“Where did she go?” Jorma asked.

“Once I got out a town map and pointed out the address, she made a quick little sketch of it the way Tdeshi would and went out the door. If I was forced to guess, I would say she was on her way to where you used to live.”

“But she didn’t know you and didn’t know where that address was?”

“At least pretended very well if it was her.”

“You know I tried to get in touch with her, back when she went missing.”

“Yeah, she wasn’t gone that long before it happened was she?”

“Nowhere near a decade. She always was a headstrong kid,” Jorma continued. He should know, he was the one who fell in love with her as soon as her father let him. Jorma had been tenanting that cabin and plot behind Leand’s manor since way before Tdeshi was born. “So how’s she look?” Jorma asked, trying not to let the conversation die.

“Pretty much same as always, might have put on a little weight in the right places. She’s still got that cute ass. She looks like she’s maybe not so driven, but really not much different than when she caught that cattle boat south.”

“And with your eyes and memory, what do you think the odds are?”

“You mean if she just didn’t recognize me? It’s possible, she didn’t know me that well. I think I always noticed her a lot more than she noticed me.”

“Yeah, you’ve have to allow the same margin of error on her side too, if her memory of you distorted in the opposite direction from what changes you may have had in those years.”

“Oh I used to dress for the post a lot more then, now I just show the tag if I need to, I figure everyone knows I’ve been with Eye-Mail since she was just a little kid. I was cutting my hair then also wasn’t I?”

“So it could be her and she didn’t recognize you?”

“But she didn’t recognize the address she left from?”

Naarb'n asked.

“It’s been a long time and judging by how much she’s written, I would say she hasn’t thought of us much in those twenty-one decades. She might write to her dad, if she knows where he’s gone. She didn’t think much of the guy she lived with for a few years since he hadn’t heard from her either.”

“Yeah,” Naarb'n said, “she could have forgotten a lot since then. Who knows what life she’s had down there? They say lots of people pick up a habit or two in that city for one thing. That might not help the memory. Another thing they get hooked on is money. They say only professionals cook in the city.”

“So considering that possibility and your own memory, what do you think?” Jorma asked.

“I would say I’m five sixths sure that was Tdeshi.”

That was a high probability. He was saying Tdeshi was much more likely to forget than he was.

It had been a long while and Jorma had been thru a lot of things since then, though he’d always lived within a week or two sail of Sinbara. The farthest he’d been was the couple years he spent in Zharvai just after Leand left town. Just about the time Tdeshi wrote that letter. Jorma had been in a logging gang when Tdeshi left and on a fishing boat for a long time after that, but that was long after Leand left here. During and between he was just tending a garden somewhere, finally buying a little place on the foot of West Hill, only a few long blocks from Leand’s mansion. He’d been thru quite a few relationships more important and longer lasting than the few years he’d spent with Tdeshi. But in that time he had

known no friend as deep as Leand. After all this time, Jorma wondered how much of all that he remembered correctly and how well his mind's eye view of Tdeshi would jive with an old photograph if he was to get one out right now. That might be an interesting experiment.

Naarb'n was a friend from their offshore days, a few guys they knew who still worked the slings off this coast came in while they talked and they wound up spending the evening there at the keg rail, especially once they found the catch had been very good and those guys were eager to buy. No more was mentioned of Tdeshi that day, and this loud group of guys didn't attract any women. As the crowd thinned out they got to lean on the bar next to the stone wall. Jorma got pretty wasted just trying to keep up and spent a lot of time looking at the smaller and smaller twigs stuck together and grown into one gigantic leaf to make the roof. To top it off, he blew most of an iron there that night just drinking.

A week and a half later he was sitting at Torgay's stand on fifth dock of West Harbor having breakfast. It's a long dock so you can see a lot of open water here. He hadn't seen much, the fog hadn't lifted, Lmonteira and Kyebenwae seemed to have switched this year and put them back in an earlier part of spring. At least there hadn't been snow, but he was going to have to get a cart of trash-wood from the mill this week to split for cooking.

The water was calm, this dock was mostly fishing boats, they were dots on the horizon at this point in time except for Tulmee's, the one with the for sale sign on it. That was a big

Sailfisher, a deep-water dual-hull grown out of LakeKnife foam-filled pontoons. Way out of Jorma's price range if he wanted to sell his farm and get back on the water. Torgay was set up right at the beginning of the dock, less than three boats out when they were parked in here, so he didn't have to walk far on the planks.

Jorma had just drawn up a stool on the end of Torgay's rail as close to the fire as he could get when Vureer happened by. Vureer is one of his better female friends right now, a savior in that she will accept just-for-the-fun-of-it sex with him if she's got nothing better to do. She's a little wide and curly, strong, probably has a lot of Dwarf in her lineage somewhere. She also runs the largest registry in town, one that was very successful because she had been early to see the advantage of using the suntower channels to link with other registries as soon as the suntower channels got cheap.

She sat with him and a couple dumplings stuffed with shaved vegetables in a sweet-orange residue gravy. She mentioned that a woman had come in and followed her thumb print tree to Tdeshi in her birth records room. "This woman looked exactly like Tdeshi, I was startled when I saw her but she didn't recognize me at all. I knew she was familiar, but I actually couldn't remember her name after these twenty decades so I didn't speak up. She was very efficient and polite and a bit jovial like Tdeshi would be when she asked if she might look at the tree. She seemed to know what she was doing so I let her into the cabinet I keep it in. She went off, found the record and wrote it all down like she was a total stranger doing detective work."

“Did you get to tell her that you actually knew her?”

“I actually didn’t, I saw she was gone and pulled the packet where she left the files open, once I saw her name I remembered her.”

“Did you ever hear what happened to her?” Jorma asked.

“Shonggot is what I heard,” Vureer replied.

“As did I, so no news here.” If that rumor was true and it had been shonggot, that wasn’t Tdeshi. There was probably no knowledge in town but what had come in that one letter he got from someone in the city after she disappeared. That had echoed around town for twenty decades to mutate into all the stories that were known about her. The guy who bought that house in the city from Tdeshi’s boyfriend of the time finally wrote back to him. He could recite the note by heart.

– I’m sorry that your friend hasn’t responded to you. She disappeared last year and didn’t contact us either. Somebody at her school heard it was shonggot. Her boyfriend was pretty shook up about it but didn’t tell me much of anything. He left the area when he sold me this house. Sorry I can’t tell you more and better news, but I thought you deserve to know this much –

“She wasn’t down there a decade,” Vureer said.

“She was always so intense,” Jorma said, “So competitive. I wonder if she was trying to cram or despondent that she hadn’t crammed enough to meet her standards?”

“I certainly don’t know, you knew her a whole lot better

than I.”

They'd been over this decades ago when they first found out. They were trying to console Leand at the time, and hadn't done well. It was true that Jorma knew her better, but mainly in a way that Vureer was jealous of. It wasn't Jorma's fault, Tdeshi just had no bi tendencies. She had tried out of friendship and Vureer wasn't fooled. Tdeshi was purely hetero, at least when she left Sinbara.

Kortrax twinkled off wavelets thru the mist giving the light a feeling of torchlight. They both watched and he didn't feel a need to answer immediately since they were both busy with very good dumplings also.

He wanted to think that he hadn't driven Tdeshi to leave Sinbara. He didn't think so, she was self driven. She thought life was desperate, she had to go get it all done now, not wait til you really needed it. Sometimes the just-grown are like that. It is an instinct deep in the human soul because deep in human history we were an ephemeral kind. She was nowhere near four decades old when she left, she wasn't yet four decades when she wrote the only letter Sinbara ever got.

It was pretty normal that someone who left their home town when just grown might want to re-connect with her roots after twenty decades or so, but it was not normal that she wouldn't acknowledge the old-time friends she might have come to find.

He was supposed to be answering how Tdeshi might have gone to shonggot wasn't he? “She could have gone either way, I think you knew her well enough to know that. She was just too intense for her own good sometimes.”

“I knew that, but she was young, she had the intensity of someone new. If she’s lived til now, she’ll be OK.”

“So if she’s around, where do you think she’d be?” he asked.

“Probably with someone, she never had a place of her own. She was with her dad, she was with me for awhile, then she was with you, then she went down to the city and didn’t you say she was with some dude there according to the one who finally wrote back to you? Probably someone she knew had a destination up here and she remembered that she comes from here. Maybe that isn’t her? Maybe she’s a detective sent to look her up?”

“I think she’s probably just forgot after all this time,” he said. Jorma had dug up an old picture of Tdeshi and had a marble of it in his pouch. “Is this her?” he asked as he handed it over.

Vureer put it to her eye, “Yeah, I would say she’s hardly changed if that was her, it’s an uncanny resemblance if it isn’t her.”

“So who else has connections with her around here? Where could she be staying?”

“I don’t know, maybe at an inn?”

“I should go check them,” Jorma thought.

“Yeah, if she’s still here after all these weeks, any innkeeper she was with would know her by now. But what else have you been doing?” she asked between mouthfuls.

“I haven’t done much so far this week, woke up, grabbed my fur and came down here to breakfast.”

“Torgay’s cooking brings you out on a morning like this?”

“It’s his fire, the rail’s narrow and we can sit close to it like we are,” he said. “I got to Dawnsleep with an extra quilt and never lit mine,” not mentioning that he’d run out of firewood.

“Yeah then this is good, I like the mists rising over the water also, the swinging lantern on that boat.”

“It’s a nice little dock he cooks on.”

A big four-person sail cat with two rowdy couples in it came up for breakfast. They must have been coming back from quite some sleep. Vureer played eyes and arms and calves and shins with him while they ate in silence for awhile, listening to these people tell tales of what a great and bawdy time they’d had the sleep before. He and Vureer were given similar ideas by what they listened to and her chest played pleasant games with his arm by the time they finished breakfast. They still weren’t doing as much as the other couples were just talking about the sleep before.

“Shall we go get it on before we hit the gardens?” Jorma asked as they got up.

“Sure,” she said, “It’s still a little chilly to be bumping along the ground.”

So they said their goodbys to Torgay and started up the street that connected with this dock. He always thought he and Vureer could do well if she didn’t have her need for women also. It could still work out if she found a female partner that Jorma also enjoyed, and also enjoyed Jorma. Then the threesome would work. So far there had never been even a close approximation of that. Both times a woman Vureer fell for was even remotely acceptable to Jorma, they

had been exclusively homo but didn't care that Vureer was bi.

With Vureer, the female partner was definitely the major one, the male was just for fun and could never be a soul-mate. He couldn't be pet of the household that way. A visit like this, on an early Morningday, was always welcome however. By the time the happy twosome of that Morningday was complete, the ground had warmed enough to work and he strolled home to his, only a quarter mile further up Fifth Dock Road. He pushed himself right to work, it was getting toward that part of the year when Afternoondays are too hot to enjoy heavy work in the field.

After the conversation with Vureer, he kept his eyes open for anyone looking like Tdeshi. He went out of his way that Afternoonday to pass by places travelers would go. He went over to the place he used to tenant to talk to the guys now living there, intending to find out what Tdeshi had asked them and if they knew where she was staying. He hadn't been there that much in the twenty one decades since he lived there. The new owner had other tenants in mind and Jorma had gone from there to Zharvai. It was a painful time.

The cabin had fond memories too, there had been good times there. The year Tdeshi shared it was one of the best, but also one of the hardest as she made plans to leave. Walking the path to the tenant cabin he noticed changes in the grounds, the kedas were gone, the cultivation was more commercial and not as pretty as when Leand owned the property.

The guy who answered his call was not the one who first took this cabin from him, that made this easier by far. "Hi,

I'm wondering if you've seen this woman in the last few weeks?" he held out the marble of Tdeshi.

The guy looked, said, "she fits the description Aura gave me. She was actually here when this girl came by."

"What did she want?" Jorma asked.

"She had a letter, the 'from' address was this address but it was old, decades before we got here. She was looking for the guy who wrote the letter."

If that was Tdeshi, it could be one of the letters he wrote to her, maybe even his reply to the only letter he ever got from her. "I could be that guy. Did she say where she was staying?"

"I don't know, she might have told Aura but if so, she never told me."

"Where's Aura?" Jorma asked.

"Good question," the guy said, "I haven't seen her since just before last dusk but I'm thinking of checking the clubs on Beach Road this evening. She's gone down there when we've had these things in the past."

He stayed and gabbed a while, but didn't learn very much. He had to turn down his offer to go down South Street that evening until he could get some day work. He did let himself hope that maybe Tdeshi had returned to Sinbara looking for him.

On Nightday of week Lmonteira he went around to all the inns in town asking if there was any Tdeshi staying there and showing the picture around. He had no luck in those searches until Gauthaur's over toward Snug Island where he found a

table-man who was cleaning up after Darkmeal. “Yeah, this woman was here, but she’s not Tdeshi, she’s Ava. She stayed here almost two weeks. She got moved into a house by the end of her second Afternoonday so she wasn’t here that long. She was pleasant, a little reserved, quiet in a serious way.”

“She’s using the name Ava?” he asked, sounding dumb.

“Quite seriously.”

“And she bought a house?”

“It would be under the name Ava, not Tdeshi, if I don’t miss my guess,” the table man said as politely as he could.

“Did she say where this house was?”

“Just that it was ‘near town’ and that she was going to settle here in modest retirement for awhile.”

“She didn’t say anything more about it?”

“There was a great view of the lake from the bedroom balcony.”

Tdeshi would like that, Jorma knew, but such a house could be in many neighborhoods of Sinbara. The lower dwellings on the uphill side of the street in most cases, many in even the poorest sections could look under the branches of the grander dwellings above and see views of the harbor and the islands at anchor in it from their balcony. “Do you know if anyone else would know more?”

“There is some possibility she may have invited another guest back to her room after dinner one day, I was busy cleaning up at the time,” the table man explained. “She was reserved, but not anti-social.”

That was not Tdeshi. Someone using the name Ava? Now

what could he do? Walk around town and watch for her in the garden on Morningdays? Do his own chores in the heat of Afternoonday or the cold and dark of Nightday? Why? There was a very good chance it could be nothing more than a case of uncanny resemblance. But then why would she be looking up the address they shared? Because of that, he had good cause to speak with her, Tdeshi or not, if he could find her.

Most people now record their home sales with several registries in the local area. Vureer might even have the entry under the name Ava. He would have to remember that name. It was the end of the business day of Nightday for all but tappers and innkeepers so he couldn't go do that now.

He sat with his flagon for awhile at Gauthiers and was distracted from thoughts of Tdeshi by meeting a delightful darkmeal, Dawnsleep and brunch companion, a traveler only passing thru Sinbara on a quest from Zharvai to the deep north researching a swords-woman from olden times. He was abnormally sad as they parted from that casual company on that dock, well before Morningday lunch when there was just enough tide for her long sail to begin. She would haunt him much longer than the hours they spent together.

There were several registries who would do business during Morningday, but Vureer was not one of them, she was conscientious about getting all her gardening done on Morningday. So he went off in search of those who were open. He turned up nothing at those in the center of town, then decided to take the footbridge across the harbor to Telsair's on North Island while he was down this way. She

was always around on Morningsdays since she worked from her house and that was above her office. The air was bracing on the footbridge, but he could actually see her at her trellis from there. After a few minutes more on West Harbor North Road, he was looking up at her. “Do you mind a registry question?” he asked.

“Oh not at all. I’m available when I’m needed and that isn’t very often.”

“Did someone named Ava register property here recently?”

“Yeah, just this year, just a few weeks ago actually. The only property that changed hands on North Island so far this year.”

“Was she tall and slim with long dark hair and a small square chin?”

“Yeah? You must know her.”

“I think I do, she grew up here a little before your time,” Jorma said. Telsair had come to Sinbara about ten or twelve decades ago. Jorma couldn’t say he ‘knew’ her, but they were acquainted. “Her name was Tdeshi then.”

“I never knew her by that name, I don’t think. She didn’t seem to know me.”

“She left town in the last decade of the 55th, it seems she’s been back only a few weeks but hasn’t looked up any of her old friends yet. Did she say anything about privacy?”

“No, I can tell you the house, we don’t even have to go look it up. Just go back down this street to the first public dock, not the little one. Follow the path from that inland til it ends, it’s the blue juniper house with the pointed roof and the

vine-wall along the street where the garden drops off behind toward the lake. It's got three big tart-berries at least sixteen inches thick along the other side of the yard with a big rinko patch behind."

"Thank you, I'm glad I didn't have to interrupt you further."

"Not for something that fresh around this neighborhood. I get a birth every few years, one or two properties a year, some business openings and closings. I can go a week without even an inquiry. If you could be so good as to drop a penny in the box I won't be this week without one."

Jorma was grateful enough to leave two.

He lost no time in going up there. The North Island is mostly small holds of a house and garden once you were more than two blocks from the few public docks. The street, called Hilltop Path, was a path just wide enough for a handcart between hedges. Most hedges were in the full bloom of spring now, sourberry tying gloribard sprays together was common on this path. He could see that people had to do their own snipping to keep this path open, but it was trimmed pretty even and was very fragrant walking thru here. There wasn't enough larorlie growing on the public path to get a buzz, even in season, but he could smell that there was enough on the back sides of the houses. A disadvantage to the Highlands was the fact the air wasn't thick enough to carry enough of the fragrance to get very high.

The place he was interested in was at the end of the street on the small hill at the end of the island. It was a cute house,

something he might have expected Tdeshi to like, but it was pretty private on it's sandy hilltop, something Tdeshi had not been attracted to as a youngster. She liked to be able to yell to her friends from her house and had once planked her father's porch to two neighbors for a party.

He went to the door, "Tdeshi, I heard you're back," he called. The door was open, it was cute within also, a nice front room, a bedroom a few steps up behind, a kitchen a few steps down behind.

"Yes, after all these years I'm back," she answered from behind him, she had come around the house. "I'm around here but..."

Jorma spun around and saw that it really was her. Twenty decades disappeared and he was transported back to the days when she had just moved into his cabin, Leand was in the big house in front and all was right with his life. He couldn't wait for the 'buts'.

2. The Stranger Within

"...I'm not Tdeshi," she said as he ran to her.

In two bounds Jorma caught her in his arms and hugged her, "I'm thrilled to see you again, I'd heard you'd O.D.d on shonggot. I'm so glad that rumor was wrong." His lips sought hers, but she got a hand between them.

"The rumors were right, Tdeshi did O.D., I am Ava. I was 'born' or 'hatched' on Noonsleep of week K'shitn, in the 23rd year of the 100th, and I have no idea who you are." She was

leaning back in his arms, but had not pushed her way out of them. She sure felt like Tdeshi, maybe not as hard as when she was just grown but just as lithe and smooth.

“You don’t remember me either?” he was incredulous, in spite of what people had been telling him. “People who you should know have told me you don’t remember them either?”

“I’m sorry, just about everyone looks nice around here, like someone I wish I knew, but I don’t know anyone. This town isn’t familiar to me, though it seems homey and comfortable and very pretty in a rugged way.”

“Then why have you come here?” Yes it had been a long time, but he was sure this was Tdeshi, not someone who happened to closely resemble her.

“I came up here out of curiosity. Please take no offense, but to me Tdeshi is a clone mother I never had a chance to meet, one who died giving birth to me.”

“What?” he exclaimed. People didn’t die giving birth in the modern world, especially not Elves. She must mean it figuratively, as some kind of total amnesia, he thought. No doubt a mind-eraser like shonggot could do that to a person. “So you don’t remember anything of your life?” he asked.

“Nothing of Tdeshi’s life, I have a pretty good memory of my own. When she was found unconscious all she had of Tdeshi’s life was an address in this town and couple irons, a hundred forty four pennies worth of change, a pencil stub and a clip board with some note paper and hand-outs from a program at the Kassikan.”

He let her go as she said that. In her years in the city, Tdeshi had forgotten everything of her origin and childhood,

even her name. She stepped back from him, like even her body had forgotten his. Why did his body remember the feel of Leand's daughter in his arms so well?

“I was curious to see where she came from,” Tdeshi continued. “I found the house that address belongs to, but no one in it had a clue who I was. By then I figured I was such ancient history around here that no one would know me. I thought maybe the address might have very little to do with me until I found a registry with a birth-record with my thumb-print under the name Tdeshi. If I hadn't, I never would have known you were talking to me when you called at my door. Thank you for coming forward.” She smiled, but more formal than it should be. “Let's go inside.”

He followed her into the house. The kitchen went under the bedroom balcony also. She couldn't use that area in a storm but that was where she went now. She was dressed in a snug and multi-pocketed garden jumper. There was another balcony beyond the back kitchen before the actual garden began and he followed Tdeshi's sweet curves out onto that. There was a bit of sun still on this and that was where she stopped. She took her knee pads off and sat at a corner table where there were already jugs of water and a yellow that looked like Sistris.

Jorma knew he'd followed Tdeshi out to this porch, other than not knowing him, this was her. Other than it's privacy, this was Tdeshi's place as Tdeshi would have it when she grew up, like she would be today after going to the city to continue her education and pursue a career. No different than if she hadn't forgotten her life in Sinbara.

“Have you heard from your dad?” was out before he thought about it.

“I’m a clone, I have no dad.” He could see she was impatient with that question.

No doubt she didn’t remember him either, or was maintaining a good act. Instead he had to ask, “You O.D.d on shonggot but you haven’t been reduced to infancy or to a vegetable?”

“Tdeshi O.D.d and was erased. I owe my life to Althart and Kiethying and their staff at the Kassikan.”

“Who are they?” he asked with a cold arrow in him. Jorma had never been a fan of the Kassikan and he knew she heard that in his voice from the reaction on her face. It was an ancient institution, started as a sorcerer’s lair he thought, that was now an institution of learning and the owner of many businesses its research had started. It was too powerful, too old, too mysterious, too big and held too many secrets. They modified the human mind there, willingly, and people paid for it. He was glad it was at least a year from here if one traveled tending cargo sail, at least ten weeks by air.

“The cyber-neural researchers that Tdeshi’s body was taken to,” was her answer. She adopted Tdeshi’s defensive expression as well as wizard-words Jorma couldn’t penetrate. “They could not bring Tdeshi back to life but they were able to create a clone daughter in her body. With a mind-link helmet they were able to get her body to live, even if they couldn’t restore any of Tdeshi’s personality at all.” She went right on explaining her past without giving him any time to digest. He hoped this had happened on a balcony high on the

pyramid. “They did quite a bit more for me, when I first became conscious I was an infant. They fed me knowledge pills appropriate to a student my age. By the next Morningday I was released knowing how to read and write, something about what had happened to me and with a job offer at the Kassikan. I took that job and lived there for thirteen decades and had a good enough career that I can live off the royalties until I get bored. I think it took the normal amount of time, maybe longer, to mature as an individual again. I awoke knowing how to speak, but I acted like a child for the normal two decades. I’m grateful to the University and the open minds of the staff there for putting up with me during that time.”

Jorma shook his head, wondering how much of this he could understand or even remember. He needed to have that all written down. She had certainly blasted thru a detailed explanation, one that she’d clearly rehearsed. Didn’t she just say that she was actually Tdeshi? She had no memories of Tdeshi, but this is Tdeshi’s body? That was total amnesia, not an actual cloning. She had been an infant again in personality but was fed knowledge pills for a student her age? Tdeshi’s age? She considers herself a new person. Jorma had a hard time getting his mind around that. A new person in the same body? How is that different from forgot? A clone he could understand, but a clone grows as a new embryo, a completely new person. He had to clarify that with her. “Are you the same physical person, or did they clone a new infant body from a cell?”

She clearly didn’t like that question, but she answered it.

“I am in the same body. They were able to keep Tdeshi’s body alive, but they had to grow a new soul to live in it.”

He put his hand over his face and sighed. Total amnesia was a way he could describe it that he understood. However it was labeled, he had to face the fact that the person he was re-connecting with wasn’t here. He could not put his feelings in words. No, this was the same body, but the mind was gone from shonggot and a new soul was in it, as if a new embryo had grown, one built from RNAcid recordings at the Kassikan. He still didn’t think he understood it, but he’d never studied high mental science. He understood that she didn’t remember anything of her life before the shonggot, that was about as far as he could get.

He could understand how a person who had total amnesia such a long time ago could think they had become a different person. He didn’t even think that made her especially abnormal since she had been away from anything of her previous life for such a long time. She went off to learn painting twenty one decades ago. She said she was learning to be a gas tech to pay for her studies in the only letter he ever got from her. Now she wound up back here in Sinbara twenty one decades later. That was after a long career at the Kassikan.

He understood what she was trying to say with the analogy of the clone mother. Tdeshi gave her everything of her flesh and nothing of her mind. Tdeshi was a mother who died giving birth to her, he understood that part of the analogy also. He could relate that to things he had heard of, clone mothers and mothers dying in childbirth. He’d even read

stories told by orphans.

Still, Tdeshi didn't really have a mother either. Colandros expected to work in wealthy households with plenty of serving staff. They fully realized they would not be leaving the household from ovulation til weaning. Some of them even gave up lactation to wet nurses so their job was done once birth was over. They were like surrogate mothers in that they would not be getting to know the baby, even though half the genes it bore were hers. But in this day, a colandro's genes were expected to be the finest that money could buy.

What did Ava have for a father, wizards at the Kassikan? Was that so different than a busy land-owner in Sinbara, as far as a child's life went? Would this 'Ava' personality that had grown up in this body now really be all that much different from Tdeshi? If she had the same body, the same genetics, wouldn't she be a very similar person after all? If so, they would probably get along like they used to. Jorma was not terribly obtuse to the ways of women and could tell that she did feel attraction for him. It would be worth getting re-acquainted with her.

“So I guess I'll have to start from the beginning,” he said. “I'm Jorma, I had a tenancy in West Harbor behind your dad while you grew up. We were good friends when you went away to the big city, all those decades ago. That address you asked postman Naarb'n about was ours when you left.”

“Were you close with Tdeshi? I'm sorry but I have to ask.”

“Hell yeah, you moved in with me about a year before

you left, that address was once your home address. You don't remember that either?"

"My memories hold nothing before this personality was created under that helmet back in K'shitn of 100,00,23."

He was going to have a problem with that impenetrable wall. There was no way he could speak to Tdeshi. No way to explain anything that had happened since she left. "We were close," he said, but the words seemed to echo into that lost past, "We were close in many ways," trying not to let exasperation show, "but we hadn't known each other physically for long, I guess about ten or eleven years. While you were growing up I was often your confidant for things you were afraid to tell your father. I knew him long, I knew how he would react to most things. I waited til you were over three and had Leand's approval before I touched you, in spite of your whining. For the last few years before you left I'd called us a couple. For the last year, we shared the home bed at the address you found."

"I'm sorry I don't remember," she said, but it gave her clear pause for thought, enough to examine him closely. "I'm sure I'll be delighted to get to know you again. Having the same genes as Tdeshi, I'm likely to be attracted to the same men. But I don't know you yet." She put her hand on his waist and turned a little more his way on the bench so their knees touched. "You must know this town better than I do, it would be nice to have a native guide."

Instinctively he knew she would be slow with contact. He accepted that, put his arm around her shoulder but did not press for more. "I never left it for any length of time, I should

be able to draw a street map from memory. There's a few paths I might get mixed up, but I can find my way around."

"How'd I do picking this neighborhood?" she asked.

"It's cute, the footbridge gives North Island an identity. This is the coldest house in Sinbara in the winter though, you'll think you've moved to Kugenzglaw." They each grinned but she did not laugh, she might not know of Kugenzglaw. "The house looks snug enough for it and I saw the stove you've got."

"I'm not afraid of the winter," she said. "How are my neighbors here?"

"It seems to be a relatively nice area. I can't say I know anyone who lives out here very well. I live a couple blocks back from West Harbor now, not far from where your father gave me his tenancy, long before he gave me his prettiest daughter."

"So how did you hear she O.D.d on shonggot?" Ava asked him, not picking up on the compliment.

"Thru the new owner of the house where you were living, and it was just a rumor."

"You knew a house where she was living? In the City?"

"I have an address, you wrote to me from there. I eventually got thru to someone else there when I never heard from you again. He wrote me a note. He said he never really knew for sure but he heard you'd O.D.d. That's all the news this town ever got, as far as I know."

"You said people have recognized me?"

"Naarb'n thought it was you, but when he tried to be friendly you were cold."

“Who was that?”

“The postman you asked about our old address.”

“I thought it was a come-on, like maybe I was going to have to give him a ride to get the directions. Calling me by someone else’s name doesn’t help even if I should have expected it. I didn’t even know what her name was at that time.”

He knew how clumsy Naarb’n could be in approaching a woman and well imagine she could feel that way, but he still couldn’t focus on the enormity of the situation. What was she doing here? She came here out of curiosity? “Are you here to try and regain your memories?”

“No, I believe the wizards,” she sighed, “that is impossible, unless she had an ‘acid tab made of her life. I was curious to see the town my clone mother came from. It’s as good as any to live in awhile. I didn’t think there would be anyone left who knew her. Quite often people who erase themselves don’t have a lot of close people around them.”

“You had a lot of people around you here, you were a popular girl, you came from a good background. There were a lot of people who knew you, and some of the people who were your close friends are still around.”

“I didn’t think of that. Does it make you uncomfortable to have a stranger here in Tdeshi’s body?”

“You are not a stranger. You may have lost your memories of us, but we have not lost our memories of you. We can heal you.”

“I don’t feel ill,” she replied, “So I don’t think I need healing. I’ve had a good life already, I keep myself in

condition, well, sort-of. I'm enjoying my leisure for the time being until I decide I need a more serious interest once again."

"Do you wish to avoid your old friends?"

"No, I would love to hear about her, as long as you understand you are telling someone else about her. You are not MY old friends. Can you make friends with a stranger who is Tdeshi's clone-daughter? A daughter who never knew her but would like to?"

"You may feel like a stranger now, but you will soon find that you are one of us."

She looked at him with concern, "Can you know me as Ava? Can you understand that I am not going to turn back into Tdeshi? Can you understand that I intend to keep the name 'Ava' and be who I am, whether I am like my clone mother or not. Can you understand they are not my memories to regain? Can you understand that if I do become one of you, I'm becoming one of you as Ava?"

She had him there. Could he? Could he think of her as a daughter coming to look up the story of her mother? A mother she'd never met. He could certainly try, or at least try and act the part. If he found later he couldn't do it, he meant it at the time, meant it now. "Yes Ava, I would like to get to know you as Ava. I'll think of you as Tdeshi's daughter."

"If that will help, though I have far less of her memories than any daughter would. I never met her, though I see her in the mirror every day. I came to try and learn the story of the woman who gave me this body, Tdeshi, the woman you obviously loved."

“I loved her, the brand new little cub of a woman you were then.”

“I was not a brand new cub of a woman then, Tdeshi was. I was a brand new woman a decade or more after that.”

He paused. He was talking like she was Tdeshi wasn't he? He hadn't quite got it yet, this is a clone daughter investigating her mother. She was going to insist that she was not Tdeshi with total amnesia. She would not allow him to understand her that way. “Where did you go when you got off the boat?” he asked to change the direction of their conversation.

For a second it looked like she wanted to ask ‘what boat?’ but figured out he was changing the subject. “I've stayed all but one sleep since I crossed the Sinbara dock either at this house or at Gauthaur's Inn just across from Snug Island.”

“I know the place, I wish I'd been there when you got off the boat, when was it?”

“Just after dusk of week Voratainin. We were late getting in, the cook fire had to be re-kindled.”

It was a good thing he hadn't, he was flat broke then. “And how'd you pick Gauthiers?”

“A complete stranger said if I wanted a quiet, homey, pretty place with good food and company, that was the place to go.” She spoke of it a bit, all things he knew. It was out of his price range to stay or to dine, but he had been to their taps at times. “The food's not bad,” she told him. “Gauthier's best feature is his jokes, but he likes serious conversation. He likes to talk about how much everything's changed since the starship came but how it really hasn't changed after all. Just

now the average Joe can spread the rumors himself instead of having to wait for a news service to do it.

“If something spirited gets going he’ll give specials on yaag and beer to everyone at the table. Then something really spirited will get going.”

“Sounds like fun, I would probably come to like a town if I stayed in an inn like that. Memories or no, you are still the life of any social occasion.”

“I was there, but I was hardly the life of the occasion. I laughed when it seemed appropriate and made other noises to make everyone think I was following along. Most other people knew each other, I was just an innocent witness and knew nothing of the local scene and actually followed very little.”

He didn’t have to say a word, the surprise in his expression was reflected in hers. This was nothing like Tdeshi and they had that in the open between them. “Those wizards in the Kassikan didn’t bring all of you back,” he said, “You were always the life of any gathering, from the time you were barely over two decades.”

“I was always like this, no matter what my mother was like.”

“What are you like now?” he asked.

“I am interested in various studies, mostly having to do with data access and transmission, not something we could point at right here and now. I’m into literature, including poetry. The last few decades I’ve been taking it easy and living off the land and royalties. I’ve been making my way up the Westlands shore as a tourist for the last couple decades.”

“You always were studious, Tdeshi, that hasn’t changed.”

“I was brought to life as Ava,” she said with a bit of heat.

“It’s a name I’ve used for twenty decades now, a whole life in ancient times. I know from my birth-record this flesh was originally given the name Tdeshi, (she pronounced it t’Deshi now) but that soul who was in this flesh who was known by that name is dead and I’d like you to understand that. That was the name of my clone mother. Just a minute ago I asked if you could come to know me as Ava and you said you could. If that’s true, why are you still calling me Tdeshi?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I guess I haven’t quite come to know you as Ava yet, but I’m working on it. But I thought you came here to learn about Tdeshi?”

“But not to become Tdeshi. Just by learning about my clone mother’s life, I will not turn into her or take her name.”

“I know,” he sighed, noticing she was going to be touchy about this. “Why don’t you tell me what you would like to know of Tdeshi?”

“Let’s start with where she started,” she started to calm down. “I gather from the birth record that she was probably born in or near this town.”

“It was the big home in front of that tenant cabin, the address you looked up with Naarb’n. Your room overlooked the street across the keda paddock, not my tenant cabin behind. It was the last house your father lived in while he was here.”

“Where is Tdeshi’s father now? Is he OK?” She sounded genuinely worried.

“He’s probably OK,” Jorma answered. He knew they

were not as close since Tdeshi left, he had let a lot of those memories go. “He sold out soon after you left and set out to see the old north, he figured it would be a few decades before he came back this way, if he did.” The truth was, they hadn’t kept in touch.

“What of Tdeshi’s mother? I thought it was curious there was no record of her.”

“She was colandro, your father hired her for her genes, to establish a family here. She produced two daughters for him and lived in splendor, for Leand was quite wealthy as you could see from his neighborhood.” From the questions on her face it appeared that she might not have noticed. “She left the household as soon as your sister Alore was weaned. You were headstrong but beautiful. Alore was dutiful but much plainer. After you were lost, Leand lavished attention on Alore to the point where she fled to the Salvador deeps, somewhere warm and sparsely settled. Some anonymous plot without the small-town gossip. He left so soon after that, that he might have followed her trail.”

“This is a tragic story but none of it rings any bell at all, it sounds like her whole family was steeped in tragedy. I also didn’t know there were hired child-givers in this society?”

“There are, they were almost common among the modestly wealthy northerners in the old culture in the lands below Dolostel. On North Lake you see a few, south of the interconnects it’s hardly known. There were three active colandros in Sinbara at the time, your mother was considered the finest. She bore forty four children while she was active here. She may still be here, but no longer active. I don’t know

everyone in town.”

“I wouldn’t expect anyone to. There are some substantial businesses along the waterfront here. I’ve walked thru blocks of residential apartments with upper floor interconnects and there’s that double decker circle at the point. This town is not that small, it’s a miniature city. I like it anyway, mostly because of it’s scenic beauty and the favorable impression I have of all the people I’ve met so far but that postman. I don’t see why Tdeshi left here, there are all the modern conveniences with the charm of the early 40's. This community seems quite worldly for someplace this remote.”

“You were convinced there was something more. You were convinced there was something more to learn, some way to be larger than life by sailing a year off down the lake. Of course a lot has changed here while you were away.”

“Jorma please, I was never here. I, Ava, got here on Afternoonday of Voratainin and just met the first person I can talk about this body’s past with. I only know how Sinbara is now. I know its past from one old picture taken in the great blizzard of the 53rd that was hanging in the inn.”

“When you left...”

“I never left because I was never here.”

He had to stop. He was attaching the pronoun to the body, after all, she had admitted this was the same flesh. He was making that the same ‘you’ wasn’t he? She would not accept ‘you’ for Ava in that body. She wanted to emphasize that he was talking to the soul in that body, not the body itself. That wasn’t how he thought one was supposed to use the language, but so be it. “OK, when she left there was no eye here. There

was an eye at Zharvai and the price there was close to a copper a message. Now you can get hours on a terminal right here in Sinbara for an iron.”

“That’s all true in the city also,” she said. “While I lived there the price of keyboard time dropped just as steeply. I like to think the career I had there contributed in some way to that.”

“So you know what I’m talking about even though you say you remember none of it?”

“Because I’ve lived thru those times. From 100,00,23 on I lived as me, Ava. There was no production of photovoltaic devices in the world when I came to be. The starship people brought that knowledge and I studied from them. A starman was my housemate for decades and he also helped get that industry going.”

Jorma knew of the starship and Yingolians, but had never met anyone who met one of them before. Before he could ask about that, this Ava, daughter of Tdeshi, continued with her life’s tale.

“I’ve been working my way up the west shore and the interconnect for more than two decades now. The change is the same everywhere I go. The Yingolians knew how to make something close enough to photonic devices to get production going again. They’re not as good as the genuine ancient devices, but they’re much cheaper.” Her eyes were darting around his face as she told him. “I was involved in all that. That was my career and the source of the royalties I live on. I come from the labs of the Kassikan, not from Sinbara. I never had any idea what kind of life this body came from.”

He stood up and began to pace her deck. This was all too much. Another person, not Tdeshi, in Tdeshi's flesh. She was back, but she was still gone. He was reminded of all the hurt of those years, with no way to amend any of it. She was something from a dark lab in the Kassikan where they tried to save her and had saved only her body. She was now a Sorceress of Yingolian crystals no less, an important one with royalties. It would have been better if this person claimed to literally be a lost clone-daughter of Tdeshi. That would explain her appearance and why she didn't know anyone. But being the same flesh and not knowing anything of her past? Worse than that, not accepting the re-introduction of anything of her past. Yes, he'd heard of total amnesia before, but there was always hope that those memories could be recovered. This needn't be her investigation of a lost mother, but her recovery of herself.

But maybe she wouldn't want to be herself. As an important person from the Kassikan, that was more achievement than being from a fine family in Sinbara. Especially now that her family was gone. He tried once again to imagine what it must be like for her and found that he really couldn't. He tried to think of her as Tdeshi's clone daughter and found he really couldn't do that either. This was Tdeshi sitting here with him. She looked, moved, sounded and even smelled like Tdeshi. It was true that he had met a few clones before but never someone who had been that close to him. He'd have to try hard to think of her as a clone and not as his best friend's daughter. But even that would make her his best friend's granddaughter, maybe enough to effect a partial restitution.

He wondered if Tdeshi really had been that close to him, or had the years changed the memories in his mind. He thought they were close, but she had casually gone away and never really tried to remain in contact. In reality he had probably been nothing to her. Maybe by overstating their closeness he was actually pushing her new persona away? He could already see that he should start slowly with her. He would try to understand it could take time to restore her comfort with her body's past.

He might have to win her love all over again to do it, and he was less sure of winning this 'clone daughter's' love than he was of Leand's daughter's. And now that he was thinking back on it, he had to admit he wasn't so sure he had ever really won hers.

3. On Villa Beach

The summer had passed while he made friends with Ava, but it had been tedious and difficult to remember that she was a different person. It was rough because she was touchy about being called Tdeshi and she was very picky about how he used pronouns also. It was like she thought of Tdeshi as some ex-lover of his that she didn't want to compete with. She would ask him a lot about Tdeshi, as long as she was discussed as her clone mother and not as herself in an earlier time. He didn't know why he had devoted so much effort to it. Did he think that if he could win her as a friend he could bring her back to Leand and make it all up to him? His hind-

brain might have thought so, even though consciously he knew it would be of no use.

Ava spent a lot of time with him because he became her source of information about her clone mother and about Sinbara. Over the whole summer he told all he knew about Tdeshi and all he knew about the town in her time. Jorma learned a lot about Ava over the summer and found they had many things in common. They were both studious, they were both self-critical. They had a lot of the same little mannerisms, especially the same way of rolling their eyes up. They both were impatient, especially with themselves, and a bit quick-tempered.

He found out that she had changed in many ways. She was more straight-laced sexually than she had been before she left, not less. She claimed she would not accept any same-sex play at all and wouldn't engage in any group activity. Tdeshi had been glad to have her breasts tended by any number of people of either sex, Ava would only permit hers to be caressed during foreplay, and in private. Tdeshi would suggest a quickie almost any time there was fifteen minutes available, Ava would say 'we already did it this week didn't we?' The body was good under any name, but with Ava it was tentative, like she was afraid she'd lose control of it. That was not like Tdeshi, Tdeshi went head first and shouted her joy.

Sharing her house and garden had not been like staying with Tdeshi. Ava was pickier about housekeeping than Tdeshi ever was. Ava had more money, but was more careful with it. Ava was more dependable than Tdeshi. A Tdeshi promise meant, 'if I don't happen to be doing something more fun or

hear of something more fun between now and then.’ He could tell that an Ava promise would be kept even if it meant dragging a broken limb over broken glass. Ava took care of more than her share of the housework and paid more than her share of the way. Ava was ‘anything done, has to be done right’ while Tdeshi was ‘sew it up and keep playing.’

How much of that difference was age? She certainly would have changed in that direction anyway, more maturity. That was the part of Ava he liked the best, Tdeshi had been an irresponsible child at times, even after she turned three. Now, when Jorma thought of Tdeshi, he saw a girl who was basically shy but who used to deny it with the boisterousness of her youth. Now she’d grown older and learned who she really was.

Getting her back in touch with her old friends had been a disaster. She refused to accept them if they wouldn’t call her Ava. That was just out of the question for some people, they acted insulted that she would ask such a thing. She felt insulted that they would ask her to change a name she had used for twenty decades. To everyone else it was obvious that this was Tdeshi, she had a bad case of amnesia induced by the shonggot and they were doing their best to heal her. Jorma felt the same way, but he was willing to play along with her and give her time. On top of that, Vureer was hurt when Ava felt insulted about having her butt caressed.

She did better with people who only knew her as Ava. She had a few friends in the neighborhood who knew her already and she was tentatively social with them. At Raltain’s on

North island she was reserved but normal with everyone who didn't know her from before. Jorma was the only one who knew her as Tdeshi and now knew her as Ava and she was still a bit wary.

He still had little confidence that their friendship would last, in spite of the fact that he was now doing construction around her place and neglecting his own. She had already answered most of the questions she had about Tdeshi, the only one that still interested her at all was the one that interested him the most, why had she O.D.d? They were driven to that question from different directions, Jorma had to admit some guilt to himself because he had introduced Tdeshi to several other intoxicants, all of which she declared she hated. Why did she pick shonggot, the one with the worst reputation of all? One he was sure he did NOT introduce her to. Jorma thought it was only because it was rumored to speed learning with much less cost than RNAcid.

Ava both attracted him and scared him. She was a much more complex person than Tdeshi, sometimes her intelligence made him feel dumb as a bug and he wondered what she could ever see in someone like him. He didn't think he was a dolt, but he was no scientist and had little formal education. She was very learned on the Yingolians and their technology. She was deeply familiar with the Kassikan, too familiar with the Kassikan. She knew who was who on what major committees and councils and how they felt on important issues. Her stories did not make the place seem any less frightful. It was plain that Tdeshi's story ended in the Kassikan, and to delve into that he would need Ava's help. If

he could get her interested in pursuing the details of Tdeshi's end, maybe their friendship could continue.

This Afternoon of Imnotn they tacked out to East Island in a fisherman's sloop that he borrowed from a good friend. Once they were at the island, they sailed along its deserted west beach. It was hot as the last Afternoon of summer began, so once offshore, they undressed and dipped in the water as they sailed. Now she suggested they pull into this deserted little beach with gentle waves lapping at its soft yellow sand. It was out on the island's south wilds, on game preserve land.

He followed her along the beach, noticing that after a whole summer together, she finally seemed comfortable in the nude with him, maybe it was because this beach was so private. She was looking around at the view from this beach quite intently, like she might know it from her past. He had never taken her here, but many others could have.

This was a fairly unique beach for this area because it faced west. The mainland was two and a half miles away or more. To the south the beach was so far away and the land behind it so flat that it didn't block the view either. The lagoon behind the beach made it look like that was just another island. Kortrax was still high, it was nearing lunch time of Afternoon and the tide was just about to turn. Sunlight is intense and the horizon is crisp in the Highlands, the sky is dark blue, almost as dark as the water. What few clouds there were, were very white.

She had come to a particular spot on the beach, she kept

looking around and adjusting her position. It was under the shade of a stand of immense upland tribreak hangleaves that grew out of the sand a few feet from the last ribbonleaves. When she was satisfied with her position, she marked a couple 'L's on the sand with her toes, marking off a space about twelve feet long.

“What’s that mean?” he asked.

“That’s the bottom step,” she said.

“Of what?”

“A villa I saw a couple decades back.”

“There should be some kind of ruin showing, or was it a camp?”

“It was a villa with a big wide verandah about this high above the beach and all along from here,” she was walking along just outside the undergrowth line, “to here,” a good forty or fifty feet towards town. “It went back that way and there was a street door back the other side of that tree.”

“There’s never been a street here. I’ve camped on this beach several times long before Tdeshi was born, but never brought Tdeshi here. There’s never been habitation here.”

“It wasn’t here here, but a place that looked a lot like this. The trees were a little different, they were sort of like real bushy big nullbreaks of some kind. This is just as pretty if not more so.”

“Where was it?”

She had to snap back from a reverie. “It was down the other side of the interconnects, I don’t know exactly where. Navigation is a subject I didn’t study. It was on a group of islands like this but out in Center Lake. The boat stopped

there for a Nightday and Dawnsleep so it must have been turned around the other way because we left about lunch time on Morningday. Anyway I loved that place, I'm going to plank up a place just like it here."

"There's a hunting club that claims this land."

"Do you know them?" she asked.

"Yeah, a couple of them, Beson and Ulmari."

"Can you get me in touch with them?"

"Now? None of us have gadgets."

"No, ever; soon. I want to make arrangements to buy a piece of it from them."

"They're all sworn never to sell their interest to someone who would build. They can only sell their interest to someone who would also swear never to sell to someone who would build. That's what this preserve's all about. They have it in every registry in Sinbara. There's a photoglass boulder with a copy of the charter where the club land begins at the end of East Island Road."

"I guess I could probably find a place on down the main beach also or even build a new house like that one down the bottom of the land I have now. I'd rather it faced east or west, especially not north." She went back to the water and splashed around a little, no more than ankle deep.

"Put a nice camp on your beach for the summer and stay at the main house thru the dark and the winter."

"I could do that. How'd you like to help build it?" she asked as she picked up a sandfish.

"I could," he said. He had another idea he wanted to talk

about first. She found another sandfish, they were nice big ones. “If we’d brought picnicking supplies we could do them,” he said.

“All we’re really missing is a knife,” she said.

“There’s one in the boat box,” Jorma replied, “but I don’t have fire.”

“I’ve got a lighter in my bag,” she said.

“I’ll bring that,” he said as he went to get it.

When he got back with the lighter she had gathered some sticks and stones and had a fire ready on the dry part of the beach, right in front of those steps she outlined in the sand. He cleaned the knife with sand, water and fire, then cleaned the sandfish. He filleted and trussed them on bridge sticks of fallen hangleaf spines. “What would you think of going and looking into Tdeshi’s death in the City?” he asked when they sat quietly watching the fish roast.

“As a reward for calling it that, I’ll consider it,” she said. “I came to this town because I was interested in finding out what caused my clone mother to leave this body.” She paused a second while he poked the fish into a little better position. “Besides that,” she continued, “it’s now well over two decades since I’ve been in the Yakhan. It would be good to get back for a visit.” She further rewarded him by cuddling closer so he could hold her.

Jorma had spent the better part of Morningday at the Sinbara Eye consulting maps and shipping schedules so he could discuss it with her. When he referenced a detailed map of the urban area, covering the hundred miles centered on the Yakhan itself, he saw that Chardovia was near the edge of the

map just west of north, sixty five miles by water north of the center city.

The detailed location of the address on that map was well down the lake below Chardovia, another day on a small-lake lugger or half a day on a bumpy coach spending twice as much. They could take a fast cat from the Yakhan to Chardovia in half a week with rates for working and non-working passengers. The working passengers could bid for positions as lofty as cook but couldn't get to the upper deck where the sail was tended.

He had seen these canal and lake ships before. They were called 'lake runners' and his tales of them might have helped persuade Tdeshi she needed to see the urban world for herself. His descriptions of the megalopolitan area were probably the only thing Tdeshi had to guide her when she went down there the first time. She never got time on an eye. Neither did he when he first went down there. He went late in the 54th, a century before her, when even Bhangyon didn't have an eye. But he had looked up recent printed references and periodicals of the time, the Highlands were all well known and civilized for many centuries before then, many basin-wide publications had been printing for twenty centuries. No doubt Tdeshi could have looked up new versions of the same periodicals. Several of Sinbara's libraries always had several dozen magazines from the Yakhan that were less than ten years old.

"So how do you want to go about our quest?" he asked as they sat by the fire.

She was still fiddling with the circle of stones she had

around it. “I could make this fire place one I would have on the beach of my house, not the main fireplace inside.” She was cuddled up against him, his arm was wrapped around her and resting against the bottom of her breasts. This was about as close as she would be casual about. “What quest? Getting to that address?” she asked.

“Yes. Now I know where Chardovia is, I was working the maps on the Eye all Morningday. It’s about a day and a sleep north of the Yakhan on a needleboat. I want to say right from the start it isn’t worth getting off somewhere and going ashore north of the Yakhan to be closer to Chardovia. I think we should take a deep water boat right into a downtown harbor where we’ll rent a needleboat.”

“And in the interconnects?” She asked, not saying a word about the needleboat. Tdeshi probably would have been excited about it, he was so afraid Ava would object to it as a frivolous expense when they could just be dull and wait for a public one.

“Just stay on it,” he said about the interconnects. “We can find a sailor going all the way to the Yakhan down at Bhangyon or Zharvai. If the boat’s not too big it makes no slower progress thru the canals than any other keda-drawn vessel, but on the lakes of the interconnects it sails open once again. The first class mail ships are the best at making this run, but they only take crew and only experienced.”

“I’m not an experienced sailor, I’d rather go as passenger. I have income coming in that more than covers our time on the ship, unless it is some resplendent thing I wouldn’t be comfortable on anyway. I can keep house for myself, but I

think you are more interested in speed than comfort?” Ava asked.

“Yes, my ideal traveling arrangement would be to help crew a racing sloop with the Yakhan as the finish line in a half-laker.”

“I’m afraid I would be in the way on a racing sloop.”

“You’re not in really bad condition, just physically lazy. You could learn to be of some help as live ballast on a racing sloop.”

“So you want me to crew?” Ava asked skeptically.

“It would get us there faster. A passenger boat has to make stops in several ports.”

“Not if it was a full boat to a far destination,” she said. “We could get a deep water packet to Zharvai, then a good canal boat thru the whole interconnect and then a big-water liner thru to the Yakhan. It might be a few weeks longer than your racing sloop, but it will still be quick and not nearly as much trouble.”

In spite of all the previous surprises, this still took him awhile to comprehend. This was very unlike Tdeshi, she would have started out with asking to climb up top and do that rigging and grudgingly get talked down to a winch. He wasn’t formally educated in genetics, but he really thought energy level would have been an inherited characteristic. He would have thought sexuality would also have been a much more inherited feature than it had turned out to be in this clone daughter of Tdeshi’s. Tdeshi could not have withstood being cooped up in a cabin or lounging on the deck. “So what will we do all that time we’re idle on the boat?” he asked her,

as if she hadn't thought of it.

“I like to read and watch the shore go by. You should try some reading. You know this isn't the only culture in this world, the novels from the Yondure basin have a certain difference to them, it makes you think about what other times and places must be like. I've got a funny one from the early 40's about three wet-nurses in a big castle with seventeen babies that you would like.”

“I think you already know I'm not one to sit and read,” though he might watch that story about the wet nurses if it was made into a movie. “I'd rather row the ship than read. My only reason to be on water is to get somewhere or haul a catch and I'd like to be able to devote my energy to helping us get there.”

“I understand. What would you think of us traveling separately? You go as crew and I'll come along as passenger in a few weeks.”

“And what will I do while I'm waiting for you?”

“Go see if Tdeshi had any records there at the Kassikan.”

“Wouldn't you have found them already?”

“I didn't know the name Tdeshi. I've known myself as Ava all my life. Now that I know this body was named Tdeshi in it's former life, we could look up all the records under the name Tdeshi and see if the pictures and thumb print match.”

“So you never checked to see if your print matched one in the records?”

“There are twenty seven million thumb prints in the main public archives, it would take paid staff years to walk the tree and there would be many matches close enough to mine to

cause experts to debate for years.”

“I see. The Kassikan is a big place, I know.” He poked at the fish a bit, it needed turning to cook evenly. “I don’t think I’d be able to do much without you. Let’s just get there as soon as we can.”

“This trail is twenty decades old, another few weeks, even another year, isn’t going to matter. If you were in a hurry to pick up Tdeshi’s trail, you should have done it when she first went missing, or when you first heard she’d O.D.d, you shouldn’t have waited til her daughter appeared twenty decades later.”

Yes he should have, why didn’t he? He knew there were reasons at the time, but the memories were foggy now. Instead he talked about his more immediate reasons. “I don’t want to be away from my house that long,” Jorma admitted. “I’ve left it damn near abandoned all summer. If I never show up at all for years people will probably start to think it really is abandoned. But when Tdeshi went down she went down as paid crew on a fast livestock boat, more because of her skill with livestock than sail, but still, she was paid to go.”

“I’m a different person, as you might have noticed.”

“Her energy was one of the things I used to admire most,” he said.

“Then you must not admire me.”

“But you are in that energetic body.”

“A body’s behavior is what the nerve impulses tell it to be. If there is no electricity coming out of the nerves to stimulate the muscles, the body will lie there limp like mine does and waste away. I have to remember to eat and get some sun and

exercise. I'm much more cerebral than physical."

"Tdeshi was not, Tdeshi was physical in more than just sex."

"With you around that's all the exercise I need," Ava told him.

"You would be almost a vegetable."

"I could be happy as a plant," she said.

"I cannot be a plant. How could you have changed so much in this regard?" he asked.

"Because I've never changed a bit," she turned toward him and stared. "I was always this way. Because I am Ava, I am not Tdeshi. I was born or cooked up under that pyramid back in 100,00,23. Like I tried to tell you, Tdeshi is dead, the body lived and grew a new soul, me, Ava, but the person you knew died. She had a daughter named Ava. I will be different in many other ways. I will be the same in many more ways also. I hope the ways we are the same are the ways you liked about Tdeshi. I hope the ways we're different are the ways you didn't like about Tdeshi. I see that in this case we missed out. As long as I'm fed and have a warm and sunny place to sit and read, I'm fine."

The sandfish were toasted thru by this time so Jorma took them off the fire by the ends of the sticks and set them on the rocks so they could cool enough to handle. Even after half a year with this clone daughter, he just wasn't ready to give Tdeshi up completely. "I don't believe there is nothing of Tdeshi's soul left in you," Jorma said, "I've known you all summer now, there's lot's of Tdeshi left in you."

"I have her coordination, that sense of where your limbs

are and where they should be. I recognized that as soon as I awoke. You know I've kept her sexuality."

He almost choked but then said, "Yes, you're starting to catch on to it lately." He didn't say, 'that is the least thing you've kept,' because he thought that could lead to an argument that would sew it shut. "You should be like the same person, just brought up in different places by different parents, like an identical twin separated at birth." Then he thought of something that a place like the Kassikan just might have the wizardry to pull off. "Or were you really given an RNAcid trip of someone else's life?" He noticed a look of shock come across her face. Could it be the truth? He felt a chill of fear.

"I am her clone daughter," she said with a bit of heat. "I stand by that relationship. I went to the registries and added 'Clone daughter of Tdeshi, grand daughter of Leand and Colandro Jaseem' because you have given me those facts of Tdeshi's life. Tdeshi had a clone daughter, that's who I am."

"I think you are more than that," he said, "There are things about you that don't make sense, you're too much of a loner." He noticed his own anger growing, was he starting to get angry at the Kassikan for taking Tdeshi, and thereby Leand, from him, or was the anger really directed at himself for letting her get away?

"I have you and my neighbors," she answered, trying to regain a calm demeanor. "You're the first person here from her past, and so far the only person from her past, that I'm at all comfortable with."

"What's wrong with your other old friends?"

“Her other old friends. They want to kill me to bring my mother back. It won’t even work, she’s dead and gone. Whatever everyone forgot to say to Tdeshi, it’s too late. They have to understand that.”

Why did that crack hurt so much? He tried not to let her see that. “You have to forgive them, they forget,” he was able to pick up the fish now and get a bite of it.

“You forget too often, Naarb’n not only doesn’t get it right, he argues with me about it, says my ‘real’ name is Tdeshi.”

“You really can’t expect people to change a name they’ve been using for twenty four decades.”

“And you can’t expect me to change a name I’ve been using for twenty. Especially when I’ve had it in daily use while her friends have all had her name on a shelf.”

She had a point. “If you were around them more they might get it right eventually.”

“I have new friends here that get it right all the time, maybe when the remainder of Sinbara knows me as Ava they’ll get it right.”

That was another good point. In the last few weeks they’d been around the old friends issue a few times already. He knew it was useless trying to change her opinion of them now. He was the only old friend she’d kept. She did have a few new friends who knew her as Ava on North Island, she seldom went to the mainland except for business. She picked up her fish by now and started on it. “So what do you think makes you so different socially?” he asked.

“The way I entered this world I think.”

“And exactly how was that?”

“Do you want to hear the whole detail story? It might take until these fish are gone.”

“I do, you never really told me the details.”

“O.K. It went something like this... I woke up in total darkness knowing nothing, my whole universe was as black as if I was blind. I could move, but not well. My limbs responded crazily, I had no coordination at first. I immediately found that I was in a very confined area, nothing more than a box, a very low, narrow box, about the size of a coffin. I knew I'd been left for dead or buried alive, but then I found I was in a drawer that I slid out of in random panic. I barely remembered how to walk, barely remembered there was an up and down. The room was dimly lit in an eerie dark green with nothing but drawers full of zombies in its walls. This was totally unfamiliar and frightening. There were tubes of embalming fluid running into my veins that I ripped out painfully.

“I ran thru a lattice of corridors and up and down stairways to identical floors of catacombs. I was just about convinced that was all there was to the entire universe when I finally heard people. I burst thru a door into a dimly lit room with a sunken circle of six thrones with ornate helmets hanging over them, helmets connected by fibers to a huge onion of glowing crystal at least fifteen feet high right in the center of that circle of thrones. There were white-haired men in robes sitting under those helmets conversing with visions in that crystal.” She cut off suddenly and took a big bite of her fish.

“That does sound pretty scary,” Jorma said and shuddered. It was in fact too scary for him, his worst nightmare of the Kassikan. Even the blockbuster horror movies didn’t have scenes like that. He felt so bad for her, but then wondered what she could really be like in the long run after an origin like that. The fact that she still knew the basics of life seemed like a key fact however. “But it sounds more like waking up in that lab with total amnesia to me.”

He knew immediately that this was not a good thing to say to her, even though she could certainly see that it was true. She didn’t have a come-back for it, she really couldn’t, he could see the frustration within her. That was probably why it hurt her more, because she knew he was right. He had almost finished his fish while she talked, she had eaten little of hers while she narrated. She put it back over the fire to re-heat, then went back to the boat and got her short-leg body sweater. A field of puffball clouds had come up, it would probably cloud up for the dusk. But for now it was sunny most of the time and still pretty warm so she didn’t button it up. In fact she rolled up the sleeves to her shoulders.

She ate her fish silently. As she was finishing he said, “I’m sorry if telling you it sounded like amnesia hurt you. I didn’t mean it to hurt you.”

“Jorma, I’ll summarize once more. I began life in a black box, knowing little more than how to perform my basic bodily functions like breath, walk, eat, drink, piss, talk. I was able to walk, I thought I was in a tomb. I know I shouldn’t have known what a tomb was, but it reminded me of death, maybe because my previous soul had just died. Maybe I

brought that much into my new life. I thought I was walking back from death. It is my belief that Tdeshi's body remained intact, but a new mind had to be installed. They weren't quite done installing it when I woke up. I wasn't real normal the first few years of my life. Then I lived with a Yingolian for three decades, that didn't help. Tdeshi didn't have to go thru all that. The walking back from death in the deep labs was way too important to me, for way too long."

"Maybe that accounts for what I see in you sometimes."

"Oh, what?"

"Something more haunted than Tdeshi could have been," he said, but wondered if it was true as he said it. Was he talking of the Tdeshi that was, or the Tdeshi he wished for?

"Maybe," she said, "It wasn't easy being born that way. If I ever panic over a nightmare, you could be seeing me going where I don't want to."

"Where's that?"

"The dark and secret labs where I was HATCHED!" She jumped up and cackled, then paced off a few steps and turned around. She was tense, that was like Tdeshi, "I stayed in the open labs after that, but I wonder if being born in a lab is something I'll never really get out of my soul."

"Just change 'lab' to 'studio' and that last sentence sounds exactly like one Tdeshi gave me about going off to the Yakhan. Jaseem painted to amuse herself you know, your body was born in a room with the smell of paint and many unfinished canvases lining the walls. Anyway, I know how you feel about it," Jorma said. "I'm glad it was you and not me, you're much more sane than I would be if that happened

to me. I'd be in the farthest basin from the Kassikan for one thing.”

“I don't feel normal,” she said, “I think I knew that from the start, but look at it this way, even if Tdeshi had not been lost, she would not be the person who left here so long ago. Without the shonggot and a new personality grown in her place, the Yakhan would have changed her. I know because I've been changed there several times. She might have remembered your face, even remembered having sex with you, but she still wouldn't have been the girl you knew before. That still does not make me her continuation.”

“I understand,” he said. “She probably would have changed to be more like you are now.” In truth he was getting tired of these lectures. “May I still love the person you've become? Maybe I'm not looking for the person that left here either?” There was definitely a core of truth in that. In almost every way but sex, she had become what he wanted to make of Tdeshi.

“That could be,” she admitted, “and if so, I'm glad you're not.”

“Are you still interested in finding out what happened?”

“I am interested in finding out what happened to her for you,” she answered.

“I will always remember Tdeshi.” There was too much wistfulness in his voice as he said that. Too much unfinished business from those distant days.

“And so you will pine away for someone who is gone?”

He pined, but more for the friendship with Leand than Tdeshi. He had thought of Tdeshi only rarely in the past

twenty one decades, but a lot of Leand. He would not argue about pining. “You still have a part of her,” his hopefulness whined, “cloned daughter with different life experiences. I know you see something more every day in which you are like her. You know we re-discover every time we spend the sleep together new ways that you are similar to her.”

“Jorma, that is just you training a sexually naive girl to do the things you enjoyed most from the woman you enjoyed in the past, maybe even your glorified memories of the past. I never studied sex before. You’re just teaching me to do what Tdeshi did.”

“I think it was in you all along.”

“Yes? We do have the same body, and I do enjoy it all and certainly do get my exercise.”

“No, you know what I mean, you feel and smell like Tdeshi now.”

“If a person is just a body, I am Tdeshi. But if there is a soul that inhabits that body, I am Ava. Ava will go with you to the city to find out what happened to her mother, Tdeshi. But Tdeshi will not be going with you to find out how and why she died. Do you understand that?” She was glaring at him now. He understood how mad she was, he knew how forceful she could be when she wanted to.

“Yes Ava, I understand that. We will see what happened to you, to make you what you are,” he said. “I’m glad you are with me in finding out what happened, you would be if you were Tdeshi.” This would be an adventure, score points for Tdeshi, score points for Ava. He would be the judge, what surprised him as different would score points for Ava, what

surprised her when he saw Tdeshi in her scored points for Tdeshi. When Tdeshi scored, it was heredity, when Ava scored it was life experience. Together they would try to keep each other honest as they investigated this problem.

“So are we settled on our transportation?” Ava asked.

“I’m not sure, I want something to do and being on the crew is a good way to get to know an area.”

“I think watching from the deck and listening to conversations around the taps are as good.”

“How many taps do you hang around?”

“When I’m traveling?” Ava asked.

“Yeah?”

“Just about all of them,” she said with a wan smile, then changed the subject to... “So what is your history?”

“I’m four centuries older than you, a century and a half older than Leand. I come from the early 52nd. I remember the lake level ceremonies and when the first suntowers were put back into operation. Communication has been improving rapidly in more than just the twenty decades that you’ve seen. The breakthru of manufacturing suntower devices was due and would have happened without contact with another star.”

“That’s not what I thought when I was there in the Kassikan studying it.” She gave him a long lecture full of technical terms and references to the Yingolians to prove her point.

“So how do you know all that?” he asked, not admitting that he understood little of it.

“It was my life, I studied the technology of YingolNeerie

and something of the world called Earth also.”

“But all we know is from that one starship.”

“At the Kassikan there are records of three starship visitations to Kassidor, besides the one we now know must have happened to get us humans here. There was a micro-planet in the 54th century, the ghost ship in the later 55th, and the Brazilian ship in the early 100th. That’s the one that everyone calls ‘the starship.’”

“I remember that one, it was only a few years after Tdeshi left here,” Jorma said.

“When Tdeshi was born, the ‘ghost’ ship as the press called it, was already gone.”

“I vaguely remember something about a ghost ship, it didn’t get as much publicity. It left before Tdeshi was born, although a pebble did remain as I remember.”

“It is there, what people call Narrulla’s Tear. Part of it is the Brazilian starship, but most of what you see are like leaves. That’s where the last Angels live. One lived there by herself since before Tdeshi was born. I’ve heard there is a new one there now also.”

“What are they?” Jorma asked. “Those ghosts?”

“They’d like to be called Angels or simulates. They are people simulated with electricity in silicon crystals.”

“What?” That meant less than nothing to him.

She tried to give him a long science lesson about how thought was nerve impulses and by using enough of their electric crystals the Yingolian’s could make an artificial mind that lived inside the silicon. That reminded him of the Dark Lord, an evil warlock from the Energy Age in Middle Elven

history. It was said he preserved his soul inside a great crystal atop a black tower after he was killed. He could only think of it as some kind of ghost and shook with revulsion.

“There’s only two left,” Ava told him with some exasperation. Being a sorceress from the Kassikan, she was not as repulsed by such things, “and lately it seems that all those at YingolNeerie might have been destroyed or powered down.”

He vaguely remembered hearing some version of this in the news at the time. He had never really believed in much of the starship tales, but it was clear Ava did. At the time, he wanted very much to believe the scientists who said the ‘ghost ship’ was nothing more than some outgassing comet fragments. “Yes, all other boulders of that asteroid string were gone before you were born.”

“Before Tdeshi was born,” she corrected, accusing him of a pronoun infraction.

“Yeah, before her too.” he could sneak out of this slip, “I didn’t really pay a lot of attention so, yeah, if you say so.”

Ava looked like she knew she had caught him, but didn’t pursue it. They put the last sticks on the fire, the fish was long gone now. The tide had receded three inches since they pulled the boat up, but it was still bobbing.

“Will you share a cabin with me if we go as passenger?” Jorma asked. “I confess, I couldn’t afford my own and still rent a needleboat.”

“If you remember I’m Ava and Tdeshi is ‘her,’ not ‘you’ and if you don’t pester me for too much sex.”

“What’s too much?”

“Every single sleep.”

“I see.” He had been pestering her about that often.

Actually he wouldn't turn down going again when they woke up, Tdeshi usually wanted that. “Shall we hit the water once more while we have this hole in the clouds?” He was already up and walking toward it, Tdeshi's body excited his ardor even though their conversation had been closer to an argument than seduction. A dip would cool him. There would be direct sun for a good fraction of an hour before the next wave of clouds strode in. This one was marching off toward the flat lands, hiding the distant hills and making it look like they were on remote islands.

“I thought it might be a better time to make it across to snug island.”

He looked at the boat again and noticed that a couple feet more sand was exposed now than when they got here. The boat would be a lot heavier. “Actually, you're probably right, we better get the boat off now while we still can.”

Her hands went to her mouth, the next high tide was the middle of Nightday. The boat was still bobbing, that was a good sign, but the outrigger was completely aground. They could lift the outrigger out of the sand enough to drag the deeper end out. That put some of the main hull on sand, but now Jorma was able to put his back into the outrigger bar and jerk it back an inch if he put all his weight and strength into it. Ava tried to help by pushing the main hull. It was a pretty big boat, it definitely weighed over a ton loaded, it wasn't something you wanted to paddle around a lot.

With repeated heaves by both of them they were able to

get the end out into the water. With Ava aboard and Jorma lifting the bow, they were able to lift that enough to get free. So that was the end of their picnic on that beach, but the beginning of their serious plans to investigate Tdeshi's fate.

4. As Passenger

The rocking of the boat helped the rocking of their union. This was the most satisfying union he'd had with Ava yet, this was almost as vital as it had been with Tdeshi. He was concentrating on her involvement, trying to do what he guessed she wanted. She was still quiet when she came but she was strong and involved this time. There were times when she hadn't really 'been there' in some way. There were times it seemed like she was just allowing him to use her body, or to 'use Tdeshi's body' as she put it when she was angry. So far so good on this trip, but they were only on a small singlehull half way to Zharvai, only a day out of Sinbara.

"A work out like that once a week should keep me fit don't you think?" she asked when she got her breath back.

"Three a day might," he answered, "but I loved it. Your body is capable of doing that three times a day, every day."

"I can scarcely imagine," she panted.

They rolled to their sides but remained engaged. She sometimes did surprise herself with her sexuality, but she still had a long way to go to be Tdeshi. Of course Tdeshi was just grown with a new toy, now she had been Ava in a mature body for twenty decades already. She had spoken little of her

love affairs, they sounded pretty tepid and convenient to him, at least what he had heard so far. Her last serious one had been with a well-known personal adviser and service purveyor in the Yaghan. She had probably been more attracted to his fame than his person from the way she talked. Before that she had spent some decades with one of the Brazilians from the popular starship.

He wanted to believe the tales she told because it was a bit of a thrill to be into someone so close to celebrity. He could well imagine Tdeshi moving in the same circles, but she would have arrived there via a different route.

He brushed the hair back from her face. It was a very beautiful face, good to sleep with on a Noonsleep. Her face was very elegant and well shaped and smooth, an almond flavored creme in color, not quite as tan as one usually expected in this highland sunshine. Her eyes were still darting, they were the only part of her that had Tdeshi's energy. They had maybe a bit more of her nerves. He wondered if that was an aftereffect of the shonggot. It would have to be considered a permanent aftereffect if it was still active after all this time. "You are so beautiful right now," he said.

"All sweaty."

"The smile."

"Yes, yes, it was wonderful, it was too wonderful."

"How is that possible?" he asked.

"Three times a day could take up a lot of our time."

"And what else have we got but time," he asked, "now that we're traveling as passengers?"

“What about when we get there?”

“We have quite a few weeks to go, it will still be more than a year from Zharvai if the weather’s against us.” This was so like Tdeshi to feel like she had to be on duty in some way. “You’re here as passenger, so what if we spend a lot of time having the most fun we can have with ourselves?”

“I guess maybe I was Kluboeb in a former life.”

“You weren’t in any life I knew of. Leand was as unkluboeb as one can get. He firmly believed that your soul goes where the flame goes when you blow out a candle, it goes out when you die.”

“I don’t feel quite that strongly, I guess in the same analogy, I hope the candle can be re-lit.”

“There always comes a time when it can’t,” Jorma said, “but more than that, Leand and I both believe that life is the flame, not the candle. The candle is a dead body.”

“Then in that analogy, I am the re-lit candle, same candle, different flame.”

“Thank you, you have finally lead me to it on a gut level, now I feel it. You were re-lit.” He could say that, but could he really believe it?

“Right, Frankensteined back to life...”

“What?”

“It was an old story,” Ava told him. “I did say you should read more. In the distant past a primitive scientist sewed up a body out of parts and struck it with lightning and it came to life. I feel like I’m something of that.”

“I’m not familiar with the story but I see what it means,”

Jorma said. It sounded like another horror story, as bad as the electric ghosts she had talked about when they started planning this trip. “I’m glad I don’t feel that way about you or this position would be a little scary.” In spite of what he said, he did feel a little uneasy about it.

“Well, you did just slide out,” she said.

That was true, so he decided it was time to clean up. He had to admit that thinking of her as being sewed up out of Tdeshi’s body parts and jolted to life with lighting wasn’t conducive to erotic thoughts.

The city of Zharvai is on the great dam at the south end of North Lake. The dam is eleven miles long and up to seventeen hundred feet high at a point in the center of town. This is the deepest dam ever built by all known races of man at any time, even in the Energy Age. This was not from any such age, it was completed in the late 51st. Zharvai had grown surprisingly little in the century since he’d first seen it. It had barely passed five million, in a couple centuries Bhangyon would surpass it since it was now fourteen times as big as it was a century ago, when it was the same size as Sinbara. Zharvai crowded close on the dam, making use of water power and it’s position at the mouth of the interconnects.

They soon found a stout ship called the Brother’s Formidable that could take them to the docks of the Yakhan and would be landing well up on the north side of the center, saving them a lot of city traffic. It was a comfortable ship and Ava really liked it. It wasn’t too lavish for Jorma and looked like it could be fun. It was quite reasonably priced, he was

glad to see, even though Ava bought passage for both of them. However, it wasn't fast and it wasn't raising anchor for another week and a half. Jorma chafed at that, but since Ava was buying, he made the best of it.

As soon as they were settled into their new cabin, it was time for darkmeal, and as the kitchen of the ship wasn't stocked yet, they had to go ashore for it with a group of fellow passengers. Once it was over Ava told Jorma she really wished he'd leave her back on the boat with a full jug of lantern fuel, a full jug of yaag and a nice thick book while he went and saw the sights. She explained that she had sailed out of here little more than a year ago.

"So you can be our party guide," one of the girls at their table said.

"I'll guide you to a library or something," she said.

"You're not into city things?" one of the girls asked.

"Cities have the best libraries and Zharvai's is actually very good. It's got a little art museum on the side and an impressive collection of ancient manuscripts from Morlain and..."

"No, I mean city things like sex, drink, and music."

"All along the Konocongus, the third set of locks and canals from here, the one with the strobing lanterns," Ava was already beginning to move off in the direction of the dock.

"You sure you don't want to come with us?" One of the guys from the boat said.

"Nah, that library's over a mile and a half from here and a thousand feet lower."

So he stayed with the group they joined for darkmeal and

had a good time without her, but did worry a bit why she would want to prove her difference from Tdeshi so diligently that she would give up a good time.

Zharvai is a pretty lively city, much steeper on it's dam than the Yakhan, with a lot more styles of the northlands, grandiose Dwarven architecture, signs with sigils from Salvadoran times. There was a lively party scene with lots of after-dinner music of styles from various deeps. There were many women much more eager to enjoy bodily pleasures than Ava, so he made sure he wouldn't have to pester Ava for sex for the next week. The trysting suites were just as lavish as ever and had been kept up pretty well, though they had slipped a bit in price. Tdeshi would have enjoyed the foursome they had in a hot tub at one of those, but Ava would not. Jorma certainly did, both girls were vigorous and busty. He hadn't gotten back to the boat til Morningday started to show over the distant deeps.

They didn't talk about his night out, she was asleep, both jugs were empty, she was on her back with both quilts pulled up around her. He left her a note -I've already slept, didn't want to disturb you-. He grabbed his fishing gear, along with an extra fur and gloves and spent most of Morningday snoozing in the sunshine with a fishing pole.

5. Venna

The interconnect is a chain of lakes that links North and Center lakes together. They are connected by wide canals that

follow the contours of the relatively flat land in this area. There were some places where the canal cut thru the bank, and one interesting spot where this three hundred foot wide canal strode above the ground as an aqueduct for more than two miles, at one point passing a hundred and forty feet above a small river in a valley that looked stuck in a much earlier age. The interconnects span seven hundred miles in a straight line, but stretch eighteen hundred following the water. It would have been a lot more if it wasn't for the lakes, the cuts and the bridge.

The first major lake had been Entisonggass. It went well over three hundred miles inland if one followed it, but they had only crossed it, a hundred twenty mile sail, just out of sight of land except for the stop under the tallest towers of Entisonggass City at the southern end of that dam. That city has clearly grown larger than Zharvai in the last century.

Now they were in the second dark on the three hundred eighteen miles of canal, aqueduct and small lakes that lay beyond Entisonggass, the longest canal in the interconnect. It was getting into Dusksleep and there was a bit of tide running with them. They were in a deep cut here, the masts couldn't have reached over it if they had to. There were tall trees all along it. The custom of growing your food vertically on tall trees had caught on well here. The population is almost as dense as a city and the street on the dam side of the canals and lakes is such that it could almost be called one eighteen hundred mile city from Zharvai to Chessanishaw.

He was dressed warmly and had his best fur around him, and this was only Dusksleep. It felt like there would be frost

before Nightday even began and this was nearly mid summer. The raw wind probably made it seem colder than it actually was, but he had felt warmer in below freezing conditions. The crew might have to break ice to continue during Dawnsleep, he would probably join them. Jorma had not volunteered for the crew. He often stood watch, but did not tend sail. They hardly ever used any sail here, just poles and wheel-spars that bore on the well shaped curb stones of the canal.

He was on the starboard foredeck in a deck chair right near the door. He was content to watch most of the time, most of the crew were housekeepers and he would have to be pretty bored to volunteer for that duty. On small water there wasn't enough work for the sailors already aboard. He often conversed with the sleep shift crew and they agreed this wasn't really sailing. Those that had sailed open water agreed it was North Lake that was the biggest water and one of them knew a guy he'd sailed with. They were just coming to duty and this was one of those shifts he wouldn't stand if he didn't have to.

Ava was inside the ship this Dusksleep, probably actually sleeping. She would be awake for breakfast. Nightday would see them under sail again on Vooshtian, the second big lake on the interconnect. Jorma had a hard time sleeping while the ship was moving thru the canal, something about the sparwheels rolling along the bank made it impossible. Under sail on open water he slept like a keda in a scrape.

Of course, the fact that he and Ava weren't sharing a cabin any more put a crimp in his social plans. A week ago she moved in with another guy, someone who never got her

confused with his former lover. Of course not, he had no history with her. What would she do when they arrived at the Yakhan? Would she put ashore before then? Had she already? He hadn't actually seen her since last shift.

It had just happened out of the blue. They hadn't had a bad argument, just a couple cross words when he'd used the pronoun 'you' to refer to something of Tdeshi, it might have even been something of the body. After that duskmeal she'd decided she'd room with one of their table mates instead of Jorma. So casual, like he was nothing to her. 'I hope you don't mind but I'm going to room with Klanden.' A year since they met, all the plans they made for this investigation and she can just say, 'no problem, I'll just move down the walk a couple cabins'.

There was something that bothered him about Ava, something in the way she ran from her past, her past in the form of Jorma and all her old friends, her past in the form of Tdeshi. Ava kept saying it was coming to life in a crypt that made her strange, but he'd heard those stories and thought that still didn't account for it. He began to wonder more about Tdeshi being given an RNacid of someone else's life. If that was the case, she would have come to the body with an existing identity, that was really the way she was acting.

Her discomfort in his presence was definitely part of it. That was what had driven her to Klanden's cabin. Maybe it was because Klanden was cool enough himself that she wouldn't have to get too much exercise, that was the other thing that seemed to drive her away. They were quite mismatched in libido, he had failed to remember that also that

duskmeal. That was probably what she hated the most about Tdeshi, having to live up to her sexuality.

He knew he should be trying to figure out what other females on this boat weren't paired off, but still hoped that this incident would soon blow over. He knew there were many active women and had sampled two of them so far, but it was understood both times he was just stopping by for a boink on the way to his cabin. Ava/Tdeshi was the reason he was on this boat. If that reason was gone from his life, he should get off. He might even get some of his passage refunded, not that he needed to, not that he had paid it. He was an experienced big-water sailor and could get passage anywhere. Or was his curiosity so worked up now that he would pursue Tdeshi's death anyway, with or without Ava?

He wondered if there was a dual personality thing going on in her? Sometimes Tdeshi's persona would be active and they would get along, like they did before Zharvai. Sometimes Ava would come to power, the one from the dark and secret labs of the Kassikan. He wondered if Tdeshi would gain control again. If so, he could be ready for her if he stayed on this voyage.

He had dropped about a shift in his waking hours, but hadn't entertained a new social agenda this week. Part of it was stubbornness over losing Leand's daughter a second time. If this went on for another week, he would have to decide between making new friends or giving up the quest. He could go another week with only casual company if he had to, but saw no reason to bother if it was pointless. He would find some company on the way back north if that was

the case. As he thought about that, he heard footsteps coming up from below on the stairway behind him.

“Cold and quiet out here isn’t it?” a husky woman’s voice said. He turned and saw a woman as tall and slender as Tdeshi, a bit more curve above, a bit less below. She had a burst of dark red curls framing her round face, and a long thick knit that she was clutching around herself.

“You’re the first person I’ve seen out here who isn’t on duty,” Jorma said.

“It’s so smokey in the grill room.” That was amidship where there was a hearth and taps. It was the only place with refreshments on the ship unless you had something in your cabin.

Jorma did, but it was getting low and it wasn’t as good as what the barrels amidships contained. “I can’t believe it’s this cold this early in the week.”

“Me neither,” she answered. “Especially this time of year.”

“If you come sit with me I’ll do my best to help you keep warm,” he said, hoping for contact with her supple body.

She did. She sat on the bench beside him with one leg wrapped around his. He wrapped his arm around her, she snuggled close, accepted his hands on her and rubbed his legs. He suspected she might be as interested in some social activity as he was for she had an impish wide grin.

“I’ve seen you around but I don’t think we’ve met, my name is Jorma.”

“I’m Venna,” she said and kissed his cheek. “You’ve been with that dark haired woman when I’ve seen you so I didn’t

butt in.”

“Ava,” he told her, “But she moved down the aisle to Klanden’s.” He tipped his head in that direction but she wasn’t watching. “I always saw you with the same guy the times I’ve seen you.”

“Oh Bilmore,” she said. “Yeah I know him, but we’re not together. I did stay in his cabin a couple sleeps but he doesn’t want me staying with him cuz he likes to get around.”

“If you’re without a cabin, I’m alone in mine.”

“Well, I’ve found places I could go, I just haven’t gone to any of them yet. It isn’t that late.”

“It just feels like it is.”

“Yeah, but I’m warm enough cuddled up.” She turned a little and that allowed him to caress her chest. “Mmmm, that warms me up more.” She gave him a lascivious grin, letting him know just how it warmed her and snuggled up closer to him, making him pretty sure that their interests aligned. She folded her legs over his and turned so his arms could slide inside the big-knit without opening it and he could pull his fur around them both. She had a thin jersey inside the big-knit and she felt great with only that between her soft flesh and his hands. She was much fuller in the chest, though was not as sleek and quite a bit more muscular, maybe how Tdeshi would feel today. “Actually, it feels more like Dawnsleep than Dusksleep. It’s been years since it’s been this cold this early.”

“How late is it?” he asked.

“It’s only about four hours since Duskmeal.”

“And it’s this dark?”

“The air’s so clear it got dark as soon as Kortrax winked

good-by. Look at the stars!” she said and leaned back to look up and to give his hand better room to roam. “Cold air must magnify them. Do you know which one the starship came from?”

“It’s not visible this time of year, in three weeks it will begin to show in the southeast at this time of the week I think.”

“I’ll have forgotten about it by then,” she said. “I wonder how many other stars have starships?”

“Like all other humans, I don’t know. The people who came on that starship never found any life that could be seen with the naked eye elsewhere in the universe til they reached this planet right here. They were shocked to find humans here. They don’t know how we got here any better than we do. They couldn’t have left us here, the Yingolians just invented starships a little over a century ago. On the scale of the galaxy, they haven’t gotten much farther than we have.”

“Just sixty one light years farther is what I heard.”

“Yeah.”

“So how do you know so much about the Yingolians?” she asked.

“That woman you saw me with, she’s from the Kassikan and she’s been working with them and their technology since they got here. She knows three of them personally.”

“Oh?” Venna acted very interested in that. “Is she famous also?”

“I don’t think so. Have you ever heard of her?”

“Ava? No,” Venna answered. “I knew a guy named Ava once, but he wasn’t famous, he had a fish weir in the southern

shallows (of North Lake, Jorma figured, though there wasn't a lot of shallow water there)."

"I guess she's known in technical circles," Jorma said, "But I hadn't heard of her before I met her."

"How did you meet?"

"She's the clone daughter of a girl I once knew, Tdeshi. Tdeshi was the daughter of one of my best friends." He thought it best to tell the story from Ava's point of view, just in case there was a chance they could patch things up and continue the investigation. If he told this girl she'd had total amnesia, that would certainly get back to Ava on a boat this small and make reconciliation all that much harder.

"Something happened to her mother. We were going back to her last address to investigate."

"You were? And now you're not?" Venna asked.

He must have put too much stress on the 'were', "Well, she did just move to Klanden's a week ago."

"Has she spoken to you since?"

"Not really, she's been polite but has not conversed."

"So that's why you've got room in your cabin?"

"Yeah, that's about as deep as that goes."

"Are you sure you want to take me in?"

"My initial impression is yes."

"I'll stay the sleep with you," she said, "and let you make your mind up tomorrow about anything more. How soon are you going to your sleep?"

"In your company I would be glad to retire to my cabin now."

“Yeah?” she turned to look at him, saw that he meant it. “OK, lets, I’m not uncomfortable, but I’m sure we’d be warmer there.” She began unwrapping herself from him and stood up.

“Yeah, it’s the same as all the topdeck cabins.” He stood also and went thru the door and up the steps, then began leading along the rail toward it. The rail here inside overlooked the galley and taps. At least a third of the passengers were still there, lounging at tables, drinking, chatting and watching projected video.

She wrapped her knit snugly around herself and wrapped herself around him. “Topdeck; nice. Bilmore’s in the middle below.” Her hands were caressing his butt when she suddenly stopped. “My bag’s down the other way, I’ll hurry.” She ran back out onto the foredeck of the far side. She was soon back, breathing a little more deeply, like Tdeshi would have, not Ava. Ava would have taken her sweet time or asked him to get it. Venna took his arm and left her knit open for it, then caught it with her other arm so the one on this side could get at his butt again. He bunched it for her, that made her purr and rub both her tits on his arm. He wished his cabin was seven city blocks instead of just a few doors down because he had to break that spell by turning to open the door.

“Right here?” she asked.

“Yeah, I was sitting at the closest bench.”

The cabin is the standard for this boat. It has a few square feet of floor, a nice big bed that two can actually sleep on and a little bench and pull-down table at the other end of the foot of the bed. There’s a good big cabinet above the headboard

and plenty of hooks over the foot upon which most of his clothing was hanging. There was a tiny basin with hot water next to the door and a comfortable toilet compartment.

“Ah, it’s warmer in here,” she said while he grabbed that clothing down and moved it to some of the hooks over the front wall. She dropped the knit on the bench.

He turned on a dim golden glow with lots of swirl for the ceiling. “I’ve got a burner candle I can light,” he told her, “That will make it a little warmer still.”

“I’d rather cuddle under the quilt and get acquainted, if it’s OK with you. I’m not one for formal sitting up.”

Jorma noticed again how she acted and felt more like Tdeshi while Ava only looked like her. “Three quarters of that cabinet is empty if you want to put your stuff up,” he invited.

“There are a couple things that could use some air.” She emptied her bag on the bed and put a couple things on hooks above the bench, then hung up her knit. She put the remainder of her things back in the bag and put that in the cabinet. Then she came over to where he was leaning back and began to press her body to him. He tongued her thru her dress. “I like a guy who can get deep into my tits. I’d like you to lick my nibs til they show thru. Showing is another vice of mine.”

“I like a woman who isn’t afraid to admit what she wants.” That had been one of Tdeshi’s strong points in sex, sometimes so strong that the people in the next house would know exactly what she wanted and how she wanted it and what she thought of it when she got it. Ava was completely opposite. She tried her best not to give him a hint, made it as big a challenge as possible to get her off. Like she was

playing ‘ha-ha you can’t make me come’. Tdeshi just wanted to come, that was how she scored at sex.

Her hand was probing for hardness in his loins and finding quite a bit and more on the way. She drew it out and palmed it. This woman obviously wanted to have sex, the sooner the better. He put his hand under her tee and began to ease it up, caressing the curve of her butt. With her free hand she snatched it off and lay down on him, drawing the quilt over them. Her only comment was a giggle, and the romp was on.

“I’m sorry I was so desperate,” she said as they lay panting afterward. “I’ve waited outside Bilmore’s cabin twice in the past week and haven’t had one of my own.”

“I thought you said you had places you could go.”

“There are degrees of desperation. I was desperate to get laid, but by a hot guy.”

That was a shocking thing to say. Tdeshi had said almost the same thing to him the first sleep they spent together. He wondered if there was something supernatural going on here. Tdeshi’s body with Ava’s personality, and now this girl Venna’s body with Tdeshi’s personality. Not that the bodies were that much different, just their faces and coloration.

“Thank you for saving yourself for me,” he said, trying to come up with something before she thought he was off in another world.

“And thank you too. I thought you’d be good, I’m glad I can still tell.”

“Still?”

“Yeah, It’s been a while since I’ve had to go out and hunt.”

“In other words you recently broke up with someone important.”

“Well, not that recently, I’ve been a few years in Zharvai, but we were a pair for ages, three decades anyway, on and off. That’s a quarter of my life!” she said, like it surprised her. She got up and grabbed the towel from the lavatory. “I really don’t have to stay here if you’d rather not, I really do thank you for the sex though.”

“Venna, if you don’t mind, I’d like you to stay.”

“It will be warmer,” she agreed.

That was something he hoped she would value on a cold dark like this. “What would you do? Sleep in a lifeboat on the upper deck?”

“I can find places.”

“Please stay.”

“I’m staying, I’m staying, I just don’t want to drip cum on you half the night. I’m glad to stay as long as I’m welcome. You know sometimes a girl runs into guys who just want a quickie and then have you on your way.”

“Not me,” he said, “And don’t throw that towel far, we might need it again.”

She put it over the cabinet handles and kissed him before curling up in his arms. She was sleeping in minutes with her curls all the way down his arm. In the dark, this was the only difference, Tdeshi had never had curls, Venna had billows of them. She woke up a little and clutched his hand a little tighter to her chest, just the way Tdeshi used to, twenty one

decades ago.

6. Only For the Sex

The next Morningday at lunch was the next time he got to talk to Ava. Venna had kept him busy both sleeps of the dark and all of Nightday, but today she had wandered off. It could be that she was as casual as the first girls he had met, and if so, he had better be sure what his plans were regarding Tdeshi. Yeah, he could have some fun on this boat, and a vacation in the Yakhan might be interesting, but Bhangyon seemed to be all the city he really needed any more. If they were no longer going to investigate Tdeshi, he might as well know it now. But even from here, not yet halfway down the interconnect, summer would be almost over by the time he made it back to Sinbara.

They were up at a bow of the ship, a place that would be busy during the weeks they would spend on the belly of that open water, but now it was pretty quiet. The wheel arm rolling along, the wheel man half asleep watching it. It had just warmed up enough to take their warm clothing off now that they had finished lunch.

He had gotten Ava to agree to talk with him, saying they needed to for business reasons. She had wanted to talk right there in the galley, but he convinced her to come out here where it was a little more private. “I just wanted you to know I’m thinking of getting off at the next port.”

“Oh, why?”

“Because it seems that our plans have changed.”

“How?” she asked.

“We were going to investigate Tdeshi,” he said.

“And how as that changed?”

“You’re with Klanden now.”

“How does that change anything else?” she asked.

“Because we’re separate now, there is no ‘we.’”

“The ‘we’ that will investigate Tdeshi still exists, it’s just the ‘we’ who share a bed that has changed.” She drew a breath and continued, “You know what this sounds like to me?” she asked.

“No.”

“It sounds like I have to share a bed with you as your price for cooperation on this investigation.”

“I think it says I was doing this for a friend.”

“I thought you were doing this for Tdeshi?”

“I was going down there for Ava also. We weren’t casual shipboard companions I thought, the work I did on your house alone should show you how important you are to me. But hey, if you want to just slap that all aside, I’ll give you the maps and that postcard, I would not go on this trip if it weren’t for your company.”

“I’m sorry, I’m still convinced you’re doing it for Tdeshi’s company.”

Jorma was overcome by her coldness. “Do you hate your clone-mother that much?” was his reply.

“I probably would have loved her, had I ever seen her.”

“Every time you look in the mirror.”

“I’m not surprised I look like her. This is all stuff we’ve been around before. We can’t get past that Jorma, don’t you understand? The love affair disconnects, but the investigation doesn’t have to. You still owe Tdeshi and yourself closure on what happened. You won’t get past this and on to the next step in your life until you find out why she never came back to you.”

When he was honest with himself he knew why, he was just a casual thing to her, a roommate with a handy dick. What he might be to Venna. He didn’t want to say that, instead he said, “You may be seriously overestimating Tdeshi’s importance in my life.” ‘And underestimating Leand’s’ he thought.

“Then why have you tried to extract her from me?”

“I really wish you knew how wrong you are about that. I’d give you a reading of my mind if I was that skilled a biologist.”

“And I would see at it’s heart the certainty that you feel you are going to get Tdeshi back from me, some time, some way.”

“And you are so much more than Tdeshi already, what sense does that notion make?”

“Why did you pursue me if it wasn’t to restart the lust affair you had with Tdeshi?” Ava made Tdeshi’s face ask him.

“To learn what happened,” he answered. “Anyway, I would continue this quest as a friend, not as a fellow investigator with a separate personal life. I came here as part of my personal life.”

“Do you understand how my ear still hears you telling me

I have to trade sex for your cooperation?”

“What does sex have to do with it?”

“I think it has everything to do with it,” she said. “I am not withholding my cooperation and friendship and financial support from this investigation. The only thing that’s changed is who I’m having sex with. No plans changed on my part, no goals changed in my mind, I’m still going to the Yakhan for this investigation, still the same plan except I’m just staying in a quieter cabin. Now you want to change the plan because I’m not having sex with you any more. My mother was your lover, you never saw anything in me but a naive soul you could train to make the body she abandoned, act like she was still animating it. You seem to think I’m some demon-lab weirdo who’s possessed her body. You think you can keep reminding me about Tdeshi’s sexual prowess and teaching me Tdeshi’s sexual prowess til you drive me out, or I learn Tdeshi’s sexual prowess, whichever comes first.”

“I...” wow she was out there. “No. I knew you were a different person from the very first day when you put your hand in front of my lips. I’m sorry you grew up in a lab and didn’t grow up with humanity. I loved you anyway, but you can’t seem to accept that because I make a mistake with a pronoun now and then.”

“Jorma, don’t take this up with me, take it up with yourself. I’m going to check out that address and the name Tdeshi in the Kassikan to know what happened to my mother, whether you come with me or not. You go to investigate what happened to your girlfriend or not depending on what you owe her and yourself, not what you owe me. If you decide

you're going back, I'll pay you what you'd like for those papers." With that she went off, undoubtedly to her new cabin with Klanden, leaving Jorma to think about it.

In all of this, who did he think he really owed? He didn't owe Tdeshi anything, he'd been her last fling in Sinbara. Maybe by listening to what Ava made that mouth say, he opened up memories long lost in the intervening decades. He had prettied up the memories of Tdeshi's departure in his mind had he not? But he knew he probably hadn't prettied the memories of Tdeshi's departure as much as he had Leand's.

He didn't owe Ava anything. In fact she owed him because without the letter he had kept, she wouldn't have this address to chase down. He still thought Ava had something to hide about her real relationship with Tdeshi. Clone mother was only a translation of what really happened. She reacted so strongly to some things he'd said that he was beginning to suspect that Tdeshi had been caught in something really sinister at the Kassikan. He didn't dare accuse her directly yet, but he worried even more, now that he had suffered that scathing outburst.

If he owed anyone it was Leand. Leand had been where he landed in life after his big burn out in the mid 55th. Leand had given Jorma a place to start over and been a friend ever since. Leand had given him his more beautiful daughter. If he could find out for Leand what had happened to his daughter, that would be important. Leand had been hurt when Tdeshi was lost and Jorma bore some responsibility for that because Tdeshi had been living with him when she decided to leave Sinbara. Their friendship hadn't been the same since.

He had suppressed a lot of those memories in the last twenty decades hadn't he? He'd suppressed hearing the wounds in Leand's voice the evening he showed him the note from Himla. He'd suppressed the memories of the shouting at Klempet's kegs. Had it been any worse than what Ava had given him? Only in that it was given by one of the leading citizens of Sinbara in a very public place.

Three weeks later on a Morningday they were sitting on the starboard foredeck in the last of the canals of the interconnect. Thru the previous dark they had sailed the whole hundred miles of Beghtik, the smallest major lake in the interconnect, and were now riding a surging favorable tide as Kortrax pulled the waters toward their height at Noonsleep in Center Lake. There were feet of tide here and it ripped thru the canal relentlessly, carrying the traffic with it.

He had decided to continue the expedition. He hated to admit that some of the reason was the way Ava shamed him, making him either continue or admit he was only with her for the sex. Maybe the reason he continued was only for the sex, but it was the sex he was getting with Venna, not the sex he wasn't getting with Ava.

He was still amazed by how much Venna acted and talked like Tdeshi. She continued to use a lot of the same expressions, when she did a cutesy-voice, it was the same kind of cutesy-voice Tdeshi used to use. She was young, but not young like Tdeshi had been, she was young like Ava was now. A bit younger than Tdeshi would be now, but many times as old as she had been then, with lots more learning in

her. She wasn't the mind that Ava was, she was the mind Tdeshi would have become if she had slowed down and matured.

Venna moved around the ship during the day but had spent every sleep in his cabin since the first one. As the trip wore on there was a group that hung out on this deck during the waking hours, weather permitting. She was the subtle leader of the conversation, just as Tdeshi would be, and like Tdeshi, she was interested in the starship. But unlike Ava, she was not intimate with it.

Ava did not hang out with them thru most of the weeks in the interconnect, but Venna was willing to discuss Tdeshi, especially when they were alone like this in the early part of the day. They sat together and still had a nightcoat over them. Venna was one who enjoyed petting any time she could get it and he was glad to oblige.

While they waited, she asked, "So just how important was Tdeshi to you?"

"Perhaps not enough," he answered, "Perhaps too much. Not enough because I didn't come down to investigate her as soon as I heard."

"Why didn't you?"

"The bitter truth?" Jorma asked in return.

"If you must."

"Without Ava's money it would be nearly impossible. I could get transportation as crew, but I couldn't eat for very long without taking jobs off the boards and pretty soon I'm on a treadmill just to survive and can't even get back."

"I know what that life is like. If it wasn't for sugar

daddies like you, I would be there.”

“I’m hardly a sugar daddy.”

“You gave me a home,” she said, “That’s more than Bilmore.”

“But it was Ava that paid for this cabin,” Jorma said.

“Why is she doing that if she’s in with Klanden now?”

“She’s quite flush I guess, more than she acts. She’s willing to pay for our trip to investigate Tdeshi.”

“Why does she care?” Venna asked.

“She considers Tdeshi to be her mother. There’s something about her origin she’s not telling me. Something I think she’s not even comfortable with.”

Venna took a moment to think about that. “From what you say she’s not very comfortable with sex, but what could that have to do with it?”

“Maybe she made up her story about the crypt so she wouldn’t have to admit she was the product of sex, especially the product of a hired mother.”

“So she thinks being the product of a wizard’s helmet is more natural?” Venna giggled.

“Maybe it’s some statement about how abnormal she thought her childhood was.”

“All in all, Tdeshi doesn’t sound all that abnormal. Yeah, she had a rich dad and a hired mom, but I’ve read about that before.”

“You’re a lot like Tdeshi, you had a missing mother and a doting father...”

“But far from wealthy.”

“Yeah, but similar,” Jorma said. “But your personality is more like Tdeshi’s than Ava’s is. That’s what bothers me about this. Just coming back to life in a crypt with all her memories erased by shonggot shouldn’t make her so different. To re-use an analogy she gave me, a re-lit candle shouldn’t have such a different flame.”

“I really can’t help you much there. I never met Tdeshi and barely met Ava so I’m no judge of their personalities. But one thing I do believe...” She paused when someone appeared at the galley portal.

Jorma prodded her on, they would have no more time to themselves after this. “What’s that?”

“The Kassikan is not as simple as it looks.”

On the belly of the lake itself they were in a universe of blue. There was blue water below, blue sky above. There was hardly any white out here on the open water. Sometimes a few clouds toward Afternoonday, usually heavy rains for Dusksleep and even Nightday. The cold of Dawnsleep was somewhat mitigated out here in the middle of the open water and there was never ice out here. The ship had only one more stop now, the docks of the Yakhan at the very end of the Dromedian arm.

Venna was lost in her mop of rowdy copper curls in his arms. They were on the sail deck, she never wore clothes up here and they were both deeply involved with her long dark nipples. She was trying to engage in a sleepy conversation, but they had consumed so much yaag that it didn’t progress with a lot of purpose. They spent most of their time together

now and most of the time some part of his body was in contact with some part of hers. This included all the times they were having sex, that in itself was almost ten percent of their waking time he thought.

They were actually on top of a sail locker right now, almost two flights of stairs from the cabin, but there were no stairs to the top of this locker, just a lifeboat to climb on. It was not visible from the deck but the crew had found excuses to climb a little rigging and look at Venna til they were tired of it, she didn't care in the least and was eager to get as naked as they let her. Everyone knew each other by now on this boat anyway.

Somehow they were quiet for a few seconds, Jorma got to ask her something serious. "So how far back does your history go?"

"Oh just about twenty decades I guess," she said, "I was born in decade zero, I forgot just what year, late twenties I think. I might have written it down sometime but I probably left the notebook I wrote it in behind in an attic of a house I lived in along the way. I never really stayed put until I was with Raicha for those decades. I'm not much for memorizing facts and figures either." She had darting eyes also for a moment, a lot like Tdeshi used to, but that was one of the ways Ava was like her.

"I do enjoy a woman with an easy going attitude."

"Oh yeah, I go easy, but you knew that the night we met. Didn't I just about drag you into your cabin and fuck your lights out?"

"It was very mutual. We did it four times that first sleep as

I remember.”

“Ah to be young and lusty,” she said whimsically.

“At twenty decades you are.”

“Well what about you? How many of yours can you remember?”

“I am over four centuries. I don’t remember all the details of my life, I remember very few scenes from my childhood. The only one I can think of now was climbing over big old log sections which had been left out to rot. I had a toy crossbow, I was pretending I was going after theirrops.”

“Where was that?” she asked.

“Somewhere below Dolostel,” he answered.

She raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment. “I grew up fourteen miles by paddle south of downtown about a mile down from First Canal,” Venna said. “I have no trouble remembering what that was like, of course most of the places I’ve lived have been in the same neighborhood but the last few decades I’ve been on the north side farther inland near Seventh.”

“With Raicha?” he asked.

“Uh, yeah.”

“You’re not really done with him are you?”

“This is a really great vacation. I have to go back, at least try it. All my things are there.”

“So this is never going to be more than shipboard?”

“You have your own quest in the city, chasing the ghost of a woman you compare me to. So when is shipboard anything more than that?” she asked by way of an answer. “There’s

been times before and after that we will each wish it wasn't. Lets not worry about that and enjoy it while we may." The crew had given up watching them so he let her undo his shorts.

7. The Dromedian Arm

They had made the turn to the east into the Dromedian Arm. That arm really was a small body of water compared to the vastness of the the lake. It's population and history were what made it so much larger than it looked on the globe. They were sailing in lines of traffic in lanes as narrow as a mile wide between horizon-spanning fields of lon. He knew there were a million acres of it growing along the approaches to the city.

Ava and Venna had become acquainted, even got along a little. Klanden stayed back from that encounter, Ava told him that Klanden had no use for Venna, having experienced her earlier on the voyage. Jorma thought he was probably afraid Venna would tear his out by the roots if she had another chance at him, Venna agreed that was a likely assessment.

He knew the time with Venna was coming to a close. She had already told him that the week before. This meant he had another time of decision coming up on him. He thought of Leand. Venna had attracted him all the way down here, why would he just go back now? Ava is right, so what if she's not the one you're having sex with? If they were hired investigators on a case, they might find physically more

compatible people wherever they were. He sure had more and better sex since Ava moved out than before. If they were normal people and the only one convenient however, they would get together again, maybe on the way up, maybe once they were there. Did he know this? No. He wasn't willing to sign in witness that Ava was normal. He still remembered her touchy reaction to his speculation about reading in an RN Acid trip of some other person. And how normal is she to just move to another's cabin without any special warning?

He arrived back at his cabin with another round of cups from the galley. "You aren't going to feel Jorma is overbearing on you any more are you?" Venna was asking Ava as he opened the door.

"I don't have any problem with Jorma, not now, not ever. It's his problem that I found a more comfortable cabin to sleep in, not mine."

"Once again, thank you for doing that," Venna answered as she smiled at him and took her cup. "I still say the reason you wanted to leave is exactly why I wanted to be here."

"We do have this in common however," Ava said while taking her cup.

"That we do," Venna said, "But what are you going to do about Tdeshi once we reach the dock?"

"I have to get to an address the other side of Chardovia," Ava answered. "That was the last place she lived. Jorma was eager to rent a needleboat and take us up there before this cabin change."

"So you're still trying to find out what happened to her?" Venna asked.

“Yeah,” Ava answered, “I wasn’t the one suggesting we change plans back before he met you.”

“Oh he’d met me when that happened, but we weren’t an item yet. But like I said, it’s strictly shipboard, nothing more than that because I have a home to try and patch up back in the city.”

“Are you passing me back to Ava now?” Jorma asked.

“If she wants,” Venna said, “But I think she has issues we wouldn’t be able to understand, as endocrine-driven as we are,” Venna told Jorma.

“You can be a bitch,” Ava said with a smile.

“Especially when I include the person we’re talking about in the conversation,” Venna responded.

“Jorma can take part in this conversation any time he wants...”

“To be called hypersexed,” he butted in with.

“That is not fair,” Ava responded.

“But it’s to the point,” Venna said. “The conversation was about his sexual needs being so much greater than yours, more on a par with mine, so you didn’t enjoy sharing the cabin with him.”

“Klanden was more my level with that,” she said. She turned to Jorma, “If you could have sex with me once a week, be my good friend the rest of the week and have-at the remaining women of the world with my blessing for the rest of what you need, we’d get along fine. But you have to be comfortable with the fact that that’s all the sex I want, I don’t want to make up for your others by getting others of my own.”

“That seems quite unnatural to me, like you’re being very unfair to yourself.”

“No,” Venna said, “To me it seems more like the ancient humanoid where females used to flock to the king in harems and leave common men childless in their fields, selling their hard-won crops for pennies to the king to feed his harem.”

“The Yingolians left a world where there was still a lot of that going on,” Ava told them.

“And how long has it been here?” Venna asked.

“Since what?” Ava asked.

“Since there was that inequality in the sexes.” Venna answered.

Since sex was more about offspring and less about someone who’s genes you want to check with, Jorma understood. That was about the late 35th to late 41st depending on what basin you were from and what your income level was. He was born near the turn of the 52nd century, he’d never known the fear of years, could never feel what countless generations had known, that they had a finite count of decades, not centuries, and not much over twenty, and then they were dead like a tentacloid instead of remaining an ongoing process like a celluloid. Humanoid life, humans in particular, had crossed that boundary in the early to mid 40th if one was poor and living in his ancestral lands in the old north, many generations ago. Such things as lines of succession and inheritance were concepts he had no feel for. “Twenty centuries now,” Jorma answered Venna’s original question.

“Yeah,” Ava backed him up, “so they were really

primitive in that regard.”

“I think it’s because of those ghosts,” Jorma said. “I bet they made sure the humans stayed ephemeral so they could harvest their souls.” He couldn’t keep the horror from his voice.

“There were some of them who did that,” Ava agreed, “Especially what the Brazilians called Heavenly Talstan. From what they told me, most of their bully groups totally denied it. Theirs certainly did, but theirs was still run by flesh humans when they lost contact. The Yingolians I knew were never ghosts, they were frozen ephemerals who we were able to cure of their ephemerality. They’re quite glad to have arrived here by now, more than an ephemeral lifetime later.”

“But what of these ghosts?” Venna asked, “Do you know anything about them?”

“There was a starship full of them in the 55th, before the frozen human one,” Ava said quickly, “and a couple still there on Narullla’s Tear. She still has what’s called a ‘fabricator’ that is able to keep her alive. I heard she recently made room for a friend. She lives in a universe of complete magic tied to ours by that ‘fabricator,’ the device that builds her virtual world out of Narrulla.”

“Can people actually talk to that ghost?” Jorma asked.

“By eyemail and suntower. The wizards say they can visit her via helmet,” Ava told him. He could tell she was uncomfortable with this subject.

He didn’t blame her, entering the spirit world with one’s head encased in an ensorcelled helmet was too scary to contemplate and was making him cold, especially with his

senses heightened by the yaag. He dreaded having to go this close to the Kassikan. He understood that her creation in the Kassikan was the problem between them. He could see that even though the Kassikan was home, she still had fears of it.

“What are these ghosts?” Venna asked, picking at the horror like one fascinated with a deadly predator. He had to admit this was something else Tdeshi would have done.

“Human souls using electric currents in silicon crystals to think with instead of nerve impulses among neurons,” Ava explained. He’d heard that before and thought it was even spookier than traditional ghosts.

“It all happened before I was born,” Venna said. “It’s just too weird, can you image what that must be like?” She seemed genuinely excited to learn about this stuff, but enthusiasm was something she was good at.

“They say they live alone in their own private universe of which they are the God,” Ava told them. Her expression was pained and Jorma didn’t blame her, he was just as uncomfortable with this subject.

Venna must have guessed Ava was tired of this YingolNeerie quiz. “You sure are an expert on them,” Venna said, getting up from Jorma’s lap. “Sorry to bug you about it. But listen you guys, I really need to get going. If I finish this cup here, I’ll be anchored til Noonmeal and there’s some stuff I need to get done before we dock.” Venna was already sliding into a sheath. It was a side lace, while she laced it, she said, “So I want to tell you, both, it’s been great sailing with you.”

“It’s been good meeting you,” Ava said, “I should thank

you for taking care of Jorma for me.”

“I thank you also,” Jorma said, also standing. “I’m really going to miss you.”

“No fair getting sappy,” Venna said, finishing tying her lace.

Jorma took her in his arms and kissed her soundly. She returned it with interest, embarrassing Ava and making her look away while their hands fondled each other.

“Anyway, this is hard enough as it is,” Venna said, prying herself away and going to the door of the cabin. “I’ll see you before we get off,” she said, leaving Jorma sitting on the bed and Ava sitting on the bench with the table top half down so it was more like an armrest between them. He looked after Venna too long, she had been too much fun, her loss was going to hurt. It was quite a few seconds before he turned his attention to Ava.

“So; are you still renting that needleboat to ferry me to Chardovia?” she asked, “and how much sex do I have to give you for that favor?”

“Why must it always be in terms of sex with you?” Jorma asked.

“Me? I’m the one who’s trying to get out of it.”

“So? That means it’s still about sex. So you only want it once a week. Say it and it’s done, I’ll be more likely to remember that than what pronoun to use each and every time my linguistics senses forget what side of K’shitn 100,00,23 we’re talking about, or whether we’re talking about the body or the soul inside the body.”

“The pronoun usage shows me what’s just one layer deeper in your mind than your first excuse.”

“The pronoun usage shows I never took a fancy RNAcid course in language. I won’t be putting down three coppers on a boat and burning one up in fuel if I’m going to get abuse from you. If you can’t stand my body more than once a week, I can live with that, but I don’t need to take verbal abuse on top of it.”

She took a deep breath, “I’m sorry, I’m just not Tdeshi. I’ve never been a sex-crazed individual, or ‘endocrine-driven’ as Venna called it.”

“I’m sorry I tried to make you into Tdeshi sexually.”

“Once a week. I like that. Maybe I could do a little cuddling on some other days, and a lot on that day of the week.”

“What day should it be?” Jorma asked.

“The one when I seem to need it most.”

“I do not think that is very honest of you. I will think you need it one day earlier each week.”

“Then I will know you are paying attention to your needs, not mine.”

It would do her no good to try that tack with him. “I’m sensitive enough to lend an ear if you have something to say, but not to try and decode your moods from cues you try to hide. So pick a sleep.”

“Dusksleep, if you must. I will grant you sex each Dusksleep if you rent a needleboat and take me to Chardovia so I can continue my investigation into what happened to my clone mother.”

“Ava, you don’t have to promise sexual favors to get me to aide you on this investigation. I want to know too. I’d rather travel in your company as we have on this boat than not at all. As long as you’re willing to continue this investigation, I am too. You do not have to sleep with me even once more if you don’t want to. This is not about whether I sleep with Tdeshi’s body, it’s about whether I find out what happened to Leand’s daughter.” He really meant that. He had searched his soul and was confident that was why he was here, and confident he could work with her without bedding her, without even touching her.

“I’d just as soon stick to the once a week agreement if that’s all right with you. If you’re busy on a Dusksleep and it slips a sleep or two one week or another is fine. I’ll even keep my own place if you want.”

“No. I get it. Once a week. You’re not Tdeshi.”

“God damn right. You know how it was the first few weeks in Sinbara, before we started planning this trip?”

“I certainly remember it, it wasn’t much over a year ago.”

“It was about once a week then. That was perfect. Once a week with you is way better than once a week with Klanden. But once a week with Klanden is better than wakeup, midday and sleep with you.”

“If we’d been tending sail we wouldn’t have had time for the midday.”

“Yeah, but if we’d been tending sail I wouldn’t have had energy for once a week.”

“Do you only have sex for the exercise?” Jorma asked, “Do you get no pleasure from it at all?”

“I get too much pleasure from it. I come too close to losing control.”

“That’s what sex is for,” Jorma said, “To celebrate the animal in us. Even if we of humanoid evolution have some tentacloid and some celluloid characteristics, we are still animals and we can still get pleasure from our flesh.”

“Scary isn’t it?” Ava replied.

“Is that how you really feel?” Jorma asked, “afraid of it?”

“There is definitely some of that. Maybe I’m scared to be an animal.”

“But you are.”

“I’ll act like an animal once a week,” she agreed. “I was having fun trying to act like Tdeshi for you.”

They had Noonmeal together, just him and Ava. Venna’s tasks were probably taking a lot longer than she thought. They had no idea where she could have gone to do them, maybe to Bilmore’s? “So what do you think of my way of getting here?” Ava asked him when they’d found a table in the galley near a front window.

“I think it’s easy to get lazy.”

“I never found it was any problem at all,” Ava said.

“I know, I know you now. It’s well over a year now isn’t it?”

“Thank you,” she said. “You used to say you’ve known me since Tdeshi was born.”

“I know better now,” he said, “We are going to find out what happened to her.” He almost said ‘what the Kassikan did

to her' but restrained himself.

Ava leaned over and kissed him, then settled back in her chair. "Actually, next week will be two years since we met. It was Morningday of Iyosaign as I remember."

He had learned to call her Ava. He had not given up all thought that she might find some of Tdeshi's memories on this trip. If she got to where she was when she made the decision to take the capsule or whatever it was that shonggot came in. "What does shonggot look like?" he asked.

"I wouldn't have the foggiest clue, you might just inhale it for all I know. From the witnesses descriptions she probably received it at the clinic or whatever where it was made. It must have taken effect as she settled in for that boat ride. That was probably the only reason she was in that neighborhood."

He wondered if she really didn't know or did she think he was trying to trick her? If he had been a victim and was in an area where it might be found, he would want to know something about it. She certainly would have found out, why did she want to keep that from him?

The air was very still so it wasn't til dawn of the next week that they could see their destination. The very end of the Dromedian Arm looks very flat from a distance, you can never see anything beyond that line on the shore. As you get closer there is a five hundred foot tall cliff of vine-covered crystal building with a couple hundred feet of jungle crowning it. Behind the northern part of the tallest wall, a pinkish-white pyramid with vegetation in every niche rises sharply above that, near an ornate black spire. The cliff goes

on for miles in each direction. Ten or twelve miles away the beach/harbor wall was probably only twenty stories high. It would take a good scope to see that far.

This is the shore of the city of Kassidor Yakhan, the great city of the Highland Elves, of which he was half-breed. This is the birthplace of the modern world, what many agree is the world's greatest city. What most also agree is the largest contiguous city using the standard measure of urban area. Many miles of great structures, grand canals and enormous locks choked with traffic lay beyond this shore. This is what most agree is the richest of the great cities, certainly the one with the most egalitarian distribution of wealth. Certainly one with one of the most ambitious populations.

From what he could see it had changed little in the last century, less than Sinbara. Of course he didn't know the details, the whole waterfront could have been torn down and rebuilt since he was here and he wouldn't have been able to tell. There was the same crystal and grown wall, the same busy docks in the middle, the great beach miles to the north with its wall of crystal buildings behind it. The deep blue sky and water hadn't changed either. The colorful sails were just as common. The same proportion were the tiny outrigger kayaks, the same proportion were the nylon spinnakers of the lakerunners. The city that spawned most changes in the modern world still looked pretty much the same as it had a century ago.

8. The Canals of the Yakhan

His maps said they had a half mile to go to find a needleboat for rent, and they had to hike with their baggage to get there. Ava brought more baggage than Tdeshi shipped as freight. As they filed off the boat they met Venna. She had the same bag she had in his cabin, which was hardly bigger than Ava's street bag. Exactly as Tdeshi packed when she left Sinbara on that cattle boat. Jorma had his own pack strapped on and the larger two of Ava's bags in his hands. Ava carried her street bag, her pouch, and had on a knapsack of her own. The boat they rented would have plenty of ballast.

Jorma put the bags down and said a proper good by to Venna, right there on the dock with passers-by watching. Venna went right with it and, in truth, it felt like she was ready for a standing quickie on the street and 'let 'em cheer us on.' "It's been a really fun trip," he said.

"Hasn't it?" she said. He noticed that they were both trying to keep their eyes dry.

"We're going to rent a boat," Ava said, "Can we give you a ride?"

"Nah, thanks, but I need to pick up a few things while I mosey over to Seventh. I'll take a few streetcars and a public or two and still get home by Noonsleep."

With that they set off to the hike city streets and her blob of orange curls was soon lost in the crowd. He knew she would be another of those people he wished had stayed in his life.

Jorma was excited to be the pilot of a needleboat at last, after a long and boring business ceremony that Ava participated in a lot more than he did. But after a few hours of struggling thru city traffic in the mazes of small canals or the ships and barges of the main canals, he was already thinking they probably should have taken a lake runner to Chardovia. Because the lake was too rough for the needleboat, that might have even been quicker. He could see that Ava thought so, but she knew how eager he was to play with this, so she didn't tease him about it. He was grateful for that.

As they dodged heavy industrial traffic on First Canal, Ava pointed to a sign for a canal named North Shore Residential. He was a bit dubious because it was a tunnel under a plumbing factory, but since she knew her way around, he turned onto that.

"I've been up to this neighborhood before," Ava said once they had come up into a deep forest of apartment buildings where it was quiet enough to talk. "I came down from the back-beach canal when I came up here. I didn't know we were this far up. The needleboat captain who turned in Tdeshi's body plied this canal."

"Can you show me where she got on?" Jorma asked.

"Yes, stay on this canal, it's way up."

After another hour on this crowded residential canal behind North Beach he was getting stiff from the tiller and turning in the seat to handle it. He had to turn and use his left hand now and then. There were narrow city homes along here, but most were of concrete block rather than cast stone and growth. These were built during a revival of that style in

the late 50's when cast limestone blocks were popular. Most of these houses were six stories counting dormers and boathouses. The greying plank of the balcony rails was in the firm grip of thickly knotted vines, heavy with pods and flowers in the narrow crack of sunlight that penetrated this canal. This far up the canal, only small trees were growing above them, still dwarfed by their initial crystal support pillars. Very few of the trees had habitable rooms in them yet, and there was not an upper level street-grid in place here. At the third small bridge in that area Ava said, "This is where Tdeshi got on."

Jorma stoppered the steam and they drifted slowly under the bridge. The street was on the second floor of the homes along this canal. The homes were between street and canal here, there was no walkway along the side of the canal along here, just a stubby dock where the needleboats and u-paddles stopped and a stairway between two homes that lead up to the street. Jorma looked at that little slab of stone pavement. That was the last land Tdeshi stood on in her life.

The homes overhung the canal a foot or two on their upper floors, except at this public dock. Age showed on some for the artificial limestone had already eroded and formed stalactites in the three or more centuries it had stood here. The homes were of generous size however and from the amount of laundry showing on the multiple floors of ropes strung across this small canal, probably heavily tenanted. There was no one here waiting on the stop at this time.

"A beat-fashionable urban area I would say," Jorma said, "if a bit dated." He didn't think it had been touched since the

53rd or 54th when this had all been put up. Boom times, wealth and glamor had been common in both those centuries in the Yaghan. “It doesn’t seem squalid, it might have even been a trifle upscale a few centuries ago when it was built.”

“That’s quite a nice place there,” she pointed to a home with its own little needleboat tied up in a marble-pillared boathouse that had two fingers of dock and room for four boats behind the stout grillewood gates. That needleboat was even smaller than the one they were in.

It was shady down here, but the center of the bridge had a bit of sun and a couple was lounging at the rail enjoying each other.

“I would imagine you interviewed everyone here at the time?” Jorma asked.

“I even still have the notes in storage in my old office. If we stopped at the Kassikan I could show you.”

“I thought we wanted to get to that address?” It would be many hours back to the Kassikan, in even heavier traffic.

“That’s the only thing we have that’s new,” Ava said. “You’re the one who’s new to this scene.”

They spent most of the first day just getting out of the central city. He couldn’t cross the lake and had to take the canal around the North Sentinels. The ache in his shoulders and back made him all too aware of how much this urban universe had shrunk in his memory during the past century. At the rate they were going it might cost them a whole week getting to the northern extremities of the urban complex. He was certainly getting his chance to drive a needleboat all he

wanted on this journey.

While having noonmeal at a fish stand off shore of Hslingy, he loaded up on caffeine to drive thru Noonsleep. Ava stretched out in an early Noonsleep while the hours slid by on the canal. The ship traffic went on thru the sleep, but once it was well into Noonsleep, Jorma could lay back and open the throttle to full. The ride was smooth and gentle now that he wasn't dodging things. Hour after hour there was revealed along these banks ever more miles of a thin line of city, backed with miles of plots. It was so numbing in its infinitude. He was numbed already and was only about halfway on his traverse of the north side of the city to the address where Tdeshi lived.

He worried for Tdeshi's soul in these endless miles of city. He thought about how small she would be in this area, while she had been so big in Sinbara. She had to be overwhelmed, all alone in the infinite crowds of this urban universe. It was true that she could make casual friends easily, but she had never been in a situation where new friends were all she had. While driving these endless miles he was able to remember how she had spurned his offer to come with her to the city. She had spurned her father's help. She would conquer this urban infinity by herself. She had still been alive when she took a route like this into the central city and her death. He flashed back to that boat-stop he had already seen. She may have come down this canal on her way to that.

Deep in Noonsleep, Ava offered to take the controls after a rest stop at the docks at the far end of Ebmemboz. The lake

was now calm so they would have no big detour between them and henarDee. “You can pilot one of these?” he asked.

“You didn’t do bad for a beginner,” she said, “you only scared me once.”

“So when did you drive them?”

“At the Kassikan. I often got stuck driving people around. I knew how much you wanted to pilot one so I didn’t interfere, but you must have had your fill of it by now,” he didn’t need to say a word, he could feel his face flush, “and we still have hours to go.”

In this way Ava was very unlike Tdeshi. She would have never let him go as long without letting her drive it. But Tdeshi wouldn’t have driven as long as Ava either. Tdeshi would have played, Ava settled in with a cool, almost bored confidence. She set out to be comfortable but alert. It really seemed as she said, she got stuck driving a lot. Maybe it was nice that she didn’t have to conduct a tour for her superiors? Jorma stretched out across three seats and was asleep before they reached Shipping Cut, a seven mile cut thru the hills to Lake henarDee.

He woke from a sound sleep at Ava’s prodding. “I think we’re in Chardovia,” she said, “It’s the first big city on the Grand Canal.”

“You went all the way across henarDee while I slept?” She had driven at least a third of the journey, he’d been bored with it before they got that far. He had to admit once again that he had seriously underestimated the size of the Yakhan’s megalopolis when trying to cross it by needleboat.

“It was just a lazy Noonsleep but it’s over, we’re late for Afternoonday breakfast. You have the maps, I forget which lock leads down to the canal we’re looking for.”

Jorma struggled awake enough to look at his maps, he had been sleeping quite soundly, even this late in a small boat. Chardovia, the last major urban center on the trip from the central city. He found the map, they needed to go to the third major canal down, the lowest one, and go another hour or more out on the lake that canal lead to. He found it on the map and looked up the lock’s name so they could find it on the Chardovia wall.

Chardovia had a little different character from the other urban centers, being one row of city on the top of it’s narrow dam. They went between two foundations and under the street, then rode down at least four stories with a few other larger boats in a lock between the foundations. At the bottom of the lock they found a convenient dock on the back of a Chardovian tower and had a great brunch.

Downstream of Chardovia they went down a lazy, lon-choked river for a few miles before it widened out into the next lake, backed up by another city in the Yakhan’s urban complex called Sistril that was sixteen miles down the Mindendao river. It was a little auto-lock that took them up to the Eleknane Canal about halfway down that lake. They followed that for only a few minutes til it got small. Jorma tied and locked the boat on the quiet side of a public dock in a sleepy little village center with some perishables stands, a keda yard, an inn behind it, and an arched stone bridge on a paved road that paralleled the lake from Chardovia to Sistril

passing right in front of the inn, one small field back from the canal. It had cooled off just a bit once they were out away from the pavement. This was a purely residential area, there wouldn't be a lot of activity at this dock.

In a way it seemed like the trip two thirds of the way to the far end of the city had taken as long as the voyage from the north. He remembered the scenes, but not the size of the urban world. That had become a major barrier on this quest, but at last it was only three blocks to the last address where Tdeshi ever lived.

9. Tdeshi's Last Address

They had gone only two of those blocks up the path when a woman did a double take on seeing Ava.

“Do you remember me?” Ava asked.

“Well yeah, I think so, but wasn't it really long ago?” She was looking her over and thinking, “Yeah!” she said, “It's been so many ages but you used to live right over there didn't you?”

“I think so,” Ava told her. “I am the clone daughter of the person you think I am, born on Noonsleep of K'shitn of 100,00,23. I'm actually trying to find clues to who my mother was and what happened to her.”

“Where were you born?” she asked.

“In a crypt deep under the pyramid at the Kassikan. They said my mom was a victim of a drug called shonggot. I had

no identity, but I could still talk, read, do arithmetic. They said they had to load RNacid into me to do so, I didn't even know what that meant at the time. I eventually understood that Tdeshi's brain was wiped and they had to reload it from scratch, that is how I would put it, but that's only because I've had a career in photo-voltaics since then. I don't really know what lead up to the shonggot overdose."

"How did you find me?" the woman asked.

"We didn't, you found us."

"But how did you find your way here?"

"Jorma recognized me, way up in Sinbara."

"Where?" the woman asked.

"It's a little town about three thousand miles north up the lakes," Ava said, "Jorma knew my mother and received correspondence from her when her address was that house you just pointed to. That's the last he knew of her. He's the first person I've ever met who knew my mother. You are the second." Jorma didn't interrupt about that, there was the whole 'welcome home Tdeshi' party that he'd put together with Vureer, Naarb'n, Bimla and a few others that had been such a terrible flop.

"To be honest we really spoke only once," this woman said. "Other than waves and 'good mornings' and all that. I mean only once seriously for any length of time. Your name was Tedshee I think, or maybe T'Deshi."

"Tdeshi," Jorma said. "I was there when she was named. It was twenty four decades ago but I remember it. She was as sweet as a baby as she is now."

"I did admire your appearance," the woman said, "one of

the White Elves of the Misty Vales. Did you talk to the people who are living there now?” she pointed toward the house.

“We’re just getting here, we’re on our way to the address. I’m surprised you remember her, it was twenty one decades ago when she wrote to him last, years before the Brazilian starship got here.”

“Brazilian?” she asked. “I knew of two, the mean one and the friendly one.”

“The friendly one.”

“I was born in the late 55th,” she answered, “I was barely grown when we talked, but you were not much older as I remember.”

“So Tdeshi was here before you?” Ava asked.

“Yeah, I thought you always lived here. I guess I must have just assumed that was the house where you were born, I never really thought about it I guess. We never talked about where you grew up. But what about the guy you were living with? Did you look him up?”

“She was living with a guy?” Ava was letting her get away with the wrong pronoun and not getting into an argument. He was surprised.

“You don’t remember? You didn’t find that out yet?”

“You are the second person in the known universe I’ve met who has ever known my mother,” Ava said, still denying that Knmonawweep Nightday. She had a notepad out now and was writing that down.

“I see. Well you lived right over there with this guy, I think you said his name was Hyondahi or something like that. You waxed a bit boastful of his sexual prowess I will admit,

and everyone did hear you in the sleeps. That's one of the things we talked about, the only day we really talked. You mentioned some educational program you were in. You said Hyondahi was from The Hub and found himself 'stuck' out here in the north canals these decades later, I don't remember how many. I told you about the new shelf and bowl unit we were trying to cut in as I remember, and how we'd had a child, that was a big thing in our life. I'm with Chazzi now twenty two decades."

"Chazzi is?" Ava asked.

"The same housemate I've had on the Afternoonday we talked, all those decades ago, you obviously don't remember any of this?"

"That was my mom you talked with," Ava said. "You said she lived with a guy named Hyondahi?"

"Yeah, I think you said he used to be a hooker, a professional." The woman clearly didn't understand the situation and Ava didn't seem to wish to acknowledge that she didn't understand.

"This doesn't sound like the Tdeshi I knew," Jorma said.

"We really only exchanged a few sentences about him, it was down at the Bigtree, down by the canal." She pointed the way they had come. "We'd waved and chatted briefly a few times before that day, and not long after that, you disappeared. I don't think I ever saw you at the Bigtree again."

"I wish she'd told you more about herself, you've been most helpful. You are sharp-witted indeed to remember so much after so many decades."

“Did you ever see her talking to anyone else?” Jorma asked, “Did you see anyone else come over there?”

“Oh she had quite a few friends, it was her crowd that I happened to be near that day. I figured they were from the school you were going to,” she said as she turned back to Ava.

“Do you know what school she was going to?” Ava asked, still refraining from belaboring the point the way she would with him.

“Northlake Tech right down there on the lakeside highway about a mile. It’s just two towers of hoary old grownwood, right on a creek to the lake, but it’s well kept and well run. It’s a teaching institution you understand, I don’t think it’s whispered about as a secret fount of advanced research. I think you were studying methane distribution or pneumatics, something like that.”

“That is very helpful,” Jorma said, “That’s the most we’ve learned so far.”

“But you knew her?” The woman asked Jorma.

“Before she left Sinbara to seek her fortune in the city,” Jorma answered.

“When was that?” the woman asked.

“In the 55th decade of the 55th,” Jorma answered.

“It was after that when we talked,” the woman said, “after the turn of the century.”

“When did you last see her?” Ava asked about Tdeshi. He could see that this woman had to take an extra few seconds to process that. It was a long time in the past.

“The best I can remember, I was first sure you were missing when Hyondahi sold the house. He did tell a guy who lived in that house at the time that you’d O.D.d. Hyondahi was pretty torn up, not hysterical but pretty distraught. I’d say he genuinely cared for you.”

“Is there any way I can find him?”

“Hire a detective?” she wondered.

“Are there any around here?” Ava asked.

“If you go past that school on Lake Highway about another mile toward Sistril there’s a household where they do some detective work.”

“Do you know if they’re any good?” Jorma asked.

“No, I’ve never done more with them than see the sign.”

“We already know we have to go look up her records in that school,” Jorma said to Ava.

“Yeah, but Hyondahi. Did he have any friends around here?”

“The guy in that house at the time.” She pointed to a modest hangleaf with a rather large garden. “It’s not and wasn’t his house, it’s Byara’s house, she’s been there longer than I’ve been alive. She might remember whoever that was that was living with her at the time. He was a tall guy, blond, deep chin, big ears.”

Ava was making notes of all this. It took awhile, meanwhile Jorma asked, “So where do you live?”

“I live just up over there at Chazzi’s place,” she said, pointing up a lane that branched off at a diagonal just a little ways from where they stood. The house could be within sight

of Tdeshi's address. "But we were up in the city, Chardovia I mean, for a couple decades so Linay could find some schools. We had the place tenanted out, but we've been back fourteen decades now."

There was nothing more to be learned from her but how she missed her daughter, so with some warm good-byes, she was on her way down the path while Ava stood awhile longer finishing these notes. Jorma had been worried they wouldn't find even as much information as she told them. They had several new leads to follow already.

'So this was the last house Tdeshi lived in?' he thought as he walked slowly past it, not long after lunch hour this Afternoonday. It was three blocks back from the canal on an inner corner of a path barely wide enough for two people or a push-cart to pass. It was surrounded by a good tall hedge of leshin, glory-bean and pem-berry. There was a nice garden of colorful rinkos out behind, companioned with many varieties of bean fronds. A big rain barrel hung right below the eaves of a roof strong enough to hold a week's snow in a Kugenzglaw winter. It was a good house and good garden. This was not how it looked twenty decades ago however. This cheese-apple was still a strapping young rush in the vigor of its youth, no more than thirty decades old, it would have been barely a sapling over planks and tent then.

The house grew a lush crop of the fruits, mainly along the eaves and on the balcony rails of the upper rooms. The cheese-apple made this a lot more self-sustaining household than it would have been before. Now this was prime property,

growing a lot on it's house and hedge in a very compact area, a property several could live from in need.

The custom in the neighborhood seemed to be one of putting the front walk under a trellis, quite often of larorie, this household was no exception. The thirty feet of trellis lead to a front porch. On this porch there were doors on the lower story for Bekthi and Yorthops. Yorthops had spent some time carving and painting her sign, it was very well done. A quick-drawn sign on a scrap of plank pointed downstairs under the porch for free klizhorn nymphs, lively and quick-witted. Jorma knew klizhorns could never be quick witted. Even the greatest brain in all of Sumoid evolution could not be housebroken. None was as smart as the tiniest inglethor.

They called at both doors downstairs, to no avail. Ava called at the stairway down to the tiny barn below the porch that his nose said must hold a pen of purple-tail and maybe even a karga they were fattening up for a special occasion. He could hear the slithering of the young klizhorn tentacles in their cage. There was a stairway from the porch to a larger porch in the branches above it. Upstairs was the largest dwelling and a sign saying hSkaiya. Once they went upstairs their calls brought a "Yeah, come in. Didn't know you were looking for just anybody around."

hSkaiya was blond, plush but husky, orange-tawny and a bit freckley, buxom with lazy pink nipples, wearing only a fringed gold butt-string in the Afternoonday heat. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" she asked.

Jorma handed her the tattered postcard Tdeshi'd sent to him back in the initial decade of the century. "We're looking

for the woman who mailed this.”

“I’m not Tdeshi,” the woman said as she lead them inside, “My name’s hSkaiya. I own the place but those girls downstairs stay with me for garden work. Oh look at the date, this was way before I was here. I was living up on City Beach back then,” she said. “Have a seat, pour a cup, or tug off the bottle if you ain’t got one.” She noticed that they didn’t. “But that may be all I have to do with this postcard. The guy I bought this place from might have known her, he was here quite a few decades. So who is that and why are you looking for her?”

“That was Tdeshi, my clone mother,” Ava said.

“Your clone mother?” hSkaiya asked.

“Tdeshi was killed and Ava took her place,” Jorma said.

“Why the stealth? I don’t need any intrigue,” she said as she laid back in a big, old, cushioned, wooden rocker that was surrounded by small tables with everything someone sedentary could want at arm’s reach. This was obviously where she lived.

“Nothing like that. Tdeshi’s mind was erased by O.D.ing on shonggot,…”

hSkaiya sucked in her breath and leaned so far back Jorma was afraid she would fall over. But she obviously rode her rocker well. She teetered on the points for a full second before pointing her toes down and tipping forward, where she caught herself with her feet with a big “Woah!” and a brush with danger that left Jorma’s heart rate elevated.

Meanwhile Ava continued right on with ...“and I was created in her place with no memories, in a tomb-drawer

under the pyramid.”

“Wow, that must have been a trip,” hSkaiya was leaning forward in her rocker now and reaching for the bottle again.

“It was; an escape from death trip. I worked at getting over it for a long time, a full career at the Kassikan, studying Yingolian circuitry.”

“That must have been quite something too,” hSkaiya said. “I’ve been up to the Hub a few times but only as a tourist. I walked thru a couple museums and looked in a few shops but there was nothing there I could afford.”

“But I never knew anything of where I came from as a young woman,” Ava said, obviously not caring that this woman wasn’t up to the mental exercise of going with her. She probably thought Yingolian circuitry was a form of ethnic knitwear. “I didn’t even know that she was named Tdeshi,” Ava continued, “she was found with no identification. I came across her birth record only recently, in the town where she was born. That was how I met Jorma. Jorma still had that postcard in his possession, and we have come to find that address.”

“You were in love with her in the town you came from,” hSkaiya said, looking to Jorma, “or you wouldn’t have pursued this with her. You wouldn’t have even kept this postcard all those decades.”

Thru three moves, not counting to Ava’s place on North Island. “I am in love with her now,” Jorma said, “as much as she can permit.”

“We each have reasons to pursue it,” Ava told her with a frown for Jorma. “How long have you lived here?” she asked.

“I have lived on this property nearly five decades, I have owned this property outright for a decade and a half.”

“So you know nothing of me living here?”

“As Tdeshi, no. There have been about eleven more-or-less permanent residents of this property since I’ve lived here. The history of the downstairs rooms being let was long before I first took one. My quarters have been shared with permanent residents twice since I’ve owned them, one other time while I leased here.”

“Is there a Hyondahi in your memory?” Jorma asked.

“No, that’s not a familiar name. But that was so long ago. Yorthops has been around the area since then, but she won’t be back for a year or two yet.”

“And who else lives here?”

“Bekthi, she moved into the other downstairs room when I bought the house and moved up here, somewhat more than a decade ago. A decade and twenty four is my best guess.”

“Are there any other people around here who have been here that long?” Jorma asked.

“Oh yeah, there’s a few, there’s a few women up that way. Himla, the guy I bought it from, was a resident of the house when he bought it. He lives in that alley behind the Bigtree now. He moved in with Yimpan when he sold this place, she has a much bigger spread up on that hill, but she threw him out after only a few years.”

“Would he be around today?”

“Couldn’t tell, you’ll have to walk down there and take the left path when it forks. Third house on the left, the one with the big edenflower out in front of it.”

“Did Himla live in this apartment when he owned the house?” Ava asked.

“Legend says the owner has lived up here since it was first planked and canvassed up above the lower rooms before the cheeseapple shoots even reached this high.”

“How many other legends do you know about this house?”

“I know Stevie was doing pro tricks when Yorthops lived up here with Himla. Both of them, and I, were not happy with the customers Stevie serviced. Stevie lived where Yorthops does now. Himla threw her out of the house, even though some of his customers weren’t much savorier. Stevie blamed Yorthops and I, she picketed here and at the Bigtree for weeks. It was a nasty scene. Other than that, this has been a quiet place as long as I’ve known it. Yorthops has been the main gardener, though I didn’t shirk it when I lived downstairs and I still tend the livestock more than Bekthi does.”

“Do you have any idea how much different this place was twenty decades ago?”

“There were a lot more male owners in the neighborhood, it’s only turned like this in the past few decades.”

“Is it a homosexual colony?” Jorma asked.

“No, not at all, it’s just mostly female owners for a few blocks around. Most of us have men around, I have a few I see regularly myself. In fact I thought you might be one of them when I heard feet on the porch, til you called in the same voice that was calling downstairs. There’s no males living in this house right now but Yorthops is the only one of

us who's at all bi and she's not very. She's away in the Hub for a few years, she's got friends in North Beach."

"This is a beautiful home," Ava said, "So airy and private in such a small space."

"Thank you, I've had something to do with the upper decor even though Yorthops does the grand design."

"It was the larorlie I was admiring," Ava said.

"I just wish the air was thick enough here to carry enough of the fragrance to get high on, they say the fragrance is the trippiest high of all."

"I think you're right," Ava said, "I passed thru Zhindu when I flew down to visit Alan and you can get visions by just walking thru some of the narrow upper vangs."

Jorma didn't want to get distracted into that. "Does this mean there was less larorlie on this house in earlier years?" Jorma asked.

"There was only that little patch Yorthops keeps over her porch until I got here," hSkaiya said. "Once I was willing to help care for it, Himla put some in over the walk."

"That would jive with Tdeshi," Jorma said, "She was down on yaag, said it made you lazy."

"Well I'll drink to that," Ava said and took another pull off the bottle.

hSkaiya took another tug and passed it to Jorma, who joined them with just a taste. Ava was very different from Tdeshi in this regard. "Do you know anything else about this house that has changed in the last few decades?" Jorma asked.

“I’m a much better housekeeper than Himla was,” hSkaiya said. “I keep the front porch and walk a lot better. Yorthops has thanked me often for that. The place up here had a bit of a smell when he lived up here. He kept the mats down more often and had lots of old blankets scattered around and let the klizhorns roost as they pleased. There were food scraps and bugs up here when I moved in.”

“That wouldn’t have bothered Tdeshi that much,” Jorma said. “She wouldn’t eat bugs, but she wasn’t bothered by them enough to do more than say ‘ew’. She’d sleep in a barn just as well as a palace.”

“While I could never live in that even if it was upstairs in another part of the house,” Ava said.

“There is something going on here,” hSkaiya noticed.

“There is a form of competition,” Jorma told her, “is this new inhabitant of this body more like Tdeshi or different?” he pointed at Tdeshi’s body with Ava in it. “She’s scoring points here, the differences.”

“I don’t really know that Himla was here when she was Tdeshi? Do I have that right? Your tale is a little confusing.”

“You have that right,” Ava said, “or at least close enough. This body was once inhabited by another, but mentally she was my clone mother.”

“That’s too bad. You could clear a lot of this confusion up if you had her memories.”

“That would clear it all up,” Ava and Jorma said almost at once. “We wouldn’t have come here bothering you in that case.”

“Oh I don’t feel bothered,” she said, “I’m fine to sit up

here and gossip.”

Unfortunately that was all she really had to tell them. There was more about someone in the neighborhood at that time who once got lost in the Dromedian forest. After awhile it became apparent that they were going to have to just leave, so when the bottle ran dry and hSkaiyia got up to get another, they said they didn't want to drink her out of house and home and scurried out the door.

They decided it was worth staying in the neighborhood and talking to a few more people. The school would have to be looked into, but that was down the road toward Sistril a ways. Instead they went to Byara's house where a friend of Hyondahi's had once lived but found no answer. Ava drew it in on the map and looked around for any other signs of life. They knew they should come back on Morningday when most people would be tending the garden, now most people were out somewhere. They did see a guy on a side porch and called to him.

“Hey? What's up?” he replied.

“I'm the clone daughter of a woman who used to live across the street, I wonder if you remember her?”

“If you come around back and have a tug off this bottle I'll be glad to take a look.” He motioned to the way up.

They went thru his side gate. It was so overgrown with dawn-blooms that it took some effort to open it. He had a big long larorlie trellis leading all along the side of the house, filling the space between his house and the next one, heavy with last year's swelling pods and new buds ready to pop. His

porch had grown-in balcony seats in the rail above it, they took the side opposite him. He handed them a very nice bottle, grown over with polished and varnished dried vines. The glass probably held over a half gallon, the wooden legs were six inches high and it was a wide-mouth with a thin but springy clip-down stopper. There were some small but wild designs worked onto it in beadwork around the belly of the bottle. He knew the yaag was going to be a potent blue just from looking at that shade-grown trellis.

“This is some of the best Highland home brew I’ve had in a long time,” Ava said, “this is a work of art.”

Even Jorma was appreciative. What hSkaiya had was nice enough, but this was connoisseur quality with copious, long-lasting fumes that packed more rush than a big bong. Jorma was sure once again that this was another way the neighborhood had changed in the twenty decades since Tdeshi was here. She wouldn’t have wanted to live in a neighborhood where there was a larorlie trellis over the average front path.

“Well, I will tell you this,” he said as he put the bottle back down, “I would be very glad to know you, for you are an elegantly beautiful lady, but I do not recognize you. You used to live here?”

“In this neighborhood, diagonally across the street in the cheese-apple.”

“hSkaiya’s; how long ago was that?” he asked.

“About a third of a century ago.”

“Oh, I’ve been tending Tendine’s vines for a good decade and a half now. This is Tendine’s house for four decades.”

So she had been here only a third of the way back to Tdeshi, Jorma thought. “There seems to be a lot of turn-over in this neighborhood,” he said.

“Well most of the homes are owned by single women who take lovers as they see fit and get tired of them from time to time. The women may or may not get tired of the neighborhood, it’s not what you’d call acreage around here. If someone wants to eat like a grown man in this neighborhood he’s going to have to bring something home.”

“How well do the women know each other?” Ava asked.

“Good enough,” he said.

Just then they heard the door open and footsteps approach, “Hi, I bet you’ve already got a bottle going on the back porch don’t you?” She had already dropped her skirt or shorts inside the house and was pulling a tank top off over her head as she came thru the door. She tossed that back inside, like ‘thru the door’ was accurate enough. She was trim and compact with dry, golden-brown skin and generous amounts of hair a little lighter than her skin. She was obviously fit but smooth and sleek also. “Hi,” she said to Ava and Jorma in a smoky voice, but hit the bottle before saying more. She didn’t just take a little taste but pulled on it awhile and then handed it around again. She’d had her hair bound but now took it out.

Jorma decided he’d go for another swallow or two or they wouldn’t be speaking the same language before long.

“Oh well,” Ava said a look a good glug and handed it back to the man, who tipped it up and finished it.

“I got a couple more of these if we need ‘em later. This is Tendine, This is...”

“Ava.”

“Jorma. Ava used to live here, under the name Tdeshi,” Jorma said.

“Twenty decades ago,” Ava said.

“Oh I’ve only been here four. Forgive the sweat, I’ve been canal building all day. Irrigation, I was mostly dragging four inch hose with some friends about three blocks up that way. We did shovel out the ditch last week and straighten up some of the curbstones. When the people around saw us coming by working on it, most of them pitched in, while we were at their place at least.”

“I’m sure they thank you for the initiative.”

“I’m just hyper is all, but not now, I’m collapsing. So what brings you here?”

“My body used to live over there,” Ava pointed.

“Where hSkaiya is now,” Jorma added.

“Oh, a lot has changed since then. It was twenty decades you said?”

Ava just nodded to that question, “I never met my mother,” she explained her clone mother again. “Do you know anyone around here who’s lived here that long?”

“Yeah, I can even tell you where they’ll be hanging out right now,” Tendine said, “Take this path here, go around that big keda field about six houses up and listen for the lazy laughter and the splash of kegs. It’s a big twelve-trunk house set back behind a feed lot down by the canal with a second floor that overhangs a full twelve feet on the fat limbs that gnarled, black archwood put out.”

“I don’t know about you,” Jorma said, “but what’s in that bottle ain’t something I immediately want to get up and walk around on.”

“Definitely not me,” the guy said, “but that’s where the old-timers hang out.”

“I’d get lost in the shower if I tried to take one now,” Tendine said. “What was this neighborhood like then?” she asked Ava.

“I couldn’t guess, I remembered nothing.” They thought she could have found out what happened to her by tracing back how she had been brought into the lab. “I know the whole thing,” Ava said, and told them how Tdeshi’s body turned up on that needleboat. By now Jorma could have recited it as well as Ava. He thought they should write out a pamphlet for everyone they interviewed to read so they wouldn’t have to recite it so many times.

“If your name was Tdeshi, why are you now called Ava?”

“She had no identification on her, so when I was revived I had to pick a name for myself and that’s what I chose. I wanted it to be simple enough to remember. I lived a whole new life with it, Tdeshi doesn’t seem like my name, Ava does.”

“But you must have been Tdeshi longer than twenty decades,” Tendine said.

“Actually she has been known as Ava longer,” Jorma admitted. “Tdeshi was still not even four when this happened to her. She wasn’t even twenty years over three when she went off to find a college here in the city.”

“This isn’t really in the city here,” the guy said. “We’re

self sufficient in produce.”

“Since he’s been here to work so hard on getting the roof into production.” Tendine said. There were thick stands of dwarf thesh on their roof, genetic coding for it had been spliced into the hangleaf leaves the roof was grown from. The roof’s thickness would grow more slowly now, but it would produce half the thesh they could eat in a year. It had probably required injecting each spot that would sprout a thesh rosette.

They stayed a while longer, but what they talked of had even less to do with finding her roots and more to do with the yaag he made. They refused the next round, saying they should get down to the tap house where the old timers were hanging out. “How long will they be there?” Jorma asked.

“There’s quite a few in this neighborhood that’ll have Duskmeal there, but none that will stay for the whole sleep. You might have a few that’ll go up to the 2nd floor for awhile since they have someone at the house already like Tendine does here.”

Tendine’s scowl told Jorma all he needed to know about the sore issue in that area. Jorma was actually up by now, feeling somewhat clumsier than the barges he dodged in the needleboat, but not running aground. Ava also got up, all lanky and loose. Neither the man, nor Tendine moved more than a hand to wave as they walked down the back steps and under the porch and trellis around to the front.

They got thru the gate again without damaging the vines that covered it. It was still a couple hours before Kortrax would get into hand-to-hand wrestling with the land. They

had spent quite a few lazy hours with the local jugs already. The lane was shady and they still had quite a buzz on. It didn't need to be a direct walk to the next tap, this intensely cultivated land was cute, but they had to remember not to get lost. They shouldn't, the inn they spoke of was right next to where they parked the boat, but with this buzz nothing looked very familiar.

He stared once more at the home Tdeshi had lived in as they went back by it. The cheese-apple it was built in was one of the biggest such trees he'd ever seen, and productive enough to sell plenty. A cheese-apple fruit a day and a quart of water can sustain human life for quite a long time. A cheese apple will keep in a bin for a year if the skin is not broken. This tree produced at least a thousand a year. He'd picked and eaten one on their way out just to see what they were. It was a dry, sharp, nibbling cheese-apple, not good for slicing.

There were at least four rooms on the second floor in that house, was it only the two of them living there when she lived there with Hyondahi? Probably not, it sounded like Yorthops had been in the house when Tdeshi was. There probably wasn't garden enough for more than the four of them back then, even counting the trellises in the trees around it that one could obviously climb. They had a tall fruit tree in each corner of the tiny lot, and bridges of hard-bean slung well up into them to aid in the harvest of both.

As he was looking up into the trees he saw someone, actually heard someone, scampering down the vines and out

of the trees with a nice sprig of jelly-drops clutched in her teeth. She was waving as she descended, once she got down to roof level she put the sprig in her hand. “You must be the girl hSkaiya was talking about, the one who used to live here.”

“I was, did you know Tdeshi?”

“No, but I know a guy who knew your boyfriend. He bought this place off him. I’m just one of the boarders here, but I hung out here with the previous owners also.” She was working her way thru the ridge-fronds of the roof, then down the edge and stepped onto a balcony rail and disappeared down the stairway. “I’ll be right out,” they heard her say. She was true to her word, having thrown a wrapskirt around her hips and maybe gave a brush one pass thru her hair on the way thru the house in what couldn’t have been more than ninety seconds. “I’m Bekthi, but Himla was here when Hyondahi owned this house. He’s described you well enough that I knew you on sight.”

“What did he say that let you recognize me?”

“The dark intelligence behind your eyes.”

“Oh?” She didn’t know whether to take that as a compliment or insult. Jorma got a chuckle out of it.

“The elegance actually, and the fact that hSkaiya described what you’re wearing. Anyway, Himla’ll probably be right down there at the Bigtree til he stumbles home for Dusksleep. You’ve been walking around all week doing this?”

“Just this Afternoonday after lunch. We had this address, we reached it this after-lunch when we found hSkaiya home.”

“If we go on down to those taps I’m sure we’ll find quite

a few people from back in those days,” Bekthi said.

“I suspect the neighborhood’s changed since then?” Jorma asked.

“Oh a little,” Bekthi answered.

“When she was young she would have never lived in a neighborhood or house with so much drinking,” Jorma said. “She was actually pretty straight when I knew her.”

“Well, since hSkaiya our house has been a lot yaagier, and maybe the neighborhood a little. Tendine’s got a guy who brews a blue monster.”

“That’s why we’re walking underwater,” Ava said, “We were just over there and stayed for most of a bottle.”

“You’re walking pretty good then,” Bekthi said, obviously impressed.

“hSkaiya got us started,” Ava said.

“And now we’re on our way to the neighborhood yaagatoria,” Jorma complained.

“Oh, we’ve learned a lot already and we’ve had a great time doing it,” Ava chided. She meant to give him a little shove on the arm but her languidity level was so high she missed and set herself on a giggling crooked course between the hedge flowers. Their notes were probably going to be hard to read from here on.

Bekthi lead them a few houses down the street and to the building Tendine had described, the twelve-trunk house with the overhanging second floor. The same one he saw across the paddock from the dock. He tried to make sure he remembered that. He could see dormers on the third floor that were probably where the family lived. The second floor probably

held the inn rooms. The number of windows on that floor agreed with the advertised twenty rooms and four suites. Its yard went thru from the main street to the canal, but was nothing but well-chewed keda graze with some troughs in it. There were people out in the lot also, conversing and tending their keda's and wagons. He could tell this lot was the neighborhood public parking. They reminded Jorma to come inside.

The place was a pretty lively public house inside with quite a crowd in the forty by sixty foot tap room on the first floor. There were smells of fine grill cooking coming from within, karga and big fish. It was loud with conversation and music provided by an excellent band. The music was a yandrille, chipponga and singer doing something a little soft and mysterious, maybe Dosian in sound, with fiber-optic projectors illuminating them. But these people probably lived within a few blocks, the song sounded like a cover. The thick trunks were all the decor there was inside except for the bar and the kegs. The great limbs put down buttresses in here and the planks of the floor above were nearly hidden by what had grown since then. The grills were next to the bar and there was a boisterous crowd around them. It was now getting toward time for Duskmeal and they really hadn't had a lunch today. Jorma thought he might head over there first.

“Hey Bekthi,” someone yelled from the far side of the bar, near the taps instead of the grille, “I heard Teshi's back.”

“Here she is,” Bekthi said, stepping to the side and presenting her, “with a guy from her old home town,” she said and presented Jorma. “She lost her memory to shonggot

or is a clone daughter, however you want to say it.”

“hSkaiya was telling me earlier. You do look like Teshi, you don’t remember me?” A small and slender woman asked. She was dressed in a tight, thigh-length ivory jersey and had lush blond hair reaching to her waist.

“I don’t remember anything before 100,00,23,” Ava replied.

“I live right out the back door of this place,” the little blond woman said, “and have since before you moved into that cheese-apple. That was Hyondahi’s at that time actually, since before you got there. He planted it in fact. You were his second adopted sex-child, but he kept you and saw you thru your education, until you O.D.d.”

“So you knew about that?”

“We all knew about that, those of us who were here at the time,” the guy said. He was a short wide-body with reddish-blond wiry hair and big pumped-up arms ringed with tattoos. One of his front teeth was missing, replaced by a Yingolian device, and his charge-blue eyes were ringed with the deep folds of an obvious pump addict.

“There has been some changing hands,” the other women said, she was a big, plush, buxom woman with long black hair in loose waves, “maybe even more since you left.”

“You all knew Tdeshi when she lived here before?” Ava asked.

“Nobody really knew you,” the guy said, “not even Hyondahi who you lived with. We knew you more thru him and arguments we heard out your window than we did from conversations with you. You weren’t interested in much but

hose clamps and gas equations that last year. Even when you'd sit out with Hyondahi and us, you had your books with you and were usually buried in them.”

“Hyondahi knew you because he was your sugar daddy and garden laborer,” the slim but pretty blond woman said. “He knew he was nothing more to you, but he loved you anyway.”

“You never intended to stay here beyond finishing that methane worker school,” the guy said. “You had only the final testing to pass.”

“So you three all knew me, as Tdeshi?”

“You were pronouncing it Teshi then,” the bigger, dark-haired woman said.

“That's how I heard it,” the smaller blond said.

“How well did you know her?” Ava asked.

“Nobody really knew you, you were just here to study,” the guy said. “Hyondahi was a good fuck and fed you well enough and didn't get in the way of your courses so he was in your life. You'd look up once, twice, sometimes three times a year and hang out for a week, and then dive right into the next session.”

“Does this sound like the Tdeshi you knew?” Ava asked Jorma.

“No, the Tdeshi I knew was more concerned with the social situation than educational achievement, though she was quite good at that also.”

“So are you Himla?” Ava asked the guy.

“That I am,” he said, “We met when you first moved into

the other downstairs room, before you moved up with Hyondahi. This is Byara,” he said, pointing to the dark haired woman, “she knew you at the time, and so did Elanda,” he indicated the smaller blond.

“Yeah,” the blond said, “We’re all old timers in the neighborhood.”

“Did you know Hyondahi?” Ava asked Byara.

“Yeah, I remember him,” she answered.

“Do you know where he is now?”

“He went back to the Hub I think,” Byara answered.

“He was friends with a guy who lived with you, do you remember him?” Jorma asked.

“Nah, he would’a been just some dude I was fucking at the time, I knew Hyondahi a lot better than whoever that was.”

“What do you know about Tdeshi and shonggot?” Jorma asked.

“I suspected,” Byara said, “and after it happened Hyondahi admitted she had done it before.”

“Did she tell you where she got it?” Jorma asked.

“No,” Byara answered.

“I knew nothing about it,” Himla said, “I didn’t even suspect. I guess I should have, given her intensity, but I was pretty shocked.”

“I never looked for it,” Elanda said, “So I had no idea who might have had it around here.” If anyone, she was the most nervous about what she was saying.

“I’ve never heard of anyone selling it around here either,”

Bekthi said, “but I wasn’t here then.”

“I didn’t even know there was such a thing until Hyondahi told me about Teshi using it,” Himla said.

“I really wanted to stop by that grill,” Jorma said, “We didn’t really have a lunch today so early Duskmeal feels real good to me.” He wondered how much of this Ava would write down. He still wasn’t sure he could write with what they’d been drinking today.

“Go get something, come on back and we’ll fill you in on what’s been happening in the neighborhood while you were gone,” Elanda said.

“hSkaiya’s already done that,” Ava said.

“Well in that case come back and fill us in on what’s been happening with you in the last twenty decades,” Byara requested.

They did that, and had a pleasant late-day while doing it. Ava bored them with too many details of Yingolian silicon logic and Himla and Byara bored them with neighborhood gossip that probably would have been interesting to her if she was Tdeshi, not Ava. They stayed thru everyone’s Duskmeal and got so wasted that Jorma didn’t remember anything much after Duskmeal except that at some time before Dusksleep was over he did have nice dreamy sex with Byara.

10. The School

Jorma had always hated Nightday. He never seemed to see as well in the dark as the average person. At least he wouldn't miss this in the dark, even though lanterns were scarce in the yard. The structure was the darkest of dark, the trunks of it's main building had grown so thick and burly by now that rough bark covered everything. The main trunks were at least thirty feet thick, the lumps in the bark on the coils of it's roots were big enough to sit on. It's shade was so thick that it even sheltered them from the rain that was early and heavy this week. The institution was now up to thirty eight floors above these lumpy stumps, a single compound tree nearly four hundred feet high and the tallest structure before Eleknane center. The grounds were roughly walled with loose stone and the lawn was nothing but some mossy slopes leading up to the doors between the trunks. It was set up like any small institution on level ground in a basically argridential area. It hadn't used it's trunks as part of the front wall as well as some, and it didn't have canal frontage. Other than that, it was nice enough, one of hundreds like it in the Yakhan's plots. It was a scale he could imagine Tdeshi in, unlike the endless city between here and the Hub.

Cut stone steps went up a whole story between the massive intertwined roots, the blocks had grown in a century ago and had to be periodically chopped clear. The lobby was the whole bottom floor, an open room with elevators and signs, sitting areas, information stands, art displays and the course listings. All the information was carved into signs

screwed to the bases of the huge trunks. The space was well appointed and well lit with golden panels and hung with pictures from the university's history. There was a sign that told them student records was eleven floors up. The elevator was still hand-cranked so they climbed a circular stairway inside one of the tree-pillars. It was soon apparent that the upper floors overhung the lower by a bent or two because the hallways went much farther than the lobby's size. No wonder the foliage sheltered the street from the rain.

The lowest quarters were the hired hand's homes and the experimental volunteers and hospitals. Each floor offered a pie shaped landing and hallways leading in all directions. By the sixth floor there were laboratories and classrooms, then some office and storage; by the tenth, the deans' council chambers. Above where they stopped climbing was still arts class space and faculty offices with student quarters above that and faculty quarters in the canopy.

The minister of record's clerk was tall and very fair. He wore tights and a harnessed carapace with hundreds of pockets. His head was hairless except for his long flowing pony-tail of wheat-blond hair gathered from a three-inch circle around his crown. "How can I help you folks?"

"I'm looking up my student records here, my name is Tdeshi and I did several terms in decade zero." She must have hated to claim she was Tdeshi. She didn't look at him while she said it.

"Let me go back and see what we have," he said while noting that down. "I may be gone awhile, I think records that old will be about three floors down."

He was true to his word, it did take awhile.

“Why does he wear that whole big harness with all that stuff on it?” she asked as they sat there waiting.

“He’s probably tired of not having it wherever he goes. As long as he can sit comfortably with it on, and it has it’s own leg he can drop, so he can sit comfortably wherever he wants.”

“It’s nice that we can at least wait comfortably here.” There were plush stand-cushions upholstered in scamp fur.

“I have no complaints so far,” Jorma said. “I’m glad we found this since we didn’t know much about it except the wrong name and a vague description of the building and location.” The plaque said this was now what was called the old hall, though the new hall must have taken several centuries to grow to it’s current size because it was now much larger than this one, though not as tall. “Even so, we’re here and it’s still our first week. I’m amazed we’ve found as much as we have,” Jorma said.

“Student records, six pages per iron.” That had been the sign at the door of the records room.

“That’s pretty cheap,” Jorma noted, “only twice what the copying cost would be.”

“I know. The Kassikan gets an iron a page for official student record,” she said, “but there’s a lot on each page.”

“Each page carries a lot more weight than records from this school. It seems you were much more successful as a student after the amnesia.”

He was afraid she would object to that word, but did so

only with a grimace. “I wasn’t really a student at the Kassikan, I felt more like one of the experimental animals in the lab. I think the person I am now was made there.” He thought about the symbolism there. He was helping her find herself, as far as he was concerned. He would take her back thru all her memories leading up to the shonggot and she would be re-attached to her former life.

Unless, of course, she was made from someone else’s memories. She wanted to make him understand that there was someone else in there now, there was no question in his mind about that. There was so much truth to what she said. She was so different in so many ways. She had lived a whole ephemeral lifetime since then, as she often pointed out. He hadn’t actually known the length of an ephemeral life til she told him. She’d had a career in photo-voltaic manufacture since she was Tdeshi. “We are finding out a lot about you,” Jorma encouraged.

“Are we? does the person we are finding out about feel like me to you?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said.

“I don’t feel as anti-social as the people at that spigot yesterday seem to think.”

“Compared to the way you were, you are almost that anti-social now.”

“So before she O.D.d she was already more different from the girl you knew than I am now?”

“I guess y... She was in that respect, but there was that in Tdeshi. If she was concentrating on something she was not very social. There were also certain people with whom she

was not very social back in Sinbara.”

“Who were they?” Ava asked

“Certain people her hangers-on called hangers-on.”

“Was she some important heiress? I don’t think so, I found no record of her owning property there.”

“Til now,” Jorma said, “when you own a cuter, though much less lavish, property than Tdeshi’s family did in Sinbara. Tdeshi grew up in a four person household, her, her sister, her father and his mother, in a house with nineteen rooms not counting the barns and sheds. She was moderately wealthy but more popular for her social smarts and sexuality while she was still completing her third decade. She graduated as queen of the Sinbara day school.”

“She did? How many other girls her age in that class?”

“Three,” Jorma had to admit.

Her eyes rolled but she sighed, “And she wound up in this neighborhood down in the Yakhan.”

“Does any of it look at all familiar, awaken any feelings?” Jorma asked.

“This hall of records is like many such that I have seen. The great universities make sure their knowledge is all-inclusive and report any discoveries to the center. That is done by sending scholars out to research at other universities and pursue their most advanced discoveries. I’ve done eleven years of that in my career, so I saw many of these, I might have even been here.”

The clerk was back, he had a thick package of papers with him. “You match the picture, but I still need a thumb print to open these records. You can see we have plenty of records of

a Tdeshi here that matches your picture.” He eyed the print for awhile, she cleaned the ink off her thumb.

“It’s certainly you,” he said, “but how’d you get so much smaller?”

“Pixie dust,” Ava joked. He wasn’t amused. “It must be another effect of what I O.D.d on.”

“The effect is as pronounced as the most successful shrinking programs science can devise.”

“My finger must have been swollen that day,” Ava said.

He was already satisfied by the picture, just curious why she was smaller. Jorma himself went with the swollen theory and worried about why. “Boost will do that,” he told them, disappointed to find evidence that she had been doing that to herself. He knew it took a large dose to get that much effect.

The clerk commented only with an eyebrow and began to lay out the certificates from various programs she had completed. There were quite a few of them, sometimes two in the same year, sometimes multi-year programs in a single year. “You seem to have been a very driven student,” he said.

“I’ll say,” Jorma added, “but I am not surprised. She was the best student at her town school also.”

“She wasn’t the best here, but one of the fastest by these records. She didn’t do badly, she appears to have done solidly well in everything...”

“Outstanding in Advanced Hydraulic Efficiency,” Jorma said.

“And barely squeaking by in gymnastics,” Ava discovered.

“That was already not like the Tdeshi I knew,” Jorma said, “The more physical it was, the better Tdeshi was at it.”

He noticed this Ava incarnation of Tdeshi looking at him. This was actually a point for him, she had begun changing before she took the shonggot and she saw that now.

There were numerous things she had written. Ava frowned when she saw the handwriting. He knew what that meant, he didn't have to question her to confirm it. The handwriting had come with Tdeshi and was not new with Ava. Other than the gymnastics, the courses she did well in were courses Ava would do well in. Many of them were things she had already studied in her new life. She was clearly awed by what she saw. “You have seen something?” Jorma said.

“Yes,” Ava said. “These subjects are the subjects I know, the ones I did the best in are the ones I pursued at the Kassikan and then had a career researching. I don't remember studying them here, but I didn't study these basic subjects there either, I woke up in that drawer still knowing this material. I don't know how I knew it, I thought it was just obvious, like it was instinct.” She turned to the recordsman. “I guess you could say your school provided a lasting education even shonggot couldn't erase, but I'd hate to think there was any such market where you could use that as advertising.”

Ava was going thru the bottom of the pile, things like conferences attended, and there, for the same year she was created, was a record of a one year pass to the Kassikan, unfortunately without the certificate number, as a scholarship transfer from North Chardovia Trades Academy. A year's

pass. What would the person they were discovering do with a year's pass to the Kassikan? Ava was thinking the same thing, he could see that as she looked up at him after reading it.

"She would not have slept that year," was their duet. It was clear that they were both building the same vision of Tdeshi in their minds, the driven young woman who had to get it done now. The clerk's eyebrows agreed with what they were saying, though his mouth remained set in a short straight line.

"She might have taken shonggot at lectures, trying for that knife edge of photographic memory between slightly enhanced and erasure."

"I wonder if we can find her notes from that year," Jorma said, "That would probably tell us a lot."

"They would be back in that house, but it's been sold twice since then, there's nothing left of anything she might have left there."

"We don't know that, we don't know what section of the house she lived in, we've only had a cursory look at the main apartment."

"For one of them the owner won't be back for years."

"She's in the city, with the needleboat, we could go ask her and come back in a under two weeks." As he said that he knew it sounded stupid. For half a copper they could both go back and forth on lakerunners and sleep in comfortable cabins and eat good meals at nice tables with glass in the window and maybe take two days longer if the air was still, one day less if the lake was rough.

"You would go thru all of that?"

"Don't you have to know?" Jorma replied.

“I know enough.”

“But this is you?”

“This is my mother, and getting toward her undersides. But I am not Tdeshi, I am Ava. I am the soul created in the wizard’s lab to take over the body after Tdeshi erased herself in her desperation. An empty body was delivered to their lab and they created my mind in it. I am a different person. I would be a different person anyway if I did keep those memories. Tdeshi would have done as well at the Kassikan as this personality, the hardware was not seriously changed...”

“The what?”

“The cells themselves,” she stammered, “there were still the same kind and number, shonggot just erases the connection weights.”

“You’re the college educated one, explain it in street-speak.”

“It erases the data in the brain, it doesn’t change the brain itself. It erases the data but the wizards read more in.”

“Where did they get it from?” he asked, maybe he could trick her into giving him a name, then maybe somehow he could find out who that person was at the Kassikan.

“It was just course work and such, info.” She was stumbling with this, was she just guessing or was she trying to cover something up? “I guess it’s what they have available on RNacid,” she continued, “they said it was about fourteen coppers worth of RNacid education.” He thought again of a pill of someone else’s life. If he did ask, what would she say? Why even ask in that case. Maybe he better start to understand that there very likely was a pill of someone else’s

life involved. A life she wanted covered up. “They didn’t really give me a personality,” Ava continued, not giving him a chance to think this out. “that just came about over the years, such as it is. I’m still pretty much a simpleton socially, even after all these decades. You’ve told me Tdeshi was socially successful.”

“Tdeshi was a queen, something I have to admit I don’t see in you. Tdeshi was the natural leader of any social occasion. She would usually start people with some observation of pop culture and bring it up to some grand socio-political thing having to do with the starships.”

“What about them?” Ava was immediately interested in that.

That was an interest Tdeshi and Ava shared, though Tdeshi’s interest was all about the novelty of it. She had been conscious of the fact that she would be in the Yakhan when the starship finally landed and that was one of her big reasons for moving there. As it was, she died ten years before it landed. “Why there was so little knowledge from them,” he answered.

Since Ava was a YingolNeerie scholar she launched right into a lecture on that. “We have all their technology that we can build. We have millions of pages on their history and culture, their biology, facts and figures about Earth and human evolution. There just hasn’t been that much interest except among a small class of scholars. It’s a small and cold world really, depressing with violence and pestilence. We knew something of events there for a few decades because there was suntower contact. The latest messages from

YingolNeerie tell of a war between Angels and mortals, it is possible that flesh humans have been wiped out over there. Whatever happened, they are no longer transmitting.”

She had to stop to explain a lot of that to him and even more to the recordsman who was quite interested in what he was listening to. He knew only of the friendly starship that had started a period of contact between Kassidor and YingolNeerie that lasted most of the last twenty decades. “Or at least Brasil is wiped out,” he said when he got a shaky understanding of the people and places.

“Maybe, but there were transmitters in China and Talstan also, neither has been detected since I left the Kassikan almost three decades ago.”

“Why do we have so few movies and other literature from those people?” he asked.

“We haven’t known them long enough to transmit many movies over that distance,” Ava said. “A few novels have been sent. The bulk of what we’ve sent has been genetic code and the bulk of what they’ve sent have been electronics lessons and code.” Ava loved to lecture on her subject and went on for quite a while. There were good reasons why she was even more learned on the starships than Tdeshi dreamed of being, but he thought it interesting that they shared that interest. “We thank you very much for all you’ve showed us,” Ava said to the recordsman a few minutes later. She indicated ones she wanted copies of. It was one each from a teacher, she got six teacher’s addresses that way in case they still wanted to press on. She clearly didn’t.

She was still glancing at the records as they walked down, the stairway wasn't lit enough for him, but Tdeshi never had any trouble with Nightday. His plan for Nightday was to make it as short as possible to make up for the very short Noonsleep he usually had. She treated it like just another day. That hadn't changed with Ava, it was another way they were very much alike.

When they got to the gloomy hallways at the bottom of the institution, he could see she wasn't eager to go back into the rain that was still pouring onto the streets. "Lets find a cozy pub to talk about this," he suggested.

"There will be all kinds of people there to overhear."

"We are not investigating an important trade secret here, just what happened to Leand's daughter from three thousand miles away and twenty decades ago."

"It was important to Tdeshi," she said, but he was already on his way out to the street. The rain showed lantern light from a street that looked like there could be businesses on it just a block or two to the left on the paved road. He grabbed her hand and pulled her thru the pour at a brisk jog into the first pub they came to.

It was an inn by it's sign, but probably rented it's rooms by the hour. There was an impressive line of kegs, this must be the primary watering hole for this college neighborhood. There was a boisterous crowd inside, so beer must be a good seller here also. There was plenty of smoke inside, but not enough to obscure the college banners that decorated the walls. The lanterns were old, the cookfires were open but the smell of rord and norrot were unmistakable. There were

roasts turning over the open fires, there were stew-pots hanging with them. “Shall we last for an early Darkmeal?” he asked, “the first round to come out?”

“It depends on when that occurs and the strength of their taps. In many a place like this I’ve had to be awakened to go home.”

“I’ll get us a couple house cups to find out,” Jorma said.

‘Why didn’t he agree that the mystery was solved?’ he wondered as he waited in the keg line. Why did she think it was? Were they only trying to answer the question of whether Tdeshi OD’d from striving or despondency, he might have thought it was solved. He agreed with Ava that she had done it thru striving. But what was she striving for? He didn’t know enough yet and maybe more important, he didn’t understand how that influenced the differences between Ava and Tdeshi. Had he switched from investigating Tdeshi’s demise to Ava’s origin? He was leaning more toward the latter with each day. The RNAcid pills had him very suspicious.

They were learning more than he had any right to expect. They found people who remembered her and written records. Part of what made him want to dig deeper was just the thrill of success, the excitement of following a trail simply because it continues. He wasn’t sure where to go next except to follow that scholarship into the Kassikan.

The house cups were quite decent here, they must be pursuing the transient trade. After a few silent minutes of drinking and savoring what little fume this brew put off, she was staring into a dimension of space-time that Jorma’s math

couldn't quite find. "You seem quite distracted," he told her.

"She studied the same things I did. How could a clone-mother leave that in her genes?"

Why not? Jorma wondered. Of course he didn't really know what genes did what and how they were inherited, but he'd seen many skills run in families. A lot of that was teaching each other in the family, not something genes really had anything to do with. "Maybe it was in her memories? Maybe there is something that came thru?"

"Would it make you happy if there was? I think there probably was," she said. Her eyes stabbed him in anger but her voice was sweet. "There are memories coming thru, just like I told that clerk, subjects I'd studied before. It was something about that school."

"Are you playing with me?" Jorma asked, sliding the cups back for a re-fill.

"I feel you're asking me to look for the faintest sign," she said, sweetly mocking. "That school is familiar. I have seen many like it, as I told you, but I might have seen that one before. It was probably as Ava doing a survey, but I may remember that school."

The kegman was here for the mugs, "You mean 'ol Northie'?" he asked.

"Yes, I went there before I erased my brain and became Ava, I used to be Tdeshi." she was mumbling this more to herself than to the kegman or even Jorma. "Though there is some evidence I might have started to turn into Ava already by the time I was here." She was actually looking at Jorma by now, not into the glowing vapors on the back side of Cynd.

“You are new to me Ava,” the kegsman said. “I’ve been tending these taps four decades now but want to get into brewing when there’s an opening downstairs.”

“I’m sure you have centuries ahead of you as a brewmaster,” Ava told him. “But what do you know of ‘ol Northie’?” she turned to face him.

“I know it took root long before the Architecturalists took it over in the 53rd. I know Imentule came from Yondure to these shores in the 35th, long before one could get any of the native wizards to start teaching more than genetics and canal-craft.”

“How long have you been here?” Jorma asked him.

“I’ve only been tending these kegs these few decades, but I’ve been around this school quite a bit longer than that. I used to have a good position there you know, before these kegs took their toll on me. I used to assist the sages in the art department, I used to work on the fourteenth floor at one point. Anyway, now I’m a whole lot closer to these spigots. I don’t get as winded as I used to on those stairs,” he said, putting the re-fill in front of them. “Thank you,” to Jorma and the wave at the change.

He had to go serve some other folks who came up to his counter. They retreated from the counter to a table by the window. He wished he remembered Tdeshi from his time on the faculty, but there might be some on the faculty who did, that was another trail they should follow up. She picked a table down the end and out from under the low roof leaves in a not-too-crowded part of the first floor. There was a bright lantern in front of this place so he could actually see some of

the street and not just the black glass of Nightday. The candle on the table was big enough to warm your hands with, another plus at this time of the week. They ordered a basket of fried inglehors from a tableman who appeared only seconds after they found the seat.

“So what more do you want to learn?” she asked him.

What could he say? Enough so you’ll remember who you were? He’d tried that too many times to pretend it was humorous any more. Something that explains why you are so different? He was sure she would not help him with that. “Why? Why she did it?”

“You couldn’t learn that from her when she was alive, you’ve told me that many times. You’ve told me how many ways you asked her what the emergency was. The emergency was that she was young. She was born with the ancient human instinct to reproduce as well as possible before it’s too late. Her intellect tells her that’s not the case, her instincts do not. She struggles between them and is lost. That’s what happened to Tdeshi.”

“We can learn more,” Jorma was sure of it. “There may be teachers that remember her, she probably has an old locker at that school, she might have left a bag with someone while she was in the city for that year. We still haven’t found where she was staying for the year at the Kassikan.”

“Was she staying?” Ava asked. “We agreed she would not sleep. Would she do more than set her bag somewhere now and then? She didn’t have the bag with her on the needleboat where she was found, she would certainly have brought more than one address, an almost new notepad and some handouts

to the Yakhan for a year. She had a bag somewhere that she lived out of. It would have been in a commercial storage cubby, they would have tagged it after a year and opened it after ten. We don't have to go looking for a bag left somewhere."

"What would have happened to the stuff in it?" Jorma asked.

"The notes would have been used to kindle a fire by the people who opened it. I hope the fire was warm and they made love well by its light."

"Why do you want the trail to end here?" Jorma asked, "have you already found out more than you're comfortable with?"

"I've already found out what I wanted to know, why she did this to herself. It was because she was too desperate to make the most of this opportunity. I guess I don't need to know any more level of detail."

They drank the yaag and had a very nice inglethor basket. They were all well cleaned and nicely battered, toasted to perfection and served inverted, hottest on the bottom, so they could commence powering thru them as soon as the basket was set in front of them. There were several popular species in the mix, each with the batter that complimented their area and the ethnic groups from there. They were so perfectly done that the meat fell off the bone but not one bone was burned.

"Where are we sleeping this Dawnsleep?" he asked.

"I figured it would be on the boat, we can't intrude on Byara again." She had been true to her word and happy that she slept by herself in Byara's front room. "You got that

nightcover, you haven't used it yet."

"It's on now or we certainly wouldn't want to go back to that boat."

"Good point," she said. "I mean we've never slept under it."

"I thought it was for emergencies. You want to come down here as a passenger, now you don't want to stay at this inn?"

"I think we might get people asking how long it was going to take us if we tried to stay the night here. It doesn't look like the pairing action is about to cool off soon."

"I'm nowhere near ready to sleep," Jorma said.

"Nor am I, this keg tastes very interesting," she said, "and I understand that is another big difference between us, she had no taste for yaag."

"She thought it tasted fine, it was the effect she didn't like. She didn't want to slow down, she wanted something that would speed her up."

"Sempheneet."

"Zarris." He could list a few more drugs that she liked, boost and lock for instance, but wouldn't let herself have; when he was around anyway. While she lived in Sinbara she hardly ever let herself have anything stronger than beer and copious quantities of caffeine. When she did it was whiskey or a little bit of a fancy psychedelic. Ava was so different, she'd accept alcohol but would glug yaag. She would watch the party from a seat up above, not dive for the center of it the way Tdeshi used to. Ava was very different in her drinking. She actually drank more beer than Tdeshi, but just as a break

from yaag. Ava didn't seem to admit to herself how serious her yaag habit was. "But she didn't have your taste for yaag, that is a fact."

"You associate that with my laziness don't you? Which do you think came first? The laziness or the thirst for yaag? It was the laziness by a few virtual centuries."

"What are those?" Jorma asked.

"Like fantasy centuries, like going back to my ancestors since way before Tdeshi."

"Leand was your father, your mother was a colandro, I told you before. I was there at y... Tdeshi's birth," Jorma said. "She left you a sister by Leand, or do you want to call her an aunt?"

"Where is she now?" Ava asked, "Tdeshi's sister," she clarified, seeing his confusion.

"In the north I think, 'as far beyond the old shore as it took for the land to be free', I think she said when she left."

"That doesn't sound like me at all, I'm definitely city people."

"You are, but so was Tdeshi, in that you are alike."

"Have you made a comprehensive list of how we are alike and different?" Ava asked.

"No, I think about the basic differences."

"And what are they?"

"Intensity," he said, "She was so much more intense. That does seem to be what caused her OD. I've gotten to like the slower sex life in a way. Tdeshi would like a group thing once a week and I think Vureer might have worked her into her

way of thinking after awhile.”

“I must admit, I’m quite far from that. I won’t lock your drawers, but as long as you give me all I desire, please don’t force me out.”

“It’s not like that in a four way, but we don’t need to go over this again and you did go with Hurlie,” he said, mentioning an incident from before they left Sinbara.

“Well, if the fourth in the foursome is that attractive I guess I can come down off my pedestal and get in the orgy spirit. He did mention that I wasn’t the way Tdeshi used to be.”

“So now I know what his grin was about,” Jorma said.

“There’s too much going on in your past up there,” Ava told him, “at least we only have each other around here.”

“This is a friendly neighborhood,” Jorma said, “We could go our separate ways here any evening and never lack for companionship again.”

“But no one feels a need to interrupt us if they overhear a snatch. They don’t have anything to relate it to. It’s twenty decades ago.”

“I wonder how many of the people in this room were in this area twenty decades ago?” Jorma asked. “I think less than half.”

“Yeah, that means at least one out of three was. Do you think someone might think I look familiar?”

“Remember how it was in Sinbara? At least three people tried to speak to you before I did but you didn’t know them. Has that happened to you here?”

“No more than the usual number of guys smile at me, I don’t know if any mean it as anything more than a plea of lust.”

“Right, it would be hard to tell for you wouldn’t it?”

“I’m not that bothered by it, I pick companions soon enough that it doesn’t become an issue. Like now, I’m with you, all know that and don’t chase any harder than a wink of approval and I am not offended.”

“You have no desire to be a conqueror of hearts?”

“When I need one, for now I am content with yours, in spite of your zeal in finding my clone-mother’s exact last instant.”

“I was hardly a conqueror of yours. Venna had to tell me what your real problem was.”

“Because it took you a year to call me Ava when we made love.”

“Do you deliberately curb your lovemaking because you want to prove you’re not Tdeshi?”

“I think I already told you, you just trained me to make love like Tdeshi so that’s what I do. I’m having fun and so are you. If you need to have any more religious depth to it than that, I probably won’t join you. I can’t get any closer to Tdeshi than clone daughter, what I told you when you first found my house.”

“I understand all that way too well by now.” She had softened him as much as he had released her.

“Sorry,” she said. “Before you trained me, I made love like I did when you found me.”

“At your age?”

“It wasn’t a priority in my life at the time, I didn’t have you at the time. Would you believe the first guy I made love to after I was created in that crypt was from ancient times? He showed me fossils in his museums that are not as old as he is. The next was from YingolNeerie.”

“While I’m only from 51,52,04 and about a hundred miles southeast of Dolostel.”

She seemed to take a long time to digest that. The look she gave him was all out of proportion to telling her his birth year unless it was the same as hers. Unless it had clicked. Hers, as Tdeshi, was in the same decade four centuries later, 55,52,43. Not very close to her birth year as Ava, 100,00,23. She looked like she longed to tell him something. He tried to make himself look as understanding as he could so she could overcome the shyness she had picked up as Ava. Nothing came out however. She didn’t tell him what it was, and he didn’t know a way soft enough to ask. He put his hand over hers and her lips curled with a little less seriousness. “I was just trying to feel how long that must be,” she finally said.

“About as long as these trunks have sunk root here,” he said while looking around.

“Much longer than me, much, much longer than Tdeshi.”

“The last thing I did with my life before falling in love with her was watch Tdeshi grow up from that cabin out in her back fields.” It was still such a strain not saying ‘you’ and ‘your’ to her, but he did it. He didn’t even know if she noticed, she just expected it.

They had worked their way around next to each other

behind the table, but Ava was always decorous in public. Tdeshi was like Venna and often much less decorous in public than he wanted her to be. Ava would allow him to put his arm around her, however when he forgot and went to her chest, she pushed him off.

“You are still training me to be like Tdeshi. I just want to be held sometimes and cuddled up to in a non-erotic way, I don’t want to be entered at the beginning and end of every sleep.” She might have thought so, but he hadn’t taught her to love like Tdeshi, not yet. She had another layer of revelation to go before she would get to that.

“I promise, I will only cuddle you this sleep, I will not poke any appendage of my body into any orifice of yours.”

“I’m not asking that of you. I’m up for it this Dawnsleep, just go find some other willing female this Noonsleep and let me sleep peacefully.”

“If we’re sleeping on the boat, I don’t think we could get on each other without tipping it over.”

“You’re probably right,” she said, “I think I can scrape up a couple tenners for a room.”

“I’ve got to check on the boat, just so the sleepshift dockman knows someone’s interested in it. Do you want me to do that before or after?”

“Before, when you’ve done what you’re going to do with this mug. You go do that, I’ll go find us the cleanest room and leave the number with the hall clerk. I’ll take a nice long shower while you walk there and back.”

Jorma stood, quaffed his mug and headed for the door nearest the dock end of the inn’s front porch. He enjoyed the

walk in a near-psychedelic way, glad he had sense to just keep going straight when the trip got especially abstract. In some respects the mile was short, in some others it reminded him of the needleboat ride. The drizzle was turning to puffs of snow before he got back, but that couldn't even dent the buzz he had going. Since they were getting a place for the whole sleep, Ava got a nice one with a fireplace. Nightday gave way to a very nice Dawnsleep after that.

11. The Cache

On the casual stroll back to the boat after a late lunch that Morningday, they ran into hSkaiya. She was bundled in a folded quilt against the early-week chill, but excited about some info they might be interested in. “Yeah, I just got off the eye with Yorthops,” she said. “She said to let you in and look at it. It was actually Himla that left it down here when he bought the place from Hyondahi. I learned all this in about fifteen minutes on the eye.”

“Learned about what?” Ava asked.

“Look at what?” Jorma asked

“Some things Tdeshi left here. I asked if she knew her,” she answered. “She knew you, knew you O.D.d. She told me where she's still got some of your things stored. I swear she can type as fast as she can talk, but even so she was more into the guys she was hanging with and what she'd seen shopping back of the near north shore.”

On the walk back to the house hSkaiya told them the

details of the message. Tdeshi had left some things in the house when she left for the Yakhan and most of them were still stored in the place where Yorthops was living now, the one Tdeshi had been in for a few weeks before she moved upstairs with Hyondahi.

hSkaiya soon had the door to Yorthops' rooms open and lead them inside. It was tasteful but quite overgrown, it had the feel of being in a burrow under a mossbank. This side of the house would get light earlier in Morningday, but now that they were nearing noon it was already shaded. The trunks were all leafy on her side, and there were other plants in earthenware in every window. The bed was up above a large cabinet in the dormer that peeked out from under hSkaiya's bed in the room above.

“She says it's in the storage under that window seat over there.”

The seat was her main room cushion in the bay window at the garden end of the house. The garden was still in full sun and would be for most of Afternoonday. They could see Bekthi out in it, picking a few of the early blue beans. The barn was partly under this apartment, so her windowsill was almost eight feet off the ground.

They had to stack the cushions on the floor to get into the compartment. There were three trap doors, one under each of the cushions. They all opened into the same large compartment, it only looked like three compartments because there were different things piled in each. There were balls of murbeet fur in here and even a complete skeleton of one otherwise long ago decomposed.

In the first door there were clothes. They would obviously still fit her today, but they were a much scantier style than Ava would ever wear among the general public, maybe even more than Tdeshi would wear in today's styles.

“If any of you girls want this,” Ava said, “You can have it. Oh, this is pretty, I'll take this scarf here.” She tried to shake some of the dust off, then saw there was so much she should do it outside.

“That's a wrapskirt,” Jorma told her.

“Not much here that would fit me,” hSkaiya said, being nearly twice the width.

Under the next door were books, scrolls, pads and quite a few notes. “Bingo,” Ava said, “This is where we'll find out what we need to know.” She gathered up all the handwritten things and brought them to the table.

Jorma looked at the books that were here. There were her old art books, she had sailed with a small chest of them. There were some newer, fancier ones with color photos for covers and shimmering lettering. All these pertained to methane production and distribution. Methanobacteriology, Fluid Mechanics, Organic Chemistry. This was well beyond what Tdeshi would have ever learned in Sinbara. Then there was a catalog of plumbing fittings, another catalog of precision drills with accurate pilots and gemstone teeth.

He opened the third compartment and saw the old Tdeshi. On top was a tray of art supplies, brushes, bowls, pallets, vials of pigments. Everything had hardened to the mineral state by now, but it was obvious what they were. Underneath was canvas after canvas from small ones a few inches on a

side to some he had to turn diagonal to get thru the opening.

“Why would she have had so many unfinished paintings?” Ava asked.

“Because she hadn’t finished them yet. This one here looks like it was finished. So do these little ones of mountain streams.” Jorma said.

Jorma spread out the pictures, this was Tdeshi. She was still doing a lot of fashion studies, using both her art forms to practice the other. Everything was darker. One painting was quite disturbing. It was an old place deep in grown city, balcony after balcony all around. All of them were crowded and all the crowds had stopped to clutch the balcony rails, staring wide-eyed directly at you out of the canvas. Their eyes were subtly oversized and she had used a technique to get more detail in the eyes, made the canvas smoother somehow, so it was obvious the staring was what the painting was about. He noticed that one of the people on the closest rail bore a resemblance to Himla, one could have been Leand and another looked disturbingly like himself.

Was this Tdeshi without her family and close friends? Was this Tdeshi alone in this numbing expanse of city, on a Nightday it looked like? She was feeling like all eyes were on her. Was it a clue to why she had done what she did? Was this a picture of the pressure she felt?

Ava snapped him out of it, “Listen to this,” she called to him, “...there will never be an opportunity like this again, make lists of everything I will need. Make sure I have everything I need. Any risk is worth it for this chance.’ Amphetamines and shonggot are on the following list.”

“Where would you guess she got it from?” Jorma asked hSkaiya.

“This was SO many years before me, but legend says the guy she was living with at the time had a big bummer over what happened to her, so I would have him under suspicion.”

“Do you have any idea how to get in touch with him?” he asked.

“No more than last week. I think Himla said he went down to the Yakhan. I didn’t come to the party for the previous sale of this house, I was still living with a guy near Eleknane town.” She pointed inland, up the canal and away from the lake.

“Have you seen this stuff before?” Ava asked.

“No, I never heard of it til I mentioned you to Yorthops, she told me you might want to look at this stuff. I’m glad I was able to catch you,” she said, “it wasn’t any trouble, just down to the docks.” They had idled away the first half of Morningday trying to decide what they would do next as they ambled the mile back to the boat. “So where will the trail lead you now?” she asked.

“Back to the Kassikan I fear,” Jorma said, “From what Himla said, she had recently left for her year at the Kassikan, she might have been still on her way when it happened. That’s one of the things we can find out back there.”

“I think I know enough just from this,” Ava said, “She was doing it for her year, she wanted to be sure she imprinted all of it. That is not the way to approach the Kassikan. The Kassikan is important because it is huge and old, not because it is something superhuman. The instructors at the Kassikan

can be just as mediocre as the lamest instructor at this Northie place. There are certainly some great ones, and they will attract the greatest, but you might only see their face in one of the campus newspapers.”

“The Kassikan is too big for me,” Jorma said, “And too old. Without you as a guide I’m actually leery of going into it.”

“Every human and quite a few others who might wish to show up are welcome as potential students. You won’t accidentally wander into anyplace they don’t want you unless you have a habit of wandering around in ventilating ducts.”

“No, I got cured off of that habit by the end of the 54th,” Jorma said.

He could see that Ava thought that was very poor humor, since there were no ventilating ducts in Sinbara. He thought it was poor humor on her part to bring it up in the first place because she knew there were no ventilating ducts in Sinbara. Maybe she was hoping he wouldn’t know what a ventilating duct was? Maybe she thought he was illiterate and had never read? Just because he didn’t want to sit on the deck and read on the way down here?

“I don’t see why we need to continue on to the Kassikan after finding this,” Ava said. “We know from Himla she would find it down there, we know from her notes she intended to. How much closer can you get?”

“Maybe I just want to know who she got it from, maybe I need to talk to someone who was close to her at the end. If she was taking it already, why would she O.D. this time?” He still didn’t dare voice his suspicions of the Kassikan, or speak

further of the RNAcid reincarnation theory.

“We’d have to find Hyondahi,” Ava said, “At least that’s what it looks like. Those people we talked to last week didn’t seem to think she had many other close friends around.”

“But that is so unlike Tdeshi,” Jorma told her.

“She was already changing, you have to face that. I didn’t take the girl you knew and push her out, she was already gone, this body was already inhabited by someone else, calling herself Teshi. You even heard one of them say I was looking better like maybe he thought I was working out again.”

“What kind of talk is this?” hSkaiya asked.

“I am a different personality, I was created in a lab in the Kassikan. They have always done research into reviving victims, shonggot is one of the toughest. They managed to keep this body alive but a different personality grew up inside it.”

“Those guys at that pub down the street seemed to think it had already happened,” Jorma said.

“As I was telling you,” Ava retorted.

“Well if you go back to the city,” hSkaiya said, “you should look up Yorthops, she’s got a friend on the north waterside, halfway out to the Kassikan.” Even Jorma knew that was well within what most people who live in the Yakhan call ‘downtown’, much deeper in the city than where the Brother’s Formidable had docked. All he knew was that it was a lot more fun in this area if you have a needleboat and can get to another part of the urban universe in the same week. On cheap public transport this urban complex can be

two weeks wide. If they left now and the lake was flat they might be able to get back downtown before dark.

He had expected that if the investigation was to get near the Kassikan, Ava would dig right into it with a hearty ‘well I know my way around here,’ and be anxious to get on with it. Instead she looked like she would be content to sit here and read Tdeshi’s notes until Jorma fixed them up a Noonmeal and they slept in Yorthops’ bed for Noonsleep. Then she looked like she’d be ready to think about passage back to Sinbara.

What there was a little of here, he had to admit, was that he came to find out what happened to Tdeshi, she came to find out about Tdeshi. She wanted to know what her clone mother was like. As much as he hated to admit it, as much as his subconscious wouldn’t, Ava was a very different person from Tdeshi. Reading Tdeshi’s handwritten notes were what Ava was all about in this investigation. Other than the entry in the shopping list, Ava found no other reference to Shonggot.

Jorma began to go over the notes that Ava had finished. Intensely explicit love poems to Hyondahi’s penis, another to a guy named Vorsduun. A telling note on one term certificate. “You have a good mind, give it time to grow.” He gave Tdeshi an A+. It was her last term certificate from ‘ol Northie’.

Another shopping list for her trip to the Kassikan, the days were added up. There was some arithmetic, the number 431 was boxed in. In another corner of the sheet was a doodle of a dress cut so low that both cheeks and both breasts were exposed, yet it had a long train that trailed across the floor

behind, but was open beyond the crotch in front.

She handed him something that looked like class notes. There was an equation in big numbers and a double box. It was labeled the practical pipe flow formula. There were other doodles on the page, some were the simple geometric ones that meant her mind was on the discussion and not her doodling. Other than the one note Ava found, there was nothing about how she felt about anything. It was pretty devoid of personal notes for Tdeshi actually.

There was another page with financial calculations, they seemed to come to the conclusion that she was going to need two irons a week. That was pretty time consuming to make from odd jobs, you pretty much needed a career or a hustle to do that in one day a week. But if she didn't plan on sleeping, she could do it in two sleep shifts and have the other sleep to party.

It hurt him to think that she would be so driven, but actually she would. Tdehsi had never understood the meaning of the word 'rest'.

"You haven't said much," Jorma said.

"There's a pattern developing," Ava replied. "We already agree she was a very high-energy person. She would have relished the challenge of going a year without sleep."

"She doesn't actually say that."

"Would she have to? She wasn't writing this to us, she was writing it to herself. She may have hidden some of her plans from Hyondahi for all we know and that's why she didn't want to leave any notes."

"I think we should follow the trail to the Yakhan," Jorma

said. “I think we need to find out how she got the stuff and why she did it. You heard Himla say he thought it came from the Yakhan, that she had a connection there. I want to find that connection. I want to find out how the Kassikan was involved.”

“After twenty decades? We probably couldn’t figure out who her connection was if it happened last week.”

“I think it would be easy if it was that recent, I’m sure someone at Bigtree would have already told us.”

“I still don’t see how you think you can learn more?”

“How can we not? You know your way around there, we have the name Tdeshi now. I wonder if anyone ever bothered to ask the guy driving the needleboat if he knew any source of shonggot in the neighborhood.”

“I already asked him that,” Ava said, “at some length, with vigor. He says he doesn’t personally know of any and wouldn’t pass on a seeker even if he did, especially now that he’s had such a tragic personal experience with it and let me tell you, I never saw anyone freak out the way he did when he saw me. If you’re going to keep investigating, you have to keep doing it from this end. Find out where she went from here. What I’m looking for is any kind of reservation for transportation, lodging, employment, storage, even shoe repair with an address in the central Yakhan, much less the Kassikan.”

“I bet she was registered for the program, she probably had the paperwork with her. We’ll probably find a locker number and find the locker with bunches of her stuff still in it. I never thought the keymasters knew what was in a third of

the lockers anyway.”

“Jorma, the Kassikan does not have lockers, students have rooms or they commute, which means they live outside the walls, in which case their pack is their locker. Residency has several divisions with more residents than Sinbara. Novice Quarters is nearly the size of Bhangyon and it’s repair crews employ seventeen hundred and fifty, all with keyrings they need to put down to work. The keymaster is a creation of town day schools.”

“Tdeshi knew the school keymaster well in Sinbara.”

“I never met him, not even now, not that I know of, but that doesn’t matter. If she was registered for something at the Kassikan and didn’t show up, the room would be kept til the end of the term, then the contents would be tagged and sent to the catacombs, where they would be til this day unless they were used for historical research. The Kassikan gets tons per year in the form of goods sent ahead by no-shows or left in their rooms by people who went home and never came back for it. There are thousands of tons tagged in deep warehouses now. Most of it is used clothing, books, small audio devices with dead chips, sticky pieces of candy on playing cards, gummed up erasers and out-of-date crib sheets.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Jorma admitted.

“Since we have to go down to the Yakhan again anyway, we might as well stop by the Kassikan and see if any of the Tdeshi’s in their records match up,” she said with a distinct air of resignation.

Jorma hadn’t thought that thru. Over centuries, with hundreds of thousands of students at any one time, there

would be many Tdeshi's in the records. Their records were probably a good indication of how popular the name was in any given era in time.

“I didn't find anything more than that first note that was right on top with any mention of Shonggot.”

“Well over here, I found this,” he leaned over and propped up the picture with the eyes.

“What the hell is that?” Ava said. hSkaiya's head even drew back, though she remained silent.

“Exactly,” Jorma said. “These paintings were all she did here in Chardovia, while she was studying to be a gas technician so she could support herself at the study of art and fashion, her real goal. These show the Tdeshi I knew,” he pointed to small landscapes he'd put to the left. “She would have done the one with the boats. Then these abstracts are something she had never done before. This one of the waterfront at night was next and finally this one,” he said, indicating the eyes. She almost finished this one, some of these earlier ones like this abstract and the boats she barely got started.”

“You think it's a chronicle of her decline?” Ava asked.

“Yes, this one is dated 100,00,22,” he said indicating the eyes, “so the others had to be earlier or you would have painted them.” He felt daring, but knew he was being correct with the pronoun this time.

“I can barely paint a fence much less a room. You wouldn't want me to waste artist canvas on a circle and triangle keda would you?”

“No, all you have to do is tell me you don't have that

talent now and I'll believe you. You've given me no reason to suspect you are trying to mislead me yet, so I trust you. It is plain in these pictures that Tdeshi's personality was changing." He wondered if Ava was the result of those transformations. If so, how dark would her visions be now if she could still paint them? But he had been with this woman, except for her origin in the deep medical lab, her visions weren't really that dark, no darker than a mossy bank in the shade of thick old trees. The painting was more like something from a scrounge's lair in an abandoned area of Yondure.

They did not take noonmeal at Yorthops' because hSkaiya felt obligated to stay and watch to see if they left with anything. She was friendly about it and deflected questions, but wasn't going anywhere. They went back to the Bigtree. There they found Himla and Elanda at the tap rail. Ava went right to him. "Why didn't you tell us you had left a bunch of Tdeshi's stuff with Yorthops?"

He looked puzzled at first, "What stuff?"

"Everything under the window seat."

He still looked puzzled for awhile. "Oh yeah, now I remember. I'd forgotten that Hyondahi stashed your stuff with Yorthops."

"It was quite informative," she said.

"I'm surprised she still had it after all this time," Himla said. "She must have figured you were never coming back for it by now."

"I came back for it, for my mother's things."

“Well, in that case I’m glad she saved it for you. I’m really sorry I forgot.”

While they were having that conversation, Jorma watched Elanda. She was uncomfortable about this, was it because of the interruption? They had seemed to be in a serious conversation from a distance. Maybe she thought they were going to be constant pests now.

“It there anything else you forgot?” she asked, unable to actually accuse him of deliberately withholding the information, but making it obvious that was what she wanted to say.

“How would I know?” he said.

“Does anyone ever remember everything?” Elanda butted in.

“Do you think I was trying to forget?” Himla said, giving Elanda only a glower, then turned back to Ava.

Elanda tore into her though, “It would be just like you, thinking everyone must have a perfect mind. Is there anything YOU might have forgotten after twenty decades?”

What could Ava say to that? Jorma saw she was hurt.

“Sorry to disturb you,” Jorma said to them and tugged Ava away. This was not Tdeshi, Tdeshi would have had a retort that would have turned her into a bug. As it was, Ava was fighting back tears.

They left, Ava was hurt but didn’t say anything. She twisted her arm out of his grip without making it obvious. They got a rinko loaf, some dell fruit and a few toasted yellow-stripes. Ava led them to an outdoor table out of sight of Himla and Elanda.

“What was her problem?” Ava asked.

“I think they’re probably having a bit of a hiss,” Jorma said. Tdeshi had always been more sensitive to those things than he had. Ava was less.

“I wouldn’t be surprised, if she’s got a tongue like that.”

“It’s not like you’re going to spend a lot of your life with them. I was hoping we could get under way soon enough to get back to the center city before dark.”

“We don’t need to be in such a hurry,” she said, “I wonder if she had a locker at that school?”

“If she did and the same keymaster is there, he would know.”

“I want to try that. I also think we should gather up all her stuff and get it shipped home.”

“If I could get in touch with Leand I would like to send it to him, unless you really want it?”

“No, her father deserves it. Maybe we can track him down next, after we get back to Sinbara.”

“You sound like you’ve learned all you need to know?”

“I know why she did it,” Ava said. “I now know more about my clone mother than I really wanted to I think. I guess there were some things I didn’t want to find out.”

“The eyes,” he said.

“It is creepy don’t you think. And that dark harbor too, maybe not AS bad, but it is a deserted and derelict place that she drew, I’m afraid she was feeling that inside.”

“She certainly had changed,” he had to admit.

She wasn't much company for the remainder of Noonmeal, or for Noonsleep either. They left the cover off the boat and took it to a more private area to sleep. Jorma didn't sleep well and wanted to be on the way to the Yakhan, but would acquiesce to Ava's desire to go back to the school.

Jorma wondered why he was so determined to get right to the very last moment? Why did he want to find where she got the shonngot? Was he going to do something about it like smash the lab? The Instinct would probably get in the way of that and if it was in the Kassikan, he would have no chance. Was he just doing it to try and get Tdeshi back? Was there some part of his mind that couldn't accept that she was gone and that she and Ava were different people? That was about investigating Ava's origin more than Tdeshi's demise. Was there some part of him that still hoped they were going to find something that would unlock her memories?

He wondered if her interest in looking more at this school made any sense. Yeah, she had investigated from the Kassikan side before, but it seemed that they had already followed the trail back to the Kassikan. True, Ava wanted to know Tdeshi, and finding more of her things here would help her do that. Tdeshi had only days left of her life when she left here bound for downtown. The things that Yorthops had saved told them more about her last days than anything else they had found so far. Maybe it was worth it. They would be a week later getting back there, but maybe there was something more to be learned here? He decided he would not argue strenuously about it.

If they found teachers Tdeshi had in the past, what would

they learn? They would probably learn more about how driven she was and more about how she was withdrawn from society. He guessed they would also learn something new, if any of them remembered her.

He wound up just watching the noontime wee-flutters and listening to the charraspas on the hedges that lined the canal for quite a few hours. He did sleep eventually, it seemed like only a few minutes but was probably a few hours.

12. The Case of the Missing Keymaster

They found only one instructor remaining who ever had Tdeshi in a class. Ava didn't ring any bells with him. He looked over her records and agreed the signatures were his but twenty decades and thousands of students had gone thru since then and her look is not that uncommon. He had no personal records she appeared on. Jorma was rather disappointed when that whole avenue was emptied well before lunch. As far as he could see, their work at this school was done, but Ava wanted to search for her old locker.

The Afternoonday keymaster at 'ol Northie' was a small woman with curly blond hair and laughing eyes, quick movements and a slender figure. She was able to find her administrative records, of which her locker assignment was a part, but the laughter in her eyes spilled over into her voice when she saw the dates involved. "Twenty decades, we would never leave an abandoned locker anywhere near that long, we go over them all every three years."

“What do you do with what’s in them?” Ava asked.

“There’s a big bin down beneath the help’s levels where we put it, but when that gets full we just take stuff from the bottom and either sell it or use it for fuel.”

“Is there any chance?” Ava asked.

“I wouldn’t think so, unless someone is cheating at their work and not going all the way to the bottom when they rotate it.”

“How much stuff is ever reclaimed?” Jorma asked.

“Almost none of it.”

“Even though it’s been so long,” Ava said, “I’d still like to look thru it.”

“Sure,” she said, “But don’t remove the tags or unpack the boxes unless you’re sure it’s yours.”

She took them back down four floors to a strong door made of thick dense wood. “Some of the stuff in here is actually valuable so we have to take some precautions to make sure no one considers this a no-price shopping area.” She drew out a string of keys that must have been a significant fraction of her own weight and sorted thru them to find one of the largest. Jorma didn’t think this was a good idea, but knew he would be helpless in the Kassikan without Ava, might be afraid to go in the Kassikan without Ava. “We don’t save the money so don’t bother looking for any. When you’re thru and want to come out, ring me on that string right there and I’ll be down as soon as I can.” With that she locked them in.

All there was in the room was a huge nylon-wire cage with a few feet of walkway around it. The cage was about

twenty feet on a side and nearly to the ceiling in height. It was stacked with boxes, bags and folders right to the ceiling.

“This is ridiculous,” Jorma said, “We’ll never find anything in here.”

Ava didn’t say anything, just went over to the cage and started reading any labels which were turned to the outside. “These are from ten decades ago,” she said.

“Not half enough,” Jorma commented.

Ava walked around to the other side and looked at some over there. “They’re getting a little older.”

They surveyed the whole outside of the bottom of the barrel, the oldest tag that was visible to the outside was just about twelve decades in age.

“If someone did want to cheat on their work,” Ava said, “They would leave the stuff in the middle and only move the stuff on the outside.”

“No,” Jorma jumped ahead of her, “I’m not digging all the way to the bottom of how many tons of discarded junk on a blind lead. If they were cheating, they’ve probably been cheating a century and her stuff would have been thrown out years ago, if she even left anything in her locker.”

“It’s important to me.”

“It’s important to me to follow the real trail to the Kassikan, not waste our time and break our backs with this.”

“After we’re done here.”

“Fine, you stay and dig in here for a couple weeks,” I’ll leave you here and head back to the center city.”

“And who will you see?” she asked, “Where will you go

and what will you do?”

She had him there. He was afraid of the place, he knew almost nothing about it. Maybe he could go to a terminal and even find a way to query student records for Tdeshi, but like Ava said, there would be thousands of Tdeshi's in the school's history.

“So,” she said, “Lets get started.”

“Where are we even going to put all this stuff?”

“Around the room I would think, that's probably why this space is here.” She was already climbing the ladder. “Oh good, there's a lift here, I'll fill it up and you empty it. Keep things in order.”

“This will take days,” he complained.

“I'll just bore to the bottom right about here, it will only take a couple hours.”

He was trapped, he needed her to proceed and she was totally stubborn about it. This was so futile that he was sure she was doing it just to prove her control over him. They made good time at first until Ava started having to climb up to get to the lift. Once they were at that point he got in the cage, she handed stuff up to him until the lift was full and then went down to empty it. It was well under two hours when they reached the bottom of the cage, but they had already missed lunch.

“Nothing over twelve decades,” she agreed, “Can you imagine someone with a job like this being conscientious about it?”

“I would be, I wouldn't want my stuff tossed before it's time.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said.

“Now are you ready to believe this is a dead end?”

“I had to know. Don’t forget that you’re just trying to find out what happened to Tdeshi in her last few minutes, I’m trying to know her. Looking at her notes is the closest I’ve come to her.”

He climbed up to the top of the cage again and began handing stuff down to her. The boxes were heavy, as they would have to be to be stacked this deeply and he was sure she was terribly sore by now. He was. It took well over two hours to get everything back and they were both trying hard not to be cross by then.

When they were almost done Jorma pulled the string that would ring the bell up in the keymaster’s office. They finished up the last couple loads and waited for her to appear. When they had waited about twice as long as it had taken to get from her office to here, he rang again. They waited the same time again.

“She must be out of the office,” Ava said.

“So now what?”

“Try again, what else can we do?”

“I wonder if it’s still lunch time?” he doubted it though.

“Maybe, but keep ringing.”

They waited another third of an hour. Now Jorma decided he would just sit here and keep ringing, maybe someone would get annoyed. He kept it up til his arm got tired, he changed arms and kept going til that one was tired. He went back to the first one again. Ava took a turn. By then they must have been ringing for an hour. Then the cord was yanked

from Ava's grip. It bounced around so she couldn't catch it again and then was still. After that it wouldn't pull.

“At least some one knows we're here,” Jorma said, “They should be down soon.”

They weren't. They were sure it was now long after lunch time.

He wondered who could be doing this. He had so many suspicions about Ava by now that he didn't really trust her with his thoughts. She could very well be someone from the Kassikan, re-incarnated in Tdeshi's body. Tdeshi might have been tricked into an overdose. She had been using shonggot before and got away with it, what was different about this time? This entrapment made him more convinced that there was something wrong with Tdeshi's demise and he wondered if Ava was trying to cover it up. Still, she was as trapped as he was, what did that mean?

Jorma went to the window. This was the lowest floor of the overhang, there was nothing below them but four stories of air and the residential side street on this side of the school property. “I wonder if anyone left forty feet of rope in their locker?”

“We'd have to look, but I don't think it's the most likely thing to leave. Yell to someone,” Ava said, “We can get someone to help us.”

It was only a few minutes before someone came by and as soon as someone did, they had no problem getting his attention. “We're locked in a store room up here,” Jorma yelled to him, “can you get someone to get us out?”

“Well yeah, I can try and find someone, but I don’t go there so I don’t know anyone.”

“Just pass the message if you could.”

“Sure,” he said. He turned around and went inside. He was gone at least ten minutes and then came out with someone else, someone in a school worker.

“What room is that?” he yelled up to ask them.

“The abandoned locker storage.”

The faculty member spoke with him a minute, then said, “I know Julann left for the day, I can’t get you a key until the Nightday keymaster gets in.”

“Isn’t there anyone else who can get into here?”

“Hold on, let me come up there so we can hear each other.”

The guy they had first called went on his way, they called their thanks to him while the other went back inside. In a few minutes he was at the door. “There’s no one really here any more, once the day’s session ends there’s only a few of us left in the lower part of the building. There’s the lobby watchman but he doesn’t have the key to this room. A chancellor might know where a key is, but I don’t know if there are any in the building right now.”

“Wouldn’t they have just gone up to the residential levels?”

“Julann lives about a half mile from here in her own house. Chancellor Grainid might be home, I know where he lives, it’s up on the thirty sixth floor, that’s quite a hike,” he said.

“We already missed lunch and now were going to miss Duskmeal if we can’t get out of here.”

“Oh, I’m on my way, I just wanted to warn you it will take some time.”

So they sat and waited.

“What is going on here?” Jorma asked, knowing that Ava wouldn’t know but needing to voice his thoughts. If she did know, she probably wouldn’t tell him. It would still tell him something to hear what Ava had to say, though he didn’t fully trust her any more.

“I think some one doesn’t want us coming out of here,” Ava said.

“But why would the keymaster have left without letting us out?”

“Maybe she’s the one,” Ava guessed.

“She didn’t seem the type to me,” Jorma said. He suspected she might have forgot they were in here.

“I never trust my judgment of character on a first impression.”

“Then why would someone have tied off the bell cord?”

“They were tired of listening to the ringing I would guess,” Ava said, “but that also seems suspicious.”

They pondered this more, but got nowhere. Ava tried to convince him this meant they were on a hot trail here and should follow that. He insisted that they’d already followed this blind alley and now it was his turn.

It was at least an hour before anyone got back to them. They heard a key in the lock. It was not the same person who

they had seen earlier. “I’m keymaster Delthune of Nightday, I’m really sorry about this, I don’t know what could have happened to Julann of Afternoonday.”

“Someone tied off the bell cord also,” Jorma told him.

“Wait, I have to be sure you are taking nothing,” Delthuun said.

“Nothing at all,” they both said, holding their hands out. On Afternoonday they weren’t wearing enough to hide anything in their clothing.

“Yes, I see, well once again, I’m really sorry. I’ll go fix the bell cord as soon as I get back for my shift. And I’ll be sure and have a talk with Julann when she returns.”

“That should be interesting, but we hope to be well on our way to the Yakhan by then.”

“Thanks so much for helping us out, we’re really sorry to disturb your Duskmeal,” Ava added.

“No problem at all, we were going out anyway,” a voice said from outside the door. Now that they were out in the hallway they saw he had a woman with him. He looked in the room briefly, then locked it back up. The four of them descended the stairs together.

“Is it unusual for her to leave someone locked in there?” Ava asked.

“Julann is a nice person and usually conscientious,” the woman said, “But she can be a little forgetful.”

“What about tying off that bell cord,” Jorma asked, “What do you make of that?”

“Someone stupid,” Delthune said, “someone annoyed by

your ringing who had no idea what it was about. All that person knew is that Julann was gone and the bell wasn't going to do any good. I wouldn't be too surprised if there's a nasty note on her desk complaining about her going home early and leaving the bell to just ring and ring."

"I hope that's all it was," Ava said.

"Why?" the woman asked, "What else would it be?"

"Someone wanted to hamper our investigation."

"Investigation?" Delthune asked.

"We're trying to find out what happened to her mother who was a student here twenty decades ago," Jorma told him.

"Good luck," Delthune said, "You'll be lucky if you even find student records that old. The place was such a madhouse back then. I think half the clerical staff was on Norrot at the time and the administration was changing hands and had the whole place in an uproar. It's almost all new staff since then, I'm one of the few who stayed. If you were trying to find what was left in her locker you never had any chance at all."

"What do you think happened to her?" the woman asked.

"All we know for sure is that she O.D.d on shonggot down in the Yakhan," Jorma told her.

"Oh dear, how tragic. Were you very young at the time?" she asked.

"I was unborn," Ava said.

"Oh dear," clearly shaken, "what happened then? It sounds like you're lucky to be alive," Delthuun's companion said.

"I know," Ava said. "I was raised by some of the staff at

the Kassikan, they saw to my birth. I owe them my life.”

“Sounds tragic.”

“It was difficult, but I think I’m alright now,” Ava told her.

They were now at the bottom of the stairs, they said their good-byes and went separate ways.

“Do you think they were right?” Ava asked, “this was all just a few mistakes?”

“We will probably never know,” Jorma said, “But meanwhile I’m hungry enough for a lavish Duskmeal.”

“Yes,” she said, “lets go to that inn again.”

13. The Kassikan

By the time they got up that Nightday, Ava insisted the dark was too cold for the run back to the central city. So they waited until this week, then got an early start and had taken turns driving and sleeping all thru the light on the way back to the Yakhan. It seemed like there were three days of light that week because of the schedule they kept. The lake was an unblemished crystal that he carved in the still heat of Afternoonday when he took over for the third time on this trip, she would get another couple hours of sleep. He was rested, but he and Ava hadn’t grown closer since they left the Chardovia area. He wanted to think they hadn’t grown farther apart, but in a sense they had because they were talking less. The fact that the evidence had pointed them toward the

Kassikan itself seemed to turn a corner for both of them. The Kassikan was something Jorma had always been suspicious of. The Kassikan was Ava's home, the source of her income and where her loyalties clearly lay.

He could have returned the needleboat on their way to the Kassikan and got more than two coppers back, but he was reluctant to do so. He thought there could easily be a time when he would need it again. They might need it to run around the city. Instead he had to pay to keep it somewhere. There was no chance that they could find a quiet bywater to anchor in within walking distance of the Kassikan. They were at the foot of the crystal along Second Canal, around here they had to find an inn with boat parking. They got one that was serviceable but none too fancy or high in the branches, for an iron and a half a week. It was down in a backwater between the foundations one lock down off Fourth Canal, still within a long walk of the Kassikan. It was old and sturdy and even had a gated quay. Ava picked that up and was even willing to share the room with him. She was still paying most of the way and that was good because he was beginning to worry how long his money was going to last if he kept this boat.

They still had half of Afternoonday, Ava thought that was enough time to do some initial lookups. Now that he was here, he had to go inside the institution no matter how many shivers it gave him. Jorma didn't even like being within the walls of the Kassikan.

The Kassikan has a boundary, with doors of one kind or

another wherever you crossed that boundary. There was a thick brick wall eight feet high above the uppermost public street line, generally the sixth to twelfth floor except here on the Third Canal side where it was more like the twentieth. The boundary includes just over two hundred and fifty acres, much of it capped by the pyramid and the dome. The remaining area was blocks and blocks of quadrangles, twenty stories deep or more, and the hallways within them. The Kassikan went deeper than that however, since part of it was built over North Canyon, the canyon that had once drained the whole lake bed down to desert. Twenty five centuries of masons had filled in levels of the old city for a hundred stories. He shuddered to think what dank and ancient catacombs could lie below here, and just how deep they could go, down to the depth of Canyon Lake, nine hundred feet lower than the great lake itself. Down to the ancient catacombs where Ava was created from Tdeshi's remains. His shoulders shivered involuntarily.

The gate they entered was not a main gate, but it was big none the less. About thirty feet high and thirty wide with two great portals held open by enormous ropes. The doors were massive, great designs of heavy wood with crystal fittings. He could see they usually remained open. Once inside, the street became a great hallway of marble and cast stone, ornately carved and chillingly ancient. There were niches with statues in them, some with lettering from bygone days. This was not the pyramid, this was something even older, perhaps the oldest works of man he had seen since the ruins of the old north. Unlike those ruins, this was in constant use.

The sounds of the street were different in here, hushed and echoing. The hallway was four floors in height, lit by gaslight chandeliers or skylights instead of glow-panels, lined by finely-carved marble railings on the upper floors. It lead down the middle of a long stone hall, somewhere in the distance another crossed it. Up there in the balconies people could be seen in robes, ornate, floor length, and heavy, trimmed in furs. He saw strange people, paper white to grey in color with large heads, especially large foreheads and thin curly hair. These were the Gnomes, a separate race who lived within and beneath the Kassikan and in the canyon under parts of central Yakhan. He had heard of them before, but never seen a pure-bred Gnome in the flesh until just now. He knew they did not run the Kassikan in theory, but in practicality they made up a large portion of the staff and were very powerful in their way.

The people here on 'street' level were mainly Elvish, most of them were like the general population of the city. Students, faculty members, tourists, hanger's on, hanger's out. The hallway was busy with them now in mid after-lunch. He had never been in any part of the Kassikan before but possibly a few rooms in some of the museums. He looked around at everything.

Ava walked thru here like it was nothing. She might have been on this hallway many times before in her life. He expected that she would see someone she knew any minute, but as they walked on, he began to get a little sense of the size of this institution and the number of people who were here. It was like a whole city unto itself, as large a city as Bhangyon.

This one hallway was as large as the largest indoor mall in Bhangyon. They saw hundreds, thousands, all anonymous, all going about some business, some in haste, some drifting along like they were lost.

People stood in the hallway hawking drugs as they passed thru, boost, black slap, norrot, alwiss and even dumeeg. Many stopped for black slap, a few more for boost, it looked like the others were wasting their time. Ava ignored them all and lead him deeper into the Kassikan.

This first Afternoonday they planned to only work at data eyes, looking for any record of Tdeshi. He had to admit Ava knew more ways to look for her than Jorma did. They followed the Kassikan map to ‘Student Records’ though Ava already knew the way and was just showing him to warn him how far they were going. It was the longest indoor walk he had ever taken in his life. Once there he saw that this was far different from student records at ‘ol Northie’. Here the lobby of the student records office was a little bigger than the lobby of the whole North Chardovia Trades Academy. By looking at the signs they were lead up one flight to a similar sized room where there were about a hundred eyes with chairs in front of them. They went to one and typed in a query for Tdeshi.

“Wow,” Ava said, “There were only a hundred seventy seven Tdeshi’s in the records who have ever registered for a course, I thought Tdeshi was a more common name than that.” They were all with pictures and thumb prints, none of whom matched and only eleven of whom were in the right time frame, fourteen were currently active. It took only an hour to page thru all of them.

Ava tried an old override password that showed three more confidential students named Tdeshi. None of them were in the right time, one was currently active. “I didn’t think we would find anything here,” she said, “She must have never really made it into a program.”

“Now what?” he asked.

“Follow me, I know another place we can look.”

Ava took him to an elevator and went straight down for more shafts than he cared to think about. This was well below street level, daylight would penetrate at no time of the week into the depths where they were going. This was well below lake level, probably below the level of the next large canal downslope. When he got out from the third shaft deeper, he could tell just from the smell of the dust that they were in Gnome quarters because he’d heard it described in novels. There is a distinct smell, a certain acridity in the candle-sooty underground-dank dustiness that many have tried to pin down in words. He had never smelled it before, but he knew it as soon as he did, in spite of the inadequacies of all the descriptions.

Deep in these catacombs was where that race had been bred, some say as an early genetics experiment, some say as parasites within the early institution. Today they performed much of the menial clerical work within the institution. They kept to their own social order, the few who were female kept homes and raised children but were rarely seen outside in the hallways. Few mixed socially with the Elves or other people of the outside. They wore their own clothing style, long black

tunics with hoods that could be thrown up if they were faced with daylight. Their eyes were so accustomed to the dim light of indoors and Nightday that they could be blinded by the full light of Kortrax.

They reached an office where employment records were kept. It was even darker than the hallways in here. The room was high and lined with racks of paper that reached too far up into the darkness for Jorma to see. The floor was covered with tables piled high with paperwork over which a dozen Gnomes were toiling. The furnishings were all heavy morel wood under a thick layer of dust. He could smell wevn and heard nightbirds fluttering somewhere above. There were six openings from the room between the paper racks, each standing doorless into absolute darkness. A single candle hung from a reflector providing all the light in this wing of the catacombs it seemed. Ava told him to let her do the talking. Jorma was glad to do so, if he had to, he was afraid he would start screaming or his teeth would chatter. He desperately wanted to pull out his torch, but he knew that would make their hoods come up and their goggles come down.

She went to a guy sitting at the end of the table watching all the others. He was in the deepest gloom of all but even so Jorma could see his skin was thick and grey. Jorma was loath to follow but afraid of being left alone. This race was from before the Instinct he knew, he fantasized horrible rituals of cannibalism even deeper in the darkness. His intellect told him it couldn't be like that, but the scenes from so many horror films had been shot in rooms like this.

“Ava, I welcome you,” the man acknowledged her in a deep, breathy voice, “It’s been so long.”

“Decades,” she answered.

“Here, sit; and your companion.” He pulled out a chair and set two cups on the table in front of that and the next seat. Ava took the seat and Jorma nervously pulled out the next, an unseen animal jumped down from it and scurried away as he did so. The Gnome took a small pot from above a candle and poured some steaming liquid into the cups. “Make yourselves comfortable and tell me how you’ve been.”

Ava put the cup to her lips and took a tiny sip, the candle under it gave little more light to this end of the table and was only enough to keep it warm, not scalding hot. “I’ve been fine, I’ve been traveling and finally settled awhile in the town my mother came from.” She introduced Jorma and kHaidol.

“What is the effect of this?” Jorma asked her in a whisper when the Gnome looked away, holding up the cup.

She laughed, “It’s just rinko tea and gloribard sugar,” she told him, “kHaidol always keeps a little pot going.”

Jorma felt stupid, he had imagined some drug that would extract his mind or knock him out til he came to in a stew pot. The previous week’s adventure in the storeroom and his fear of the Kassikan must have him on edge.

Ava spent a little time in idle gossip with this creepy grey man while Jorma sat there and looked around the room. She did include the incident of being locked in the storeroom as an example of how those kinds of things happen in other universities, not just here in the Kassikan. Jorma’s testicles crawled up his legs when he imagined being locked in some

chamber somewhere beyond one of those openings. He wouldn't be able to just call out the window for help.

The papers on the desk were employment histories that he presumed were being updated. Jorma had thought that in this day and age with Yingolian crystals in production there would certainly be no more manual record keeping in the Kassikan of all places. Instead the institution that profited most from invention in all of modern times seemed to be the most antiquated.

Eventually they got around to business. "Actually, I'm looking up my mother's past," she told him. "I've found out that she was here at the Kassikan for a year's session in the clothing arts department. I now know her name was Tdeshi, and she was supposed to be here for the year of 100,00,23."

"You should be looking in student records I think, There is little help I can give you there."

"I found nothing there, but I suspect she may also have applied for work here."

"I see."

"I would like to look for those records if I may?"

"All I have is still open to you, Ava dear," he said and she didn't even flinch much when the thick-skinned grey hand came out of his voluminous sleeve to pat hers.

"Thank you," she said, and got up from her seat.

"Lets see," he said, "the opening decade of this century should be this way." Picking up a small candle like the one under his tea, he lit it on the other and lead them thru one of the black doorways.

In here Jorma could dimly perceive that they were in a

room filled with racks and racks of hanging files down narrow aisles off this central one. It was musty and occasionally something scurried out of their way. kHaidol was not in the least disturbed by that, neither did Ava seem to be.

“This aisle should be all the applications we took that year,” he said. When the tiny candle was close Jorma could see the 23 at least. “Take a look, the year should be in order by name.”

“Thanks again,” she said and kHaidol handed her the candle and turned around.

“We have torches,” she said and handed it back.

He turned and drew up his hood. They heard him shuffle down the aisle back to the main room.

Ava walked down the aisle to about where Tdeshi would be. Once he was out of earshot she asked, “This place gives you the creeps doesn’t it?”

“I told you the whole Kassikan gives me the creeps, this place is like walking thru a sleeping kranjan’s mouth for me. This is worse than I ever imagined. I think ‘Paper Dry’ was filmed right in that room.” Jorma told her, she must not have seen it, it was a vampire horror classic. “This creeps me out even more than any other part of it I’ve heard of. There’s wevn in here and it isn’t abandoned?”

“They won’t hurt you.”

“But what are they living on?”

“Mostly paper worms, when they come out to glow for mates the wevn get them, that keeps the population under control.”

They found records of a few more people named Tdeshi. In one thin file with only a single application in it, they found what must have been the right one. She applied for a position in the robing room, which was actually a large workroom with foreman's mezzanine and it's own cafeteria. It is the department where ceremonial robes were sewn. Her experience was that of Tdeshi following her interest in fashion in Sinbara, though she did not mention Sinbara by name. She had written that she had no home as of yet, that she would return the next week to check on her schedule. There was no picture or thumbprint, but it was the right time and this person had come from North Chardovia Trades Academy on a scholarship.

“Of course she had no address, she was living out of her bag,” Jorma said.

“I wonder if we can find where she kept it?”

“After twenty decades?” Jorma asked. “She probably just hid it somewhere during the day. She always talked about doing something like that, living homeless.”

“It might be still hidden.”

“Some animal would have found it if nothing else, all you'll find now is inglethor bedding.”

There was a note on the sheet in different handwriting, very tiny writing that was hard to make out. It must have been her interviewer's comments. -Bright and eager and has good knowledge of basic seamanship. -Only interested in one year and only on sleep shift. -Probably strung out on slap or something of that nature. -Socially uninvolved -Probably

stubborn and reluctant to take direction.

“This was Tdeshi,” Jorma said, “or what she had become by then. That was the Tdeshi that painted those eyes.”

“So we know she was here.”

“Yes, we know she was in the building, but nothing more.”

“It sounded like she didn’t get the job. We know she already looked strung out,” Ava said.

“Yes.”

That was all they could do here. While Ava lead him back up into more Elvish levels of the institution to the next destination, he thought about what they were finding. There was nothing in this that couldn’t have been Tdeshi, but she was getting farther and farther from Leand’s lost daughter. Yes Tdeshi was driven, but she was also happy and popular. She had been very conscious of her health and very reluctant to take drugs when he knew her.

This had been her first time on her own. She had always had someone to take care of her in some way in the past and her father had been wealthy enough that she was accustomed to a rich way of life. He knew that from the year she lived with him and the many little adjustments she had to make. It seemed that she might not have been able to cope with doing without and had driven all the harder to maintain her lifestyle. He wished he had never let it happen. He wished he had come with her down here and taken care of her while she studied. Maybe he could have got her to go at a saner pace.

But then he remembered he had offered to do just that and

been refused. Once again he had to admit that their year together had become idealized in his mind. He had already been with Ava twice as long as he had lived with Tdeshi. He had to admit to himself at last that Tdeshi had felt even less for him than Ava did. He was just a convenient dick, a place to sleep and free meals for her wasn't he? He had been trying to calm her down the whole time they were together, but nothing had helped. He had to admit that she was only getting wound tighter by the time she left to go south. "Are we on our way to see the guy who brought her in?" Jorma asked, trying to take his mind from the gloom.

"No, there's somewhere else I want to look first."

"Not another ghastly catacomb I hope?"

"Definitely not, but talking to Kulai was a dead end. He knew absolutely nothing."

"He knew what physical shape she was in."

"A bit thinner than I am now, peacefully unconscious."

They emerged from the elevator at a level that was probably quite a bit higher than the one they started out at. The hallway here looked like it was built of stalactite. It was smooth in detail, rough in bulk, but the floor was smooth and polished, the walls were deeply carved with heroic scenes from Elven history and the ceiling was fitted with good bioluminescent lighting, bright enough to keep Gnome's hoods up. Compared to where they had been, it was like the light of Morningday, though it still wasn't enough for him to read fine print. There were still Gnomes in the crowd, but there was much more of a crowd.

They continued what seemed like another quarter mile

down the hallway and thru a large portal called 'recruiting'. This was like student records, there was a large lobby with a dozen eyes set up. They were all in use at the time so they waited in comfortable chairs. There were lots of colorful pamphlets around, each about a different seminar or research project, most of them in fashion arts history or production.

Once there was an eye available, Ava looked up Tdeshi's scholarship program. She was able to get a list of all the scholarship numbers issued by that program, found that all that were issued were used. She was not able to get the names of the people they were issued to, that would give her the number of the certificate given to Tdeshi.

"What does that mean?" Jorma asked.

"Maybe they've been deleted. The names would normally be stored."

"Who could do that?" Jorma asked.

"I could," Ava replied, "and probably ten thousand others."

"Why?" he asked.

She avoided answering.

While they were at the eye she looked up old advertising campaigns which were often in the form of seminars. The records back at NCTA indicated she was here for a full year, not just a seminar, but there was a chance she had attended one. There were several held at 'ol Northie' so she could have showed up on a list of names from one of them. She did not.

"Well," she said, "That about exhausts all the records I can think of."

“What were you hoping to find?” Jorma asked as they began walking back down that long hall.

“The employment record was good, I learned something about her there.”

“That she was strung out?” Jorma asked.

“Yeah. We already knew she had become unsocial.”

Jorma had nothing to say about that.

“This is troubling for you isn’t it?” Ava asked him.

“It shows doesn’t it.”

“Yeah, you’re getting depressed about it.”

“Tdeshi was lively, popular, clean, maybe too clean if anything. She would drink a little beer now and then and take a slap once or twice a year when some big project was due and she was behind. She was happy and enthusiastic and full of life.”

“When she left Sinbara.”

“Yeah.” she didn’t respond right away. His memories of the day she left were fuzzy, but he knew it had not been a happy scene. “I guess I’m flogging myself that I didn’t come with her and take care of her,” was all he wanted to admit.

“So you could have watched it happen?” she asked.

“Maybe it wouldn’t have. Maybe this was all because she had to study and support herself at the same time.” Why couldn’t he admit to Ava that she had refused his help? Would it just sound like he was trying to rationalize his failure to prevent this?

“So you still wish I was Tdeshi?” she said, bitterness dripping from every word.

“Ava I’m sorry, no it’s not that. Good grief in almost every way you’re ten times the person Tdeshi was. You’re at least as smart, much more mature, much more realistic, much more at ease with yourself, much deeper, and in your own way, more caring.”

“Then why do you wish you had kept her alive and prevented me from being?”

“Because I don’t think letting you have access to your memories from before K’shitn of 100,00,23 is preventing you from being. I love you in your own way Ava, different from the way I loved Tdeshi. I love you as a grown and independent woman, I loved Tdeshi as a child, a child who needed to be protected and nurtured, Leand’s daughter.”

“And is that what you want, not an independent person but a child you can dominate? Do I damage your fragile male ego?”

He stopped dead in his tracks. This was a philosophy he hadn’t been exposed to. Where would she get such a notion that a fragile ego had anything to do with being male? In fact, wasn’t it the female who was usually more involved in raising and nurturing children? “What planet are you from?” He asked, “You must have spent far too much time with the Yingolians to say a thing like that.”

She did not take that well. She turned from him and quickened her pace. She didn’t speak to him again until Duskmeal. He couldn’t figure out why what he said hurt so much.

They had a late Duskmeal at their inn, outside the walls of

the Kassikan and across two canals. The dining room was at street level but a few tables in the back corner overlooked the tiny canal their quay was on, lit by only a small lantern with the inn's name on it, swinging slowly from a hook below a tiny back alley footbridge on the floor above. The thick wood in here had absorbed the aromas of centuries of cooking and there were few tables taken in this corner.

If he didn't start telling her what he was really thinking, they were not going to have anything to talk about at all were they? At this point what did it matter? She could deny it but the evidence was there.

"You know what I think," Jorma said, "I think someone has erased her from the records."

"Why do you say that?"

"There are records of her employment request and receipt with no number, but there is no student record and no names with the scholarship numbers on their distribution form."

"The Kassikan has far too many files on far too many things already," Ava told him. "Usually they keep all the stuff no one will ever care about and don't keep things we will care about."

"Yeah," he tried to agree, but was only half convinced. "But even you said they had been deleted."

"That could be also," she said, "but I really don't think it's related."

As their dinner arrived he looked her in the eye and said, "I think there's a cover-up going on here, and I think you know it."

14. Transmission Revelation

There was no meaningful conversation after that. In spite of the silence, they stayed together for the sleep. She even initiated sex. It was actually their first time since they stayed at the inn in Eleknane. It was good, he knew she enjoyed it. He thought this would help get them back on better terms, but when it was over she went right to sleep. She got up before he woke up and went down to breakfast before him. Over breakfast she was polite, but didn't bring up the subject of seeing Kulai, the one person she knew who had seen her brought in.

He had to do it. "I want to go see that guy you know, the one who signed you in."

"Kulai?" she asked.

"Yes, I think that's what you said his name was."

"Kulai. He was the shift supervisor the night I woke up, but he also signed for the comatose body of Tdeshi when she was brought in."

"Yes, I want to talk to him."

"I think we should try to find Yorthops, hSkaiya gave us a list of addresses of people she knows."

"Do you want to take the boat and go check them out while I talk to Kulai?"

"Why should I do that?"

"You already talked to Kulai you said," Jorma told her.

"I have, and the guy who was actually on duty who's

name I've since forgotten. I told you, I came at it from this direction with some determination for a period of years. I started not more than three years after it happened. I gave up this end of the investigation by the time the starship arrived. We have to find Yorthops, or Hyondahi, they're the only new leads."

"We have the name Tdeshi to use on the people you talked to before. You didn't have that when you talked to them."

"Nobody ever mentioned the name Tdeshi before," she said.

"But now it can be mentioned to them," Jorma said.

"So what? What will any of them know of Tdeshi?"

"Remember the gymnastic dance grade?" He asked. "That makes me think Tdeshi was already undergoing damage from shonggot at the time."

"That was way up in Chardovia," she said, "what would that have to do with anyone down here in the Kassikan?"

"What if someone was in on it? Someone who knew the shonggot supply channels. Some one who did something to indirectly cause her overdose? If they sought out Tdeshi for some reason, it might have come from someone inside the Kassikan. If any of them know the name Tdeshi for any reason, it will be significant."

"What could be worth this much trouble?" Ava asked.

"What if they had some other reason to take her?" Jorma asked.

"Like what?" Ava asked, a bit nervous.

“Who knows?” Jorma said. “I’m sure the wizards in there can think up much more devious plans than I ever could.” He didn’t want to suggest as a vehicle for an RNAcid of one of their number who had died, he was now sure that would end her cooperation.

She gave him a hooded eye, but no retort for that. “And anyway, even if they react to her name, it might have nothing to do with this. As we saw, it is not an terribly uncommon name.”

With what they just found out about how little records the Kassikan contains of Tdeshi, Jorma didn’t think it was common enough that a reaction to it would be a reaction to some other Tdeshi.

Their walk outdoors was brisk this Nightday but there was no rain. They didn’t converse on the way. He noticed how Ava was getting more nervous the closer they got. He thought about asking her about it, but he knew what she would say. It was because of how Kulai reminded her of how she woke up, her run back from death. She used that as an excuse for lots of things. Kulai was involved in that event, he was the sleep shift supervisor of the lab at that time. She would use that as her excuse no matter what the real reason was. The excuse didn’t matter. He had to face his fear at being in the Kassikan at all, especially during dark. She had to face her fear of her past. Her past before she ran from Kulai’s crypt.

The guy had a nice office room, almost worth the stairs they climbed to get here. It probably had a view if there was

daylight. In just twenty decades he had changed positions again since Ava was created from Tdeshi's body. That is a meteoric rise in the Kassikan, something even Jorma knew. With an average tenure of ten centuries among the executives, the Kassikan was a world-wide metaphor for a fossilized organization.

There was no one to greet them, just a sign that said 'Be back soon, please be comfortable'. The sign didn't have dust on it. After a few minutes of looking at the lanterns in this view, he understood that they had passed a turning point in his investigation. He could tell by the way she was so reluctant to come here and denied so vehemently that she was trying to prevent it.

He knew he would never get her cooperation again. She was actually hampering him wasn't she? They were no longer a team on this investigation. Kulai was someone she knew all along, and yet she seemed reluctant to talk to him. "Why is that?" he said out loud.

"What?" Ava turned to him.

"I was talking to myself actually," he answered.

"About what?"

"You."

"What?"

He let that linger awhile, then answered, "Why you seemed reluctant to come here."

"I've talked with this guy before, when I investigated before," Ava told him. "All that's going on here is his old family friend, the Gnome, is a habitual fuck-up and didn't bother to get coverage while he went and took a whizz. Kulai

doesn't know anything about what I was before. I believe him when he says he never saw me or heard of me before I was brought in. He's more like the guy on the loading dock, his fuck-up Gnome friend was actually on duty at the time."

"Did you talk to him?"

"He knows even less, he's not even smart enough to know he's a fuck-up. He pretends he knows what he's doing and even makes some stories up, but he doesn't actually know anything."

"Will you let me speak to him also?"

"I can't stop you, but you'll just see what I mean anyway."

The door opened and a sleek man of medium height with a thick, light brown ponytail and long, light brown beard in a matching chin-band entered the room carrying a pile of folders. He was partly Elvish and maybe partly Dwarf, not the Gnome Jorma had expected. "Sorry about the delay," he said "It took longer than I expected to fetch these records."

"We've only been here a few minutes," Jorma said.

"Ava?" Kulai said as they explained that, clearly recognizing her, "I haven't seen you around in ages."

"A couple decades anyway," she said, lacing fingers over his desk then caressing each others arms as they took their seats. "It'll be three decades, thirty third year, since I left."

"What have you been doing?" Kulai asked.

"Living here and there up the far shore. I got all the way up to the town where this body was born and met Jorma," she introduced him, "who knew her then."

“Greetings,” he said and touched his brow rather than getting up to press palms. He and Kulai were at opposite ends of his table.

“Greetings,” Jorma replied and saluted also. “I was close to Tdeshi, even closer to her father Leand.”

“Tdddeshi?” Kulai asked, obviously unable to pronounce the name. “Leand?” Jorma was watching him intently, he was genuinely perplexed. O.K. no reaction there. No doubt they were now going to find exactly what Ava said they would. He had driven a wedge between them for nothing.

“The name this body had before the Shonggot,” Ava told Kulai.

“Now I understand,” Kulai said, but kept question marks on his face. “how may I help?”

“I’m trying to find out why Tdeshi O.D.d,” Jorma said.

“Ava knows how little help I am there, she was already in a shonggot coma when I first saw her. She’d already been in that coma for over a day by then. She was in a coma for hours before any medical person saw her.”

“How did she get to you?” Jorma asked.

“There was a retrieval team with a needleboat.”

“Are any of them still around?”

“I would guess they’re all still around. We could go down and look up the records, I confess I don’t have everything about that case memorized in spite of the fact that Ava is so respected and beautiful.” He flashed her a smile. “It did happen so long ago and compared to what she’s accomplished since, the little oversight of Enjteen’s is pretty insignificant.”

“It was Althart’s oversight in his arithmetic to blame, not Enjteen’s bladder,” Ava said.

Kulai smiled at her, a smile that almost winked. He was thanking her for leading the conversation this way. Was he just thanking her for summarizing his story for him, or was he thanking her for leading him away from something bigger? Whatever it was, now that he had been lead away from it, he would stonewall returning.

“We’ve traced her to where she was living, we found she had won a free year at the Kassikan.”

“No doubt you looked up her records?” Kulai asked.

“And found that she must have blown her mind on the way down for her year, because there is no record of her as a student at the Kassikan,” Ava said.

“Have you checked all the locker companies around the Kassikan?” Kulai asked. “There’s lots of locker companies catering to transients along the waterfronts in any large city, even more along the docks in front of the Kassikan. If they have any twenty decade old records or storage, we can go thru that looking for Tdeshi. That would be before the O.D., not after, like Ava is,” Kulai said.

“How long would that investigation take?” Jorma asked.

“We could spend a week on it,” Ava said.

“Small compared to the time we spent getting down here.”

“More importantly, you would be investigating it from the Tdeshi end,” Kulai said.

“At some point the Tdeshi end meets the Ava end,” Jorma said.

“Actually,” Ava said, “there was a long disconnect between the time when Tdeshi was erased and I awakened. Nearly a week I think.”

“I first entered the story during that disconnect,” Kulai said. “I never actually saw Ava in the flesh until a few years later when she came around asking me what photovoltaics I could use.”

“Were you actually present when she was brought in? When she was taken off the needleboat?” Jorma asked.

“No, but the people who were at the dock were competent. I examined her and inspected her tube’s as soon as she was transported to our section. All those people were competent, Enjteen wasn’t involved until after the transmission.”

Jorma noticed Ava turn white. “What transmission?” Jorma asked Kulai.

Kulai had seen Ava’s look also and questioned her with an eyebrow. She could only get away with compressing her lips but even that told Jorma that it was too late. Kulai’s eyes sank. “I thought he knew,” he said to Ava.

“I was trying to go without that since I left here,” Ava answered him.

“I don’t know,” Jorma forced in.

“He can easily find out,” Kulai told her.

“Yes,” she said with a sigh, “You’ve put the dung on the table now haven’t you? I knew this would happen.” She had withdrawn into herself as she said that.

“Nobody’s actually told me anything except for the word ‘transmission’.” Jorma didn’t know what that would be.

“I can’t understand why he didn’t figure it out way before this,” Ava said to Kulai. “We even tried to talk about it once. He must just be in denial.”

“Me?” Jorma said, “I’m in denial?” He was cold inside when he said that. There is something more he should know about her isn’t there, something he should have guessed? Something even darker than being an RNA copy of a dead staff member of the Kassikan. Why was he breaking out in a cold sweat about it? Why was he suddenly more afraid than he was down in the Gnome catacombs? Wasn’t it because she came from labs far deeper?

“Who am I Jorma?” Ava asked, turning to him and becoming as animated as she had since she’d been Tdeshi. “You’ve been looking for Tdeshi but Tdeshi is gone. We talked about my clone sister. How do I know so much about her? Because that was me, Jorma, a copy of administrator Ava Bancour, better known as The Ghost of Narrulla’s Tear was downloaded into the deserted mind of a shonggot victim, Leand’s daughter and your ex-lover Tdeshi.”

“I was still trying to get a reply from Tdeshi to my letters when the Angel was rescued,” he mumbled. “I hadn’t heard from Himla yet when that happened. I had no idea Tdeshi might have succumbed to shonggot at the time so it didn’t connect.” He knew in his mind Tdeshi had been in that body til they sailed on the Brother’s Formidable.

“Not even when we talked about it?”

“I guess I can’t go there,” he said while his ears rang and his throat went dry. There was a constriction in his chest like someone sitting on it. It didn’t feel like he could breath. His

vision was contracting to a small porthole.

“I never wanted to tell you this because you told me right from the start that you can’t go there, but I am that soul Jorma, I am from YingolNeerie, born in it’s year 2136, over a century old. I was shocked to find you’re even older since my life seems like an eternity now. I’ve lived a whole lifetime in the body Tdeshi deserted. I grew up in a mechanized world you couldn’t imagine, I was what you call a ‘ghost’ for more than half of my life. You made me keep it secret from you by your irrational hatred. Now you found out.”

He couldn’t participate in this conversation any more. His chest felt like it had a roller-coaster inside it, or maybe a strong hunting arrow. With freezing certainty he knew he had been in denial. This was such an abomination, a soul from a world of war and pestilence, living disembodied for half a century while stored as electricity in silicon crystals frozen in outer space. Yeah, he knew it, he’d read the news. He never actually believed it did he? No, he thought the haunted asteroids stories were all a ploy to sell news magazines. But no, due to the intervention by wizards in the Kassikan, Tdeshi’s body was now inhabited by that ghost.

In his denial he had made love to that body, in Tdeshi’s memory, repeatedly. He had made love to some kind of ghoulish zombie resurrected in the deepest catacombs of the Kassikan. A horror he wouldn’t have believed if he saw it in a movie, from much deeper in its bowels than that Gnome chamber. The horror of what he had thought happened to bright and lively young Tdeshi was nothing compared to what had really happened to her. She was gone and taken over, not by an

RNAcid memory pill of some ancient but human person from the Kassikan, but by an electric ghost from the cold and dark of outer space.

The revulsion sent him blindly running, out of the room without explanation, out of Ava's sight and finally out of the dark and ancient Kassikan where such horrors could be brought forth. As his vision tunneled, he thought only of getting back into the public streets and back to the boat.

Part II. Under Investigation

1. Ava and Tdeshi

There was a problem Kulai had to see to in his job at the Kassikan, some contaminated samples. It took him an hour just to gather all the records he would need to go over. He had regular business to conduct that detained him in some of those offices and many of the ladies with private workspace delayed him for the skills of his hands, one fringe benefit of life at the Kassikan he still allowed himself to indulge in.

The change in his life since the Brazilian landing had been so much more than the money. Since he stopped trying to get over on the Kassikan, he felt like a member of the Kassikan. He no longer felt like part of the vermin infesting the walls. His education allowed him to understand so much more about people and look back on his past with new understanding. Whether or not one is part of society or not is just a matter of whether and where one wants to join.

The money bought him a nice home and business building. The business was shipping but most of his warehouse space was actually used as residences by the poor he employed. His own home at the top of what was now the 'old commercial space' in his building, was lavish to be sure, but was offset by the responsibility of that business. All those people couldn't eat unless he found enough freight transfer deals to earn them the iron or two a week it took to eat in this city. That responsibility burdened him as much as feeding the four of them did back before the starship. He and his mother

moved out a few years after Enjteen was grown and working. Kulai remembered that was less than two decades before the landing.

Since he changed his work habits he had been promoted again in the Kassikan. He seldom had to take the deep shaft any more and supervise crews down there. He hadn't been in the Helmet Room since the promotion came thru. His office had a window now, though it was halfway across and barely above the base of the pyramid. It was above that elevator science lab in the building below.

The office was plankwall and batten except for the pyramid wall itself, but it was well finished and he had two stand-cushions as well as a high-backed roll-stool with a tile floor and a long ornate work table with pockets, three tall folder racks on one end of the table and three short ones under that end.

He returned to his office to find a well-remembered acquaintance from the age of the starship. A woman he first heard of ten years before the landing, but had first seen in person only a few weeks before the landing. She was the Yingolian scientist Ava. She was the download of a ghost from the last remnant of the secretive starship. She knew how to automate things, they had first met regarding automating the care of coma victims to prevent guys like Enjteen from screwing up their care.

For a time he almost began a social relationship with her, but his experience with women was limited then and when the starship landed, she was swept away by a mighty giant from her home world and they had never met socially since,

though he often saw her in a business context. She was an important sorceress now, the founder of the Study of Virtuality and a committeewoman on Photovoltaics.

She was, if anything, more beautiful than ever, but today she had a strapping country boy named Jorma in tow, though they sat on separate stand-cushions. It turned out he was a guy who claimed to know the girl who donated Ava's body. After all these decades, Ava was following the trail of that body again, and had followed it to a lover of the body that she was in. He bet that had been a trying relationship, but they didn't speak of it.

They knew the name of the girl now, Tdeshi, a Northern Wood Elf appellation that was seldom used in the central parts of the Highlands. Jorma was disappointed when that name meant nothing to him, hell, Kulai couldn't even pronounce it. They grilled him on all the old stuff of that time, paying particular attention to the guys on the boat crew. He didn't even want to have to think about the person he was then, he wanted to let those memories fade away. He tried not to resent being dragged thru it too much.

“Were you actually present when she was brought in?” Jorma asked. “When she was taken off the needleboat?”

He probably should have been warned by how testy Jorma was, but what could he say but the truth? “No, but the people who were at the dock were competent. I examined her and inspected her tube's as soon as she was transported to our section. All those people were competent, Enjteen wasn't involved until after the transmission.”

He noticed Ava turn white. “What transmission?” Jorma

barked.

Kulai questioned Ava with a look. She could only get away with compressing her lips. Kulai had missed an important part of Jorma's hostility. Kulai thought Jorma knew all about the transmission, and was trying to find out how Tdeshi's body was treated. "I thought he knew," he confessed to Ava, already feeling like such an ass for getting the real reason for his hostility so wrong, and blurting that out.

"I was trying to leave that behind when I left here," Ava answered him.

"I don't know," Jorma forced in.

Because he'd gotten it so wrong, Ava had to tell Jorma the truth about her origin. She flogged Jorma with it, saying he had to be in denial not to guess the truth if he had been with her almost two years. She was blaming Jorma for being insensitive, she didn't understand that Jorma was only there for Tdeshi's body. Jorma did not take this revelation well to say the least, there was a bit of shouting and he ran from the room, leaving them both stunned. Ava sat there, obviously hurt.

"I'm really sorry," he said and took her hand. "I should have been more discrete." He felt like such an ass and her importance in the institution was not lost on him.

He could see her suppressing anger, and worried at the might of her wrath, but then he could see her transforming it to resignation. "There's no way you could have known," she sighed while withdrawing her hand gently from under his. "I've known this was going to happen sometime ever since he

wouldn't let me tell him. Of course there's a side of me that wants to yell at you for blurting that out," and her voice did get more stress, "I've made my wishes clear that I didn't want to be known as a ghost from YingolNeerie but as the founder of the Study of Virtuality. I might not have personally had that conversation with you, but I thought everyone who knew about me, knew that also."

He groveled as well as he was able, "I was most thoughtless for letting that slip out. If there is some way I could make it up to you?"

She sighed another big sigh and sank back on the cushion. He liked the beautiful and thick brown hair, they had certainly found a beautiful body for this sorceress from the stars. "I guess I've gotten everything from him that he knows. He rented the boat, but the trail leads back here to the same dead end. I guess I shouldn't take him as too big a loss."

She was lying, maybe to herself. She was broken by this breakup, Kulai would not pursue her today, but he would not take that peasant's side either, "He's quite the bumpkin to react like that," Kulai said. He was guessing they must have been close, closer than she wanted to admit. He was guessing the man was probably close with the girl before she O.D.d also. He imagined the situation was distressing enough for the yokel already. He'd just dumped runny manure on the main course at their feast hadn't he?

"Yeah," she said without enthusiasm. "He's nervous about the Kassikan to begin with, he's not technically educated and has only been in settlements of over a hundred thousand as a tourist. Of course the fact that Tdeshi was his best friend's

daughter didn't help, as well as the fact that he was hung up on her. I'm guessing he didn't chase her to the Yakhan at the time because she was running from him. My guess is his mind has probably tried to forget that little detail of their relationship in the last twenty decades. But now that he knows about the transmission, he has to give up the notion that he is ever going to get Tdeshi back. He has no more room to deny that I am a different person."

"Maybe he'll get over it in a few days."

"Yeah, but will I?" She sat up and stared out the window. He had the standard opening with a single small tree planted in it. It was too thin to block the view of the few lanterns visible in the quadrangles and the diffuse glow of the city on the sky beyond. "He's a great fuck but so are a lot of other guys," she said. He refrained from saying anything so soon after this breakup, "He's an energetic farmer," she continued, "I don't think I could have settled into my house without him. But culturally he goes no deeper than a tap and pickup room."

"So it wasn't only me who hurt you?"

"Yeah, but this gives me reason to stop denying some of our fundamental incompatibilities. Anyway, sorry to intrude," she said. "I know we've raked over all this garbage decades ago, but Jorma insisted on hearing it for himself."

"You're not intruding," he said. "I hope you know you are always welcome here. Unfortunately most of our conversations have been business," he said, "I would love to know your thoughts and aspirations."

She looked at him closely for some long seconds, relaxed and slumped back on the cushion with her hands folded on

her lap. “I want to know how I came by this body,” she told those hands, “that’s why I toured my way to Sinbara and why I came down here in Jorma’s company. It’s too suspicious,” she looked up at him now, “this flesh was found too soon, she’s too good a resemblance. At first I thought I was humoring Jorma to help him investigate, but the more we find out about her disappearance, the more I worry that there was some kind of foul play.”

“Ava, I know nothing about that. Nothing has changed in that regard.” Should he tell her Jorma’s reaction might have been too strong?

“No, it’s not you. We’ve had some hints that someone doesn’t want us learning more. It could be Althart for all I know.”

“No!” Kulai said. “None of the founders would dare. Anyway Kiethying’s the most likely of the founders to be in a dirty deal if you want my opinion. Althart and Myanfynga have the purest hearts of anyone, for what I know from a hundred floors below. I know little of Yohonshu.”

“She is on the Supreme Council, but she is not a founder,” Ava said. “And yes, you are right, although I wouldn’t want to have to prove any of them are innocent.”

Yes, she knew the founders much better than he did. “I cannot prove I am innocent, though I know I am.”

“I just hope none of us have to,” she said.

She said she would be lousy company and left before it was even lunch time. He was disappointed, she could be vulnerable now and he had always admired the wizard from a

distant star transplanted into the body her companion had been following. There were no Brazilians around now to whisk her away, but he wasn't going to push. Once she was gone, he hurt from the damage he had done and what might have been. But then of course she would have been with Tdeshi's lover this sleep if he hadn't mentioned the transmission.

2. The Trouble With Enjteen

Over the years Kulai had been having a harder and harder time keeping up his defense of Enjteen. Kulai had always been like an older brother to Enjteen, their mothers were good friends since long before Kulai was born. Kulai started to notice how much special treatment Enjteen actually got when he made his biggest screw-up ever and left Ava to wander around lost in the coma ward's hallways. Now Kulai worked hard making sure he gave Enjteen no special treatment.

Since then Kulai had followed Ava's career only as their paths crossed in business. He wished her well. He admitted that he wouldn't mind a social encounter with her, and was sorry last week had ended the way it had. Enjteen, on the other hand, had followed Ava's career obsessively, almost as a stalker. Since that time Enjteen had continued to screw up and Kulai had covered far too long. Enjteen threatened to reveal secrets and their mothers were still good friends. Those decades passed with Kulai even trying to portray Enjteen in a good light to Enjteen's own mother.

Now he had to sever his last tie with that past, and by doing so, open up too much of that past. Enjteen knew too much, but had tried to use it too often and exaggerated too much for it to stick any more. That past was so long gone now it couldn't matter could it? He hardly ever associated with people he knew in those days, Enjteen was the last one.

What happened this time was potentially very serious. In spite of all precautions, the last starship brought more diseases than all of recorded history. He knew, when they first landed he had lain near death while pathologists raced to save the victims and keep the infections from spreading. For twenty decades the problem was considered solved, but recently a new human parasite had emerged in the Gengee area about eighteen hundred miles to the southwest. It was a spiral protozoan of humanoid evolution that could inflame the joints and even the nervous system. An important Brazilian had died, hundreds were infected and the university had dispatched a floater to fly the corpse up here for analysis. The Yingolian who must have been the carrier defied treatment and escaped to the scrublands of the Gengee.

The corpse was vacuum packed. The flight from Gengee took little more than five weeks and it was now stored in a refrigerated room under the strictest quarantine while it was studied. But it seems that during Enjteen's shift at watching that room, the airlock had been left open and it is possible that spores of the infection could have drifted out. There was nothing Kulai could do to save him now. At the committee meeting it was pointless to even try to say something in his

defense. So it had come down to Kulai to tell Enjteen that he was no longer allowed below minus twenty three and he would have to return his key and the memory of that lab.

Right now Kulai was in the room he used as his 'upstairs' or 'public' office. This is where he met people who didn't know there was another door behind the back storage closet with the fancy lock just outside his door. Inside there were stairs that lead to another storage closet in Elevator Science two stories down. A closet so full of stuff, with so much stuff piled in front of it, that no one ever went in there from that side. From here he could watch as Enjteen's key to that closet didn't work, that would probably be the first time he would get a chance to explain.

Until then he tried to catch up on some office work. There were defect reports that needed filling out and loss tickets to get people to run down. But first he had to finish up the paper trail of tissue sample 4421,3233,3021. Several of it's genes had turned up in 4424,1312,0014 and 4424,1354,2202. It was boring work, but at least it was all from this century so the paper could be handled without crumbling. It was laborious checking of logbook after logbook, dates and times and batches run. All the way back to samples taken.

Kulai jumped up and slammed the last log book down. Enjteen hardly ever took samples, why would his name show up on all three of these? His bellow was heard thruout the hallway and co-workers came to their office doors. He was immediately glad the outburst was wordless or it would have dripped filth and named names.

He got himself under control, sort of, and with the one

word explanation, “Enjteen!” he roughly set about seeing just how many samples Enjteen had taken in his career in this lab. He put his ‘Be back soon’ sign on the door and went down three elevator shafts into the catacombs of the Gnomes where the original sample tickets for the Helmet Room labs were stored. In a dusty and damp cavern lit only by his own torch, he got down drawer after drawer of sample tickets and thumbed thru them in their thousands, one by one, starting on the first day of the decade when Enjteen was born so he was sure he didn’t miss any. By the time he was done; he had four. The three that were cross contaminated for the one gene that had been investigated, who knows how many more. If all cross contaminations were recorded, Kulai was willing to bet there would be a shatter-cone of cross contamination in order by time on these four. Enjteen was probably using his own sampler, probably the instructional one he was given to practice on. He had probably never sterilized it.

He was now mad enough to bring this to the committee himself. Enjteen would be pushing carts of soiled linens to the laundry rooms if he had his way. For long moments he seethed and went on fantasies of what should befall Enjteen, vermin control trainee might work. The Kassikan could refuse him admission to the grounds if it came to that, evict him from his quarters and lock him outside the gates. There were plenty of public spaces in the university where he could go, and he might well sneak back in, but the councils could make sure he was not allowed on the payroll anywhere, not even by vendors to licensees.

With all the investments they had made in businesses, one

way or another they could probably keep him from getting work in the city except by a few private cleaning services or in the sex and/or entertainment trades. They wouldn't do that, he wasn't worth anywhere near that much bother. His lifeworker rating would be taken, that would change the jobs he would get in the Kassikan. He would probably be working for a Gnome in his next job. They didn't take slack from each other.

Now that he had tracked this case down, there was nothing more useful that Kulai was going to do with himself while he was here. He needed something to dissipate his anger on. Some strenuous physical activity. Like running up the stairwells to the top of the pyramid. That was only sixteen hundred feet above this catacomb. That would be insane, his heart would explode if he tried to do that. But he did get a good forty minute workout by taking the stairs thirty stories up to the main court. He was puffing by the time he got there. He was feeling a little more relieved however.

The plaza was alight with glittering lanterns here in the middle of Nightday. It was cool outside and many people were coming thru the halls and idly gazing at the plaques and monuments. Where the Lake Promenade Court entered the pyramid it was a sports field wide and over thirty stories tall, making an arch into the base of the pyramid itself. There were small buildings in the corridor as it tapered toward the central elevator court, five hundred feet away.

The monuments posted the course offerings of all the schools, the status of each school was shown by the size and position of their monument. Each school updated it's

monument and course list once every century. Mechanics was going to take a big leap when their course stone for the 101st came out because photovoltaics and data handing were both in the Mechanics branch. Mechanics would probably be first stone in when they put up their new one. They came up early in the century, only eleven years into it. Medicine still hadn't put up a new stone for the 100th, they were now one of the last in time, but would still be second stone in.

He bounded up the stairs to the second mezzanine and then stood at the rail taking a breather. By now he was calm. He wasn't forgiving, but he was calm. He understood that it would be necessary to be more measured in his approach. Get the key, give him notice, make it official. Make him understand why he couldn't be trusted any more. Get past his anger and blame and get the pill into him. Kulai would have to trust that the pill would take enough of Enjteen's memories that he wouldn't remember anything to use against him.

When he got back to his office, several hours more than fifteen minutes later, Enjteen was there. "I was about to give up and call it a day," Enjteen shouted as he first saw Kulai enter the hall. "This damn key broke."

Kulai didn't shout down the hall. He didn't say a word until he got to the door, walking with forced calm all the way. All he said was, "Let's go inside."

It looked like Enjteen had 'tidied up' the office a little while he waited. No doubt he had studied the files that were out even though the door had been closed. Kulai probably should have locked it. He didn't say anything as he sat on the

larger stand-cushion. He waved Enjteen to the other one. He said nothing as he made Enjteen watch him go thru all the files and make sure that everything was still there.

“Do we need to go over this?” Kulai eventually asked in a soft voice.

“I have no idea? What would we have to go over?”

“Must have been someone else who was in here and put these papers back in their folders.”

His blush was all Kulai needed to hear.

“So far the committee only knows about the airlock,” Kulai said.

“I wasn’t anywhere near that lock, that bitch is a liar.”

“You were absent from your duty. Your key is not broken, your key is deactivated. You can just put it there on the table.”

Enjteen went even paler. “YOU WOULD DO THIS TO ME!?” he squeaked.

“My punishment for protecting you all these decades is that I am the one to do this. I might have been asked to give up my key also for this and all the other things I let you get away with.”

“But you’ll take mine to keep yours!?” He was still shouting but not quite as shrilly.

“Yes,” Kulai said. He was lowering his voice, making Enjteen have to calm down to hear him, “and I will inform the committee of my findings on the sampling case also. Since you’ve proven yourself incapable of handling it, I’ll recommend that your life-worker responsibility be removed.”

Enjteen’s jaw dropped, he jumped up so quick he knocked

the standcushion over. He screamed, a higher pitched version of the bellow Kulai had let loose when he first found this case history. He clenched his fists and jumped up and down. “WHY ARE YOU RUINING ME SO? WAIT TIL THE FAMILY HEARS ABOUT THIS!!!”

“They know,” Kulai said as gently as he could.

Enjteen was screaming something over it but heard him anyway and changed to... “And what did they say?”

“They were all angry with me...”

“SEE!!!” he shrieked, waving his arms so hard, they whacked the ceiling.

“...for being in denial so long and letting you get away with so much for so many decades. Decades ago your own mother told me it was a stupid move, getting you the job in the secret lab when you put us thru all that trouble. I should have listened to her then instead of all her ‘I told you so’s’ til now.”

Enjteen bellowed drivel that seemed to be just a vehicle to get lots of spit out of his mouth. “...and I kept my mouth shut since then!” was the next thing he shouted that Kulai understood.

“Thank you.”

“I’ll go to Ava about this,” he said, “You know she’s back don’t you?”

“I spoke with her just last week,” Kulai said. This meant that Enjteen’s tail on Ava wasn’t as close as he thought.

“You know she’s got a friend with her?” Enjteen said.

“She did,” Kulai said, still being as calm as possible. To

let Enjteen know just how little he knew, Kulai admitted to his blunder, “I thought he knew who she was, he didn’t, when I mentioned it he... well, lets just say he left abruptly.”

“You know she’s investigating what happened to her?” He was leaning over with his hands on the desk, Kulai could smell his breath.

“Are you leading to anything with this?” Kulai asked, waving his hand as much to brush Enjteen back as stir the air.

“Just that there are plenty of things I could tell her.”

“Oh? Do you think she will believe any of them?” Enjteen had no doubt spewed his lies already, many got back to him.

“I think she’ll believe enough,” he said. “Don’t forget, I was an eye witness to you getting up from her.”

“There’s no need to go over that nonsense again. I know what I was doing and no one has ever believed a word of your distortion of it.” There had been investigations he only heard about later. It hadn’t been his semen in the patients, but that of a guy Kulai used to know in the days before the starship. Kulai was less worried than that because the pill would make him forget everything that ever happened down there.

“There is other nonsense you don’t want me talking about, where the cash goes for instance.”

Kulai did all he could to look as unperturbed as he did by Enjteen’s necrophilia allegations. Since he had been clean for twenty decades he was getting pretty good at it. For the last twenty decades he’d been fighting pilfering from the patients. “If you can find where cash goes around here, let me know.”

“I’ll make her suspicious enough to sic Delurna on you.”

“I’ve already spoken with his office. She’s interested in

what happened to her body, how that body ended up here. She's not interested in your sick stroke-offs even if they were true because that has nothing to do with how her body got the shonggot." Kulai drew a deep breath, "So now, the key."

Enjteen panted, seethed and paced the two paces of the room, stepping over the legs of the overturned cushion in each direction. "Why are you doing this, why have you turned on me?"

"You've used me, you've used my friendship. You've taken a free ride on my back for decades and I've done nothing but cover your tracks. But today that all ends."

"Why? Why are you doing this to me? Why do you hate me so?"

"Because you've used me for decades by making me feel sorry for you like you're trying to do now, now that you know you can't bully me."

"I'm not the bully here, I'm the speechless victim. Best friends for life and suddenly..."

"You haven't been my friend since you hit puberty." That had been twenty four decades ago. Some of his earliest memories of Enjteen as an infant were when Kulai had to eat food at the same table with him, when he and his mother also lived underground. Enjteen was a sloppy baby with snot running from his nose to his mouth. Kulai was only a grunt lifeworker at the time and his was the only income for the four of them while Enjteen was a baby. Those were days when extra coppers were hard to come by and worth the risk. "We haven't hung out outside of work since I got my place outside." Once Enjteen had a steady job, Kulai didn't feel

responsible for supporting him and his mother, just because they were his mother's friends. Kulai's mother was quite independent now and had a career as a janitorial inspector in a large retail operation on Second Canal and Gazzison Locks. About a mile and a quarter from her home.

"I should have seen this coming then," Enjteen said.

"What reason could you have for moving outside other than to get away from your Gnome friends?"

"You know you can go outside if you want to. There are many Gnomes living outside."

"Not truly outside, you are not over the canyon."

"There's always Nightday if you can't stand the light of day. Most Gnomes can. Most are scrupulously honest, conscientious and careful. What happened to you?"

"Whenever I stumble over the line, I get caught. It's been you bearing down on me all these years, not me taking a free ride. I can't believe you think you can get away with this. I'll go before the committee and tell them how you've been riding me all these decades and using me to hide your slacking."

"They will laugh uproariously. They have been riding me for decades to wake up and smell your stench. They insisted I take your key..."

"All right, here's the damn key. Now what do I do?"

"Report your new status to Medical Labs Central Committee for Personnel Reassignment." Kulai said while he put the key in his drawer. "You might as well tell them now you'll be losing your lifeworker status so you won't have to be back thru there in a few more weeks."

“At least I won’t be seeing you again.” He was turned to leave.

“The door’s locked,” Kulai said, “We’re not quite done yet.”

“What do you mean?” he looked back questioningly and indignantly.

Kulai was still sitting with his elbows on his desk, “There’s a pill,” he said, and held it up between thumb and forefinger of his right hand. It was a large lavender-colored capsule.

“You can’t be serious!”

“This comes right from the top. I was told one of the founders made this himself. He believes you cannot be trusted knowing the whereabouts of this door.”

“I can’t believe this.”

Kulai drew a deep breath. “It was my pledge not to let you out this door until you swallow this. It is my last pledge to you out of respect for our families and former friendship that you will not be harmed, other than forgetting about that lab, how to find it, what we do there and any technical knowledge you might have happened across while on duty down there.”

“Go ahead and kidnap me. I’m sure my screams will bring someone before we starve, even if you have the strength to outlast me.”

“No, they’ll just have to take the time and expense to make an aerosol of this RNAcidophage and I’ll have to re-learn the route after we get out of here. It might take a week or so before it’s ready so we’d have to sit thru a week’s worth

of hunger before they get down here with it. Just take the pill and save us both the aggravation and save the Kassikan the expense, it'll go better in your re-assignment. You might not get re-assigned at all if you put them thru that trouble. Then you'd have to go crawl into the canyon.”

“I can't believe this! You probably believe them about this pill don't you? Well I don't. This is probably shonggot and I'm going to wind up under a helmet with a mind transplant like the one Ava got.”

“There are no more of those ghosts to transplant. The others went back to YingolNeerie.”

“So I'll just be another coma victim. How many are there down there now?”

“Twenty five.”

“I'll be twenty six.”

“Shall I shout up and tell them you refuse the pill so they can get the spray brewing? Then I'll be taking it with you, will that satisfy you?”

“If you take back those re-assignment threats I'll peacefully submit to a spray that effects us both, otherwise I'll start breaking thru this door.”

“I have nothing to do with your assignments, your name's already been mentioned in councils. I'm simply pointing out how your actions will look to others and how they will be taken by others. I cannot defend you any more. I will not defend you any more. If you swallow this, I will simply report my findings on the contamination case, without recommendation, providing I see you return that training sampler.”

“But it’s so much easier to use.”

“Because it doesn’t have the precision and you can’t properly sterilize it. Not that your record shows any evidence that you ever even attempted to sterilize it.”

Enjteen said nothing. He probably thought scientific procedure was all just ritual. He never took the time to understand what it was all about, what the rituals accomplished. So he didn’t bother with a few, like the ritual of sterilization of equipment. He probably felt like someone being reprimanded for not doing enough obeisance at temple.

Kulai was still holding the capsule, staring at Enjteen over it. Enjteen was still standing, but now he picked up the little standcushion and sat, then slapped the capsule out of his hand. “Did you expect me to dry swallow it?”

Kulai kept a bottle of scientific in his bookcase, a brand called Aurora Neutron. It’s label was a psychedelic aurora that you couldn’t read til you’d had a shot or two of it.

“Oh great,” Enjteen said, eying the potent beverage. “This’ll probably do my memory more harm than the pill.”

“You’re probably right.”

He dropped the pill, this had actually gone easier than he had feared. He chased it down with a healthy swallow. If there was one thing Enjteen had a hard time passing up it was free psychedelics. As he put the bottle down he was muttering, “I can’t believe you did this to me. Erasing my mind with a shonggot capsule. Wow that stuff is strong, I have to get out of here. This room is too small.”

“We could go upstairs and find a porch,” Kulai teased.

“I’ll be fine at home. We Gnomes are very susceptible

you know, I'd like to be home before this hits me.”

“Lightweight.”

He knew Enjteen just wanted to trip on it. Another free benefit of taking his medicine like a rational human being. Kulai was glad to open the door and get him out of here. He was glad it went so well. He'd be true to his word and tore up the recommendation page. The committee would recommend he lose his lifeworker rating anyway, he wasn't worried about that. He wouldn't oppose.

Suddenly it dawned on him why this had been so easy. He sprang to his feet and raced into the hall. There was little traffic so he ran. He had almost reached the public restroom on this corridor just as the door opened and Enjteen stepped out. “Out for sprint training,” he asked with a smile.

“YOU...” Kulai bellowed.

“Haven't you said enough to me, are you going to try and humiliate me in public also?”

“What were you doing in there!?”

“I had to take a piss. You go see the re-assignment committee and see if it don't scare the piss out of you. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a buzz I'd like to take home.” He pushed his way by, smiling.

3. A Second Interview

The Nightday after the dismissal of Enjteen, he found he had pretty light duty. It was a boring day of routine paperwork and chatting with others in nearby offices, mainly about Enjteen's dismissal. He was thinking of leaving a little early that day, but Ava came to see him again. For one of her demeanor, she wore an amused grin.

“Ava my dear, what brings you here?” he said when she looked in his door. Hopes of a social encounter sprung up in his heart again.

“My feet; on a quest for naughty gossip about Enjteen.”

It seemed that the word had really spread. “You didn't hear it from me,” Kulai said, just as a formality, while turning around and motioning her to the better guest cushion, “but he left a contaminated room open, and in a separate case, contaminated all four of the biological samples he ever took in his career.”

“I see, I guess that would be grounds.”

“There's been enough grounds. Leaving you alone to wake up to mental trauma was enough, I should have demoted him then.” The person he was now would have.

“You should have checked Althart's arithmetic with the dendrite growth rates.”

“I didn't know arithmetic had a dendrite growth rate,” Kulai said, “I'm familiar with flow rates in med tube and who knows what they're talking about when I ask them a few questions.”

“What about the boat slip you signed the day Tdeshi was brought in?” she asked, “when would you have turned that in?”

“My habit was to turn in all the shift logs on my way home every single shift I stood.”

“But you don’t know why that one would be two weeks late?”

“Not one from twenty decades ago, not the one from the week Enjteen deserted you and scared your soul.” Kulai said, wondering where this was leading. “I would have been paying a lot less attention to it than normal that day. But I want to apologize once again for my impropriety the other day. I should have thought about the possibility that your friend didn’t know, that you were incognito in that regard.”

“It’s shit on the table now,” she said. After the briefest flash of a frown she said. “He couldn’t handle it. Other than that, I liked the guy. He was a really good lay.”

“I would try my best to make up for his loss if you like?” Kulai said. She paused and made a face. He worried that he was saying all the wrong things. Even after all this time, her mind was Yingolian and many things could have many different connotations in their culture. He’d heard anything even remotely sexual was one of them.

In the end she didn’t pick up on that either way, but continued with her line of questioning. “If one of the crew came up and said, ‘oh I forgot to hand this in last week’ would you remember?”

“No,” he sighed. “That happens once every year or two with one or another paperwork detail. I consider myself conscientious about my paperwork,” even then he was, “but I don’t have a fetish about it. On the week you woke up I could have very well been so flustered that I forgot it myself. It

could have gotten under something for a couple weeks very easily. You have to understand shifts tend to be very routine down there. People in deep vegetative states don't come up with many surprises, that's why Enjteen left you the way he did. No doubt hundreds of times before he'd left his post when the comatose patient hadn't asked for assistance."

"It wasn't long until I found out where I was," Ava said. "I was scared at the time and I've used it as an excuse. If I had been the new person I claimed to be, it would have been a problem, but I was a century old."

"You got to the crystal room about the time I was notified. I chased around thru all of Noonsleep trying to find out what was going on while you and Alhart came up top to the café for an early Afternoonday breakfast and Enjteen made up bigger and bigger lies about what a short time he was gone. He was gone over an hour you know. I found out later he took a piss, climbed up in a store room attic and had a half bottle, waited til he had to piss again, and then came down. By then someone else had found the drawer open."

"So you still think it's not worth my time to talk to Enjteen?" Ava asked him.

"About what?"

"About what happened to Tdeshi?"

"You have, decades ago. You've talked to him freely."

"Yes I have," Ava said, "and recently. He says he was made to take a pill so he would forget where the secret lab is. He wondered what else he would forget. He says he did forget where the lab is but he didn't forget anything else, but he said he never took the pill."

“No, he tucked it under his tongue while he glugged down a good portion of some of my best kicked yaag to ‘wash it down’, then he spit it in the hallway shitter.”

“So he says,” Ava confirmed. She seemed a bit amused at it. Maybe that was some payback for his big mouth.

“So I saw,” Kulai said, admitting how he was duped.

“So what do you know about the guys who were on that boat the day Tdeshi...”

“You?” Kulai asked. He hadn’t memorized the name they used a couple weeks ago, he was too distraught over making such a big faux pas with a person he admired.

“... was brought in. Yes.”

“The only one I really remember is B’theen,” he said, “and that’s because we share many business interests as well as a friendship. He did not get a promotion from his time on the boat, but he works with me in some outside business and has some of his own that’s doing pretty well. I think you talked to him back then.”

“I did. gZarvik and D’l’thon got promoted, what do you know about them? Especially in connection with shonggot?”

It took him a few seconds to dredge his memories for those distant days. He realized by now that her question about Enjteen had been just to put him off his guard. She was really here about the girl who’s body she was in and he was going to have to concentrate on that. He did the best he could, though his memory may have become cloudy and colored since that time. “I thought D’l’thon was getting promoted anyway, the guy he replaced had already announced his resignation, he had nothing to worry about. gZarvik was always a shifty little

wevn in my book but I'm a prejudiced bastard when it comes to sons of the hoi polloi using connections so I might not offer the most objective view. But I never heard any mention of either name in connection with the farthest fringes of shonggot, it wasn't an issue they'd mentioned."

"Had you heard of shonggot before the starship arrived?"

"Everyone with a caring mother has heard of shonggot," Kulai told her in return. "Both my mother and Enjteen's mother are still my friends, and both told both of us of the dangers of shonggot."

"I don't know what Tdeshi's mother told her about shonggot," Ava informed him. "I know her mother was hired by her rich father to produce him the best possible baby. Tdeshi's mother left the household after her contract was up. Tdeshi was raised by hired women under the control of her paternal grandmother. She grew up in the manor home in front of the tenant-cropper cabin where Jorma lived. That cabin where she lived with Jorma was the address Tdeshi had on her."

"Jorma?" Ava had been concentrating on this it seemed, while it was now a distant incident in his past.

"That guy I was here with a couple weeks ago, the one who ran screaming into the dark."

"I can see why she did shonggot," Kulai said.

"It couldn't have been that bad, she grew up rich."

"What does that get you? When you have no more family than hired staff and tenant hands," he said. He couldn't imagine growing up without a mother, he couldn't imagine growing up wealthy. Kulai had grown up free of natural light

for most of his youth. “More headaches for her father, more people bothering him and her also at too early an age.”

“I understand you are doing quite well financially?” Ava asked, “Are you complaining of your headaches?”

Questioning him about the boat slip was one thing. He also didn't feel he had anything at all to worry about in relation to the care and prepping of her body for the transfer. That was all done and pretty much forgotten by the time the Brazilians arrived. He wondered why she had so much renewed interest in those times? But that issue didn't bother him.

But he still worried about those aluminums he had taken from the Brazilian carts. For almost twenty decades he had lived very well off that fortune and none had really questioned it. Now Ava, of all people, was questioning him on it. She was Yingolian herself in a way, and had lived with a Brazilian for decades. Was she really on the trail of that lost fortune and the questions about the boat crew were really a second level diversion?

He struggled mightily to keep his nerves under control, to keep the sweat off his brow and to keep the tremor out of his voice. “I have those outside investments in real estate and shipping. They give me the headaches of the rich but do little better than break even so in a way I guess I am. I managed to get myself a nice dwelling in the process, that's really the best I've done. It barely all pays for itself these days.” He stopped himself. He was going to babble on with random excuses wasn't he?

“I guess I really don't know what I would do with it

either,” Ava mused about wealth. “The only investments I have are the products I helped develop. It gives me a modest living for as long as they are still in production.”

“But you grew up rich?” Kulai asked, unsure of who she was at this point. She had always seemed too normal to really be Yingolian, maybe she now identified herself as the girl who O.D.d?

“I wasn’t her. I can’t imagine her life. You were there for the transfer, you know who I am. I first grew up in an abandoned concrete parking garage that my dad had planked in,” her eyes went that far away and she stared thru his procedure schedule that was hanging on the wall opposite her. “It was in a city in Virginia that was abandoned with Washington.”

“Yes,” he said. That confirmed that she had no confusion about her origin. Though she might deny it to some others, she still considered herself Yingolian. “I always found it intriguing, though we’ve never actually talked about it. What I remember thinking about you is how remarkably normal you seem for someone from that far away and different a culture.” He was eager to get the conversation away from his finances. “I once met a guy from Lumpral, you’re much more mainstream than he was.”

“But I’ve been here twenty decades.”

“But I had those thoughts when you had been here less than ten years, it was that time we talked before the Brazilians landed, and the guy I knew from Lumpral had been here for the best part of four decades already.”

“In that case, I don’t think land of origin was the cause.”

“No, he wouldn’t have been much different if he grew up in a religious family at YingolNeerie from what I can see. But let me ask, would you have been as beautiful if you’d brought your flesh from YingolNeerie?”

She smiled about that, and he began to hope she might thaw. “Possibly, but probably not. I would have succumbed to the poverty and diseases in my homeland.”

“How is that?” Kulai asked.

“The common people were abandoned by our civilization, let’s see, over forty decades before my time. Life was bare survival. My mom had a serving job, that was our only income. By the time she was thirty five, almost ten decades, she was already starting to sag.”

“I guess I’m glad you didn’t bring that flesh. You look remarkably better than you did when you were brought in, did I get to tell you that back in Knmonawweep?”

“Thanks,” Ava said, “but it must be from lack of trying because I really don’t devote as much effort to it as I should.”

He worried that he was asking too soon, but liked how this was going. “Seeing as it’s now late in the day, I would be glad to help you in that cause by providing a little nutrition. Would you care to join me for darkmeal?” She didn’t answer right away, but looked at him carefully. No doubt she was considering where this would lead. His excitement grew. He was as excited to spend time with her, as he was worried by her interrogations. He knew she was an intelligent woman who’s company he would enjoy, but he also worried about her motives. He would have to be on his guard.

“Actually, that’s probably a good idea,” she said after her

pause. "I'll just stew if I eat by myself."

"The hour is late."

"You want to go now?"

"Sorry," he said, "I was factoring in the hour it takes to get to my home."

"Where's that?"

"It's back of the far side of Third Canal about two and a half miles up, but we needn't go there, it's just habitual thinking on my part."

"It's a nice neighborhood," she said.

"Where are you staying?"

"In a temporary cubbie in the pyramid that I never cleaned out when I went north," Ava answered. "It's good enough for now."

"I can offer you accommodations."

"Let's get acquainted first," Ava said.

"I have vacant rooms," Kulai said. There had been rumors that the Yingolian scientist was rather reserved. Her courtship with the Brazilian back in those days had been a spectacle. "I can take you to darkmeal and offer you accommodations and not expect sexual favors in return," he said.

"So think of it as a business dinner?" Ava asked.

He wondered if he detected a trace of disappointment in her voice. No matter what their culture, he was sure she would want to feel she was attractive, even if she was Yingolian, even if she was the founder of a study. "It is my hope that you would not," he said. "I was thinking of you at the rail of my porch on the eleventh floor on Third,

overlooking the candles of the yacht basin. I was picturing you for coated karga strips on seasoned greens.”

“Depends on the coating,” she said with a grin.

“A thick sweat and sour, more bronze than orange.”

“I could do that, but let me go get a fur or something, this knit isn’t enough for darkmeal outdoors,” she stood up.

“The shamen have predicted a late freeze this week,” he said, “and I do have a foot warmer under that table. I have a few things to put away, where should I meet you?”

“Give me twenty minutes to get to elevator lobby Viggen Fifteen on the Third Canal level. If you’ve got dinner, I’ll get us on a public and we’ll get there in less than half an hour.”

The evening and Dawnsleep were superb. He’d been fascinated by her for decades and had dreamed at times of encountering her socially. After dinner he was glad to accompany her just for the prestige, to be seen out and about with the founder of a Study. She was a bit decorous from her Yingolian ancestry, but not excessively. He found she was very interesting. Her studies had been very theoretical and advanced. She had actually lived inside Virtuality theory for half a century in a universe of perfect magic. Besides that, she wasn’t afraid of a cup, and that helped him hold his own when talking about living inside computational devices and information theory and the inner workings of the brain. He could listen to her for years, while she lectured on so many concepts he’d never known the existence of before.

She did not interrogate him directly about how her vacant body came to wind up at the Kassikan after that, but they did

talk of those days and of her fiery courtship by the Brazilian and what the gossip rags did with it at the time. If she was working at something with her questions back at the office, it seemed like she had completely put it away for the evening and was genuinely enjoying her off-duty hours. He certainly did, in spite of worrying that she might have fooled him completely.

For the sleep she is more beautiful than she lets herself appear. She's romantic and sensual and loves to take her time letting the moment build. She is very undemanding at love. He got to ply her with soft music and let his hands linger and tease on her clear pale skin for hours. No woman had ever let him linger so in delight before needing to consummate the union. When she did she was skilled and forceful, wrapping her legs around him as he worked over her.

She clearly enjoyed the luxurious surroundings but didn't gush like a bumpkin about them. She knew some of the artists he collected, one of them personally. She could quote poetry in five languages, two of them Yingolian. She knew the breed of coriakh that provided his bed furs. By the time the new week began he thought it was a real shame they hadn't connected socially long before this.

He had Athnu bring them breakfast on the turret porch, again overlooking the yacht basin, but this time the boats were brightly lit by the sun of the new week. It was still a bit chilly and she was still wrapped in fur, but the lemon drop tea that she was holding would warm her. "The sun won't reach us for over an hour," he said as he sat up from lighting the

foot-warmer.

“I’m fine,” she said, “very fine. Did I tell you this place is fabulous.” she laughed, she had mentioned it several times already.

“I just hope you’re comfortable.”

“He should have stayed and had breakfast with us,” Ava said about Athnu.

“Not on a first date,” Kulai said. “Maybe once you’ve lived here a year or so...”

“A year?”

“Whatever. Athnu is not the jolliest person I know,” Kulai said, “But he is too conscientious to pass up.”

“Just so he knows I don’t look down on him.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t, he’s disappeared because we’re still on a romantic interlude.”

“This is very romantic, you really know how to pamper a girl. A never even knew position existed, much less how the matches are scored.”

They had wandered by a performance after dinner, some of the men in both the troops were quite built, although he thought the women on the losing team were actually prettier. “There’s a whole circuit,” he told her. “I think there are eighteen theaters holding matches in the extended Yakhan area.”

“And this is so good,” she held up a fruitbread strip.

“We don’t make those, there’s a shop on the back canal.” He pointed to the back way out of the yacht basin that lead to a small lock and residential canal.

“Nice neighborhood,” she said.

“Then please, come enjoy it often,” Kulai implored.

She looked at him, got serious. “I really think I will,” she said. “This encounter is a little strange because we’ve actually known each other over twenty decades, but we never really knew each other.”

“We don’t really know each other yet,” he said. “Give us a few decades together and see if we still think we knew each other after one sleep.”

“No, but what I’m trying to say is, you’re not the same Kulai I met in the office.”

“Actually I am,” he said, “I’m just not dressed for it.” He had only his quilt around him.

“I never thought of you this way.”

He reached out to her. “Thank you,” he said, “for thinking of me this way now.”

“I’ve got things to do today, but where will you be later?” she asked.

“I’ve got some business arrangements to tend to, but I usually do noonmeal at Ziadrake’s, but there is often a business discussion, in case you don’t want to sit thru that.”

“You’re at your Kassikan office every Nightday, right?”

“Yeah,” Kulai said.

“So if I don’t make it to Ziadrakes, I’ll catch up with you at your office next week.”

“After one sleep together,” he said, “I’m reluctant to wait a whole week before spending another with you.”

“Scary isn’t it?” she said. “When we were both right here.

But I have things I have to do, some more people I want to see. When we're together I'm not doing much to track down who had what to do with Tdeshi's demise."

"Ah yes, and I also have a cargo operation I should be taking an interest in today. I'm sure Athnu has a long list of things for my consideration."

"I picture him in the downstairs office tapping his foot."

Kulai laughed quite loudly. "While I while away the hours with a beautiful and intelligent woman."

"Lazy playboy that you are."

"It doesn't take you long to figure us out does it?" he laughed.

"It's a common dynamic."

"So you've exposed us for the common folk that we are."

She laughed. "Yes," she said when she stopped, "I'm quite comfortable here. Too comfortable." She stood up, started getting her things together, stuffed the night fur in her bag. "So if not noonmeal at Ziadrales, we'll decide on darkmeal at your Kassikan office sometime before you leave."

4. Tdeshi's Boyfriend

It was an hour after Ava left when he finally got down to the business office. "There's a gentleman upstairs who want's to see you," Athnu said. "His excuse is the back doors of the Kassikan. He's a country man by the looks of him, but he's

got new sandals and cape.”

“Kassikan business?” Kulai asked. He was looking at the notes that had accumulated on this desk. More requests for reports on Ava’s body had come in from other committees, he could be a new-hire on a foot-mission to hand-deliver another.

““More personal than Kassikan, if anything,” he said. He’s no one I’ve seen before. He called once while you were at breakfast and he’s been back quite a few minutes,” Athnu added.

Kulai figured it was just some salesman or messenger but trudged up the stairs to the front office. “Sorry,” he said as he entered, “Sometimes the staff can be quite obtuse.” He sat across from him and recognized the man who had run from Ava. “So; weren’t you at my office with Ava three weeks ago?”

“Yes, that was me. I was there with Ava investigating what happened to Tdeshi, the victim of the shonggot. The former inhabitant of that body.”

“Oh yes, Jorma.” He had to apologize to this man also didn’t he. “I’m sorry I let something slip that I shouldn’t have. You were quite distressed when you left my office. Are you all right now?”

“I’ve come to grips with it. I still shudder at the thought of making love to an electric ghost.”

“Oh?” Kulai said, trying not to laugh out loud over all the pleasure he’d just had making love to her. He might agree to calling her an Angel, but she certainly was no ghost. He had to defend her in a way that didn’t dishonor her. “I thought she

was quite attractive from the start and was just remarking to her yesterday how she's become more attractive now."

Jorma wanted to argue that, went right to his nemesis. "Enjteen has some interesting things to say about your relationship with Tdeshi before Ava was transferred."

Why did this man also have to find Enjteen? Why not let him work to spread his vitriol? Why did the trouble with him have to happen now when this old issue was being re-turned? That gave him the opportunity to whine about the fate he made for himself. "If you mean he caught me probing her genitals, it's part of my job, I'm sorry if immature people watch and then have to go beat off about it, but I'm required to make a thorough examination and that is part of it. I have to do it to males also, luckily Enjteen never walked in on me then or he have even more colorful stories to tell," Kulai chuckled.

"He said it was more than that, but I understand what you mean about Enjteen. He might have exaggerated a little."

"What did he say anyway, it's interesting to see how this story evolves over the years."

"He said he saw you getting up off her and tying your pants."

"Pppp." Kulai said. Enjteen had warped it in his mind. That was Harsnon. When he was poor Kulai used to let him feed his fetish for a copper a girl, in the days before the starship. That was different girls, decades before Tdeshi. He didn't know which one Enjteen had seen. "Still; that's the way he's been telling it most of this decade. He's whispered that in the ear of most other committeemen by now, we

sometimes compare notes. Enjteen is amusing to us.”

“So this is not news to you?”

“That he tells that story? No. He tried to blackmail me with it the week you got into town.”

“You know when we got here?”

“Enjteen knew before you got here. He’s kept a detective on Ava since she woke up and walked away from his watch.”

Jorma was hurled back by the revelation of even that much, he wouldn’t want to know they’d been interviewed while still on the boat. “What can he do?” Jorma asked.

“What can anyone do who desires to be vile?” Kulai answered. “Tell lies, mislead people, give false information, try to start suspicion.”

“What’s his motive?” Jorma asked.

“What he was blackmailing me for was to get me to assign him to shift coverage with the women of his choice, even if a woman had already asked me not to assign Enjteen and her together.”

“I see.”

“Our mothers are friends,” Kulai said, “Perhaps you’ll go talk to them. They’ll tell you I covered up for Enjteen way too long. They used to get on my case about it, but they might not say that to a stranger.”

“Where do they live?” Jorma asked, prepared to write down the answer.

“Enjteen’s mother lives with him, twenty floors deep under the east wing of the pyramid, mine lives just outside the Old Baginzike Gate of the Kassikan, down on level minus

twenty three. She has a roof garden that theoretically has a view of the sky thru the trees. She does see natural light however.”

“Why don’t you move her up here?”

“Because then she and Enjteen’s mother couldn’t visit any more, not like she does now, a couple times a week.”

“Is it that close?”

“Six floors and four hundred feet.”

“I didn’t know Enjteen was that close to the wall.”

“The base of the pyramid soars about three hundred fifty feet over my mother’s neighborhood. Old Baginzike Gate is shaded by the pyramid’s base. Enjteen’s place is just inside the wall, built when it was much lower than it is today. It seems to be inside the pyramid because he’s so close to stairway 01,32. That stairway does go down a ways beyond Enjteen’s place into the back of Dormant Records.”

“I’m not familiar with the layout of the Kassikan,” Jorma told him. “You know about two of the three trips I’ve made into it, your office and Enjteen’s place. If it weren’t for the maps I could have never found Enjteen’s place. To be honest, I was in a daze at that time. I was still in shock from finding out that Ava was the Yingolian ghost.”

“I can see how that would be a shock,” Kulai said. When Jorma did not reply he said, “I’ve just had breakfast, but can I get you something, a tea? a bit of yellow?”

“I’ll have something when you get something for yourself,” Jorma answered.

“So I was told you came here for some advice on finding your way around. Finding your way to the truth about

Tdeshi?”

“Yes.”

“Ava looked into it from this end very seriously a few years after she got here, Enjteen knew about that and spared no effort in telling me everything she learned.”

“So what was that?” Jorma asked.

“Nothing much,” He told the tale from the Kassikan’s side, how her body had been found unconscious on a needleboat, how she was brought to the clinic. He could see that Jorma already knew all this. He had to, he had been with Ava and she knew all that. A lot of what Kulai knew was what Ava told him.

“So how often do you get cases of shonggot?” Jorma asked.

“Only a few for those decades while they were trying to get Ava down. None before, none since.”

“Why is that?”

“Never had a personality to load in place of the victim’s before I guess.”

“Couldn’t they just do an RNAcid of someone’s life?” Jorma asked.

“They could give the memories to shonggot victims, that’s one of the things they tried back in the late 40’s. It didn’t work. They could see the memories in there with a helmet, but the victim wouldn’t animate.”

“They aren’t trying anything else with the victims?” Jorma asked.

“I do have important responsibilities in the care of the

bodies for these endeavors, but I'm hardly the one writing the cases. All I got was a note saying there was a need for a shonggot victim fitting this description and one had been found. She was brought by needleboat from North Treeland somewhere. That was where she boarded the local that she was found on."

"So there was a description of the person to be found?" Jorma asked.

"Yeah, tall, long dark brown hair, oval face. The girl they brought in is Ava, Tdeshi if you prefer. She looks like Wood Elf stock if you ask me, maybe a bit of Highland."

"She is, but her ancestry is from South Salvador, really just the northern family of Wood Elf peoples." Jorma told him. "Her father was named Leand. Leand took me ashore when I washed up in Sinbara harbor."

Kulai would never see either of them, though they sounded important to Jorma. "So how long did you know Tdeshi?"

"Like I said, since she was born, Tdeshi was the last three decades of the thirty four I knew Leand."

"Until when?" Kulai asked.

"Until she came down here to the Yakhan, twenty one decades ago."

"When she abandoned her body to Ava?" Kulai was beginning to get the feel of Jorma's connection to all this. It really wasn't Ava that he was here with, it was Tdeshi. Ava was just in Tdeshi's body lately. In Jorma's mind, Tdeshi had been in that body until just a couple years ago.

"Right." Jorma drew a breath. "I knew her all her life, not

even four decades. All but the last few days or weeks of her time down here she was in a house and school up beyond Chardovia, but she wasn't there much over twenty years. I'm just trying to find out what happened to her because her father will want to know."

This man was no competitor for Ava was he? Kulai was sympathetic to his plight, his long lost love was dead, even though her body lived on. "She erased herself somehow, we know that," Kulai said.

"How much does your lab know about the effects of shonggot?"

"Way more than I do. I can supervise those who gather samples, and care for coma patients, though lately my work has more to do with writing specifications for taking the samples and reporting on how they're doing."

"How firm is the theory for saying the mind is erased?"

"You could take a few classes in it, but from what I know, pretty firm."

"What do you know?"

"Alhart himself said she was erased."

"Do you know how he knew?"

This man was asking him things very close to his oaths to the Kassikan about secrecy. It was known by the general public, that there were public helmets at the Kassikan, by that he meant helmets the public knew about, not helmets the public could use. The public did not know of the helmet that brought Ava into Tdeshi's flesh, but he didn't have to divulge which helmet. "Oh I knew he was going to look around with a helmet even before the team brought her in, if someone

comatose gets here, someone almost always does a helmet scan. In this case I'm told Althart did it himself, finding a body for Ava was his pet project at the time."

"And what does a helmet scan tell you?"

"They've asked me not to actually talk about it, so please try and respect the confidentiality of what I'm telling you."

"I'm not asking you to break any oaths or anything like that."

"No, no," Kulai said, "I know where you're coming from, your best friend's daughter. A mind-link helmet lets you see into the other person's mind, see what the other person sees." He wanted to deflect as much suspicion as he could. "I want to help any way I can but please remember this information is confidential and don't act like Enjteen. Just what is it you want to know?"

"Why she took it, if she took it knowingly, and where she got it."

"The shonggot?" Kulai asked.

"Of course."

"And who do you think could have the answer to that?"

"I'm not sure," Jorma said, "Maybe Tdeshi never even knew. Maybe she never even knew she was given it?"

He was making the accusation that Tdeshi's death wasn't self-inflicted wasn't he? Kulai realized he had to be careful what he said or there could be a lot more trouble about this than he wanted to deal with. He was not on duty at the Kassikan, he was not on Kassikan property, but in a sense he was a spokesman for the Kassikan in this wasn't he? "I know of no way to get farther back than when that boatman from

North Shore Canal noticed she wasn't getting off," Kulai said and that was solid truth.

"The story of Tdeshi's last boat ride, how did that get to you?"

"I heard it from everyone."

"Who was there?" Jorma asked.

"From the needleboat tender to the check-in assistant. Ava investigated it thoroughly."

"Would they have all heard it from this crew that went out to get her? When did they leave?"

As long as he stuck to the public record, he wasn't betraying the Kassikan's trust. "The sequence of events started with the Kassikan sending her description and photo to medical people all over the urban area. Next, about fifteen weeks later, there was an eye message from Physician Karteng up in North Treeland Lagoon of a comatose person matching the description. I got that early in the day the needleboat went out after them."

There was no doubt in his mind that Jorma was conducting an interrogation when he next asked, "Do you have any idea how many shonggot victims there are every year?"

"Not really. Being in this line of work, I hear of one every year or two, now that I pay attention, but I wouldn't have heard of Tdeshi if we weren't trying to find a body for Ava."

"What happens to the other victims? Those that weren't given to ghosts."

Kulai described their bleak prospects as politely as he could. He was sympathetic to the plight of his best friend's

daughter, but he wasn't going to lie when this man might be making important accusations that would make him have to fill out even more extra reports. He didn't like that those events happened so far in the past, during a time he would just as soon leave forgotten.

This rugged Northlander had a hard time absorbing just how deadly a drug his old girlfriend had been involved with. As he struggled over that, he asked, "Does the Yakhan ever make shonggot?"

"That's written down, the last official batch was made in 40,02,25. The vial is still five sixths full, it's inventoried every decade even though I'm sure it broke down at least thirteen centuries ago. That kind of detailed oversight is the boredom I sit thru every day."

"You are sure it didn't come from the University's vial?"

Jorma seemed to be accusing the university of poisoning her. He was sure it didn't come from that vial. "Yep, it's been inventoried twice since then. It's so much easier to get in novice dorm hallways than in our vaults anyway. There are students who have it, even now. The Kassikan has monuments up about the dangers in several courtyards, including Healer's Court because of Olveki."

"I saw a picture of his statue when I first looked up 'shonggot'." Jorma said, admitting he was testing him. "I know how the dosage limits are counted in cells. You need fifty to a hundred cells for a measurable effect, eighteen hundred is about the number you need to erase the mind. The average dilution aims to get two hundred to two hundred fifty in a drop.

“But let me ask you something about a different subject related to the university. Have there been any on the faculty or staff that have actually died in the last century from any cause?”

If the Kassikan was involved in something sinister regarding Tdeshi's fate and Kulai knew about it, didn't this man understand he would certainly lie? What sense did this questioning make? “In the last century?” Kulai asked while he strove to understand the real meaning of this question. He knew of no involvement so what sense would it make to lie?

“Yeah, from any cause.”

“There was Decallu, he went down with the Windskater back in the 55,40's. There were two guys on a facilities crew who were killed near the turn of the century when they forgot a few straps on their scaffolding. Tinothere's son O.D.d on Norrot just a couple decades ago. I might be able to think of a few others but there are records. I know far less than one percent of the staff however and probably hear about less than a tenth of the deaths.”

“Could anyone in the Kassikan know if anyone in the Kassikan died?” Jorma asked, looking deep in his eyes.

He looked back at ease. “Of course not.” Jorma had to give that up. Jorma didn't understand the size of the Kassikan. Ava had told him this campus was many times the size of his home town. “We can find out if we know a name, unless it was someone important and they didn't want it known.” He guessed that was what he was really asking. Jorma might view Kulai as his deepest source in the Kassikan. “Anyone who didn't read the campus news would

never know unless it was someone they knew personally. I pay attention to the news because deaths are something I may, unfortunately, have to deal with. Also; if it was some little Gnome in a counting room thirty stories down who left no one, very few would hear of it.” They might never even find the body before the wevn ate it in fact, but Jorma had a dark enough view of the Kassikan already and didn’t need to know everything that happened in the Gnome levels.

Once again Jorma seemed to be making mental notes, going on to the next question in an interrogation checklist he had memorized. “So how did you happen to get such a nice place?”

“I have some outside interests,” he said, trying to cover up his nervousness. He was ready for it this time. He guessed Jorma was probing at random as Ava had.

“So the Kassikan isn’t your only income?”

“It’s closer to volunteer work,” he tried to joke, “but I learn a lot that applies outside.”

“But that has nothing to do with shonggot?”

“No, I have some real estate, do some advising, some scavenging, dabble in some cargo here and there, that kind of thing.”

“What kind of cargo?”

He had had enough of this. If he was going to be interrogated, he was going to get it out in the open. “Jorma, you sound suspicious,” he smiled, knowing innocence would disarm in this situation. “Really, let’s go look at my books if you’d like. I’ll show you anything you want to see. My last deal was five tons of textbooks, I sent them off to Lasnar

because I know there's lots of children there this past century. I made thirty one coppers profit on that, I'm proud to say, one of the best deals I've made this decade and too new for those outside my organization to have counted in my income. Of course if I had waited to sell the property I used to buy that cargo I might have made a whole aluminum, but I'm happier with half of one in my pouch than a whole one in my might have been's. I did a shipment of lowland thesh before that, as I remember, I made about an iron or two a day for the labor I put into that deal."

"What involvement do you have with shonggot?"

"I learned about it because of the patients I've had to care for, especially Ava and all Tdeshi's predecessors as they researched the project. She's really the only involvement I've ever had with it. I've never met anyone who even used it once, nor have I seen it myself, even on my job at the Kassikan. I haven't had any involvement." He was totally at ease with this and glad Jorma moved to questioning him about shonggot instead of money.

"I'm really sorry to crowd you about this, for her father's piece of mind, I want to find out how she got that shit and why she took it."

"I see that, I'd like to help you, but the only one of them I ever knew was Ava and I only met her briefly on a very few occasions until yesterday. I'm afraid you'll have to approach Tdeshi from your end."

"Do you know if she has any student records here?"

"You can access that from any help desk. You'll find the people there are helpful and more knowledgeable about

student records than I am. I actually can't get at that data from here."

"The kiosks do not show her," Jorma admitted.

"Then there is no record unless it's someone's handwritten note and you'll have to go see the Gnomes about that. I have no knowledge of her before she was brought in."

Jorma paused, tried a different line of questioning. "This description of her, where did that come from?"

"From her," Kulai told him. "Actually, she appeared in the eyes even before the new manufacture. Many had seen her, but I was not one of them. There were pictures in the messages sent out but I didn't see that until after she came in."

"Was there a reward?"

"Yes, the Kassikan would take the shonggot patient off your hands and pay your expenses."

"No questions asked?" Jorma probed.

"All questions asked," Kulai replied. "There was a very thorough official investigation when she was brought in. If you think it would help you I would be glad to show you everything we wrote down about it. Every early interview with Ava was transcribed. There's a recording of Althart's original helmet probe that I can get you an RNAcid of if you'd like. I would be breaking an oath, but I could sneak one out as a favor."

"Would I learn anything from it?"

"About what happened to Tdeshi?" Kulai asked.

"Yes," Jorma answered.

“No. You cannot learn anything from this side about any of Tdeshi’s specific events. The helmet probe noted that the size and power of her mind was impressive, but there was nothing written there yet.” If he thought his one country butt walking around questioning people was going to learn what the founders couldn’t learn when the case was fresh, he was seriously out of touch. He tried to steer him in the right direction, “What leads do you have from the other end?”

“She was living with a guy named Hyondahi in a place a few miles down-lake of Chardovia.”

“Have you been there?” trying to get him to the Tdeshi end.

“That’s how we found out as much as we have, all we had to start with was the address of a house with not one person from that time now resident. There’s one named Yorthops somewhere in the city for another year or two, but I haven’t run into her.”

“Look her up at a kiosk also, you never know until you try.”

“Do you...”

“Back at the office.”

“It was rude of me to barge in on you like this...”

“Not if you lighten up and share a bottle with this old Gnome-herder here in the sunshine.” Kulai swung to his feet and ducked into the kitchen. From there he called, “I’m really with you on this all the way, I’d love to know what happened to her myself. If there’s any information on this I have access to, let’s go at it. I tried my best to help Ava with her investigation back when this was all twenty decades more

current, but a fresh pair of eyes couldn't hurt." Kulai returned with an ornate bottle of a clear liquid.

"Is this yaag or lantern fuel?" Jorma asked.

"Actually the color of yaag comes from a pigment that the plant produces, the chlorophyll, the purified cannaboloid is actually a clear liquid to which a little grain alcohol is added as a vehicle."

"DON'T chug-a-lug."

"Unless you want to become part of the upholstery for the next few weeks," Kulai admitted.

Jorma took a taste and Kulai took a swallow and relaxed a little. He knew he still had to be careful. Kulai passed the bottle back but Jorma declined. "I want to see how that first dab hits me before I take another swallow."

"The potency just compliments the potency of the alcohol, you're going to get as stoned as you are drunk."

Jorma took a real sip.

Kulai took another taste. "So you were really in love with Tdeshi weren't you?" Kulai asked.

That made him think harder than Kulai thought it would. "Yeah, for a little while. For a little while longer and until a few weeks ago I was actually in love with Ava. Can you believe it, I was in love with an electric ghost! Maybe even more than I was with Tdeshi, in spite of her luke warm body." Kulai let him continue and tried to keep the cat's-grin off his face. Jorma obviously had no idea how to play the musical instrument that electric ghost made of that body today. "We thought of Tdeshi as her mother," Jorma rambled, "we were going to investigate her together. Then I used the wrong

pronoun once too many times and she moved into a different cabin. We were still on the ship coming down here when that happened and I've hardly been with her since."

"She's still investigating," Kulai said, "In fact she's making waves many floors up. I've had to fill out reports for seven or eight committees already, and she's recently questioned me at length also."

"How high up does she go?"

Ava had kept a lot of her life from this man, but then he was Tdeshi's lover, not hers wasn't he? "To the top, she knows the founders. She's known them by helmet since the 55th." He didn't say the words, 'since she was a ghost,' but he heard them anyway and winced.

"What fuss is she making?" Jorma asked.

"Same one you are, but a little more polite about it."

"What's she saying?" Jorma asked, not changing his tone. This would just have to get more confrontational wouldn't it?

"That there are people, she mentioned you, who believe the Kassikan sent a team out to get her, that she was dosed with shonggot and then collected because she looked like the picture Ava gave them."

"And you think I'm accusing you of that?"

"I hope you're not accusing me personally. It seemed more like you were going after the boat crew," Kulai said.

"You don't think they might have done such a thing?"

"I think the whole idea is preposterous. There are hundreds of people more likely to have done it, if it was done and I think it wasn't. I think you are more likely to have had

something to do with her demise than any one of them.”

He was struck by that but tried to ignore it. “There are some at the Kassikan who predate the Instinct,” Jorma told him.

“They caught it the same time everyone else did. Do you think they don’t get around? Ava and Althart were an item for awhile.” Not that it even mattered, the vector for the Instinct was airborne, though Jorma must not know that.

“No wonder she had influence,” Jorma said.

“It was just how closely they were working together. A man and a woman in each other’s company that much are going to have to get together or insult each other after awhile. That was decades ago, I doubt that they’re an item again, maybe they are. I hear rumors that someone thinks he might be in on it, if anything did happen to Tdeshi. I think she suspects the boat crew also, but that’s my judgment of the rumors I’ve heard.”

“Do you know the boat crew?” Jorma asked.

“I know one of them well, B’theen,” Kulai responded, “but he will not be accused of such a thing in my presence because I count him as a friend.”

“But could he provide me with something about the neighborhood at that time?”

“The address where she was picked up would do you just as much good.”

“I’m trying to determine if it was an area where she might have gone to pick up the shonggot.”

“I would think that the fact that she was found wiped by it while she was there would be conclusive enough evidence.”

“I’d like to find out what the actual transaction was.”

“After twenty decades?” What was this bumpkin thinking? Ava didn’t find a wisp of a trail a few years after the event, neither did Internal Investigations. What did he think he could find now?

“Don’t be the five hundredth person who’s told me I should have come down on this investigation earlier,” he said.

“Yes I will,” trying not to snort. “You were in love with Tdeshi, she disappeared twenty decades ago. A slacker working for me was supposed to be watching her when she awoke as Ava, that’s how she entered my life, already Ava.

“Why didn’t you come and investigate Tdeshi then?” Kulai continued, “If the Gods were cruel, you would have come down to investigate during the middle of the Brazilian landing just ten years later, things were way too hectic then and I was flat on my back with disease for weeks.”

“But you’re still tender about Enjteen letting Ava wake up alone?”

“Yes. As you’ve noticed, my position at the Yakhan is no longer my main financial interest, but I still take the responsibility just as seriously. Even to the point where my knowledge of my competition’s prices have allowed me to tell the purchasing committee and let them get a better price than I could give them while I went back to the people I deal with on my own time to find a way to beat it.”

“How honest.”

“If you’re not playing fair, you are unfairly dominating a fellow human.”

“And on that you’ve already been promoted twice in the

Kassikan and you're younger than I am?" Jorma asked.

"Because that is what the Kassikan is looking for." He was more sure of that than he was of himself. He had always acted like he fully supported the Kassikan, and since the landing it wasn't just an act. He had been noticed for that, even though he had never been close friends with the committees he reported to.

Jorma clearly disagreed and thought Kulai was just shilling, but didn't argue that point now. "So is Ava causing you any trouble?" he asked.

"No, not really. Extra work, but no trouble. The interview was lengthy but quite cordial." He couldn't fully suppress a grin. "I went thru all the trouble when she woke up by herself. I know she says she thought she woke up running from death, but when she first came over, she thought she was in one of those things they used to sell that you could play on a screen with a cursor key. She ran thru the halls of the lower labs in a panic until she burst into the Helmet Room and someone caught her. She thought she was stuck in a screen game until they got her calmed down. She didn't start pretending she wasn't the Yingolian until she left the Kassikan."

"How well did you know her?" Jorma asked.

"Personally?"

"Yeah."

"Hardly at all, until she came down and questioned me this last time." Kulai answered. He wasn't going to talk of the delights of the last sleep with her previous lover, he already understood a lot of Ava's need for privacy. "We spoke a few times, never about personal lives. I knew more about her

personal life from cheap-paper media rags than conversation.” They probably had a lot to do with her need for privacy. “I never had any reason to think she was abnormal any time I’ve had to deal with her.”

“Did you ever talk about what it was like to be an electric ghost?” Jorma asked. He was clearly still troubled by that concept. He might also be interested in how personal he and Ava had become.

“No, but I read her book, it was done under the nom de plume of Consultant Bancour and she won’t admit to being the person that wrote it in public. She says you have perfect magic all the times and you can never get it out of your mind that it isn’t real.”

“I guess I can see some wisdom in that, but I think you would be more like a recording, pretty much the same thing over and over, like it was all the same day.”

“Isn’t there a lot of that in life already?” Kulai asked. “Since ephemerality and garden pests were conquered, boredom has been the greatest scourge of mankind. Neither scientists nor philosophers can prove we aren’t in the same kind of thing ourselves.”

He had the feeling a lot of the conversation from there on was over this guy’s head, but then he didn’t force the syrup down his throat. He couldn’t really imagine Ava falling for this guy in a big way, but then he hadn’t understood what she saw in that Brazilian either. Maybe if he had moved faster all those decades ago? But he wasn’t sure enough of himself then was he? He couldn’t get rid of Jorma until after lunch, but

once he was fed he was soon out the door.

He was getting a little worried about all the interest in Ava's body that was getting stirred up. Not because of interest in that body per-se, he just didn't want so much interest in that time. When he was a shift foreman like he was in those days, signing something out of stores or letting an influential person make use of a body was not as great a disaster as it would be in his present position. The fact that he had been by the book for twenty decades would make no difference to whoever was digging in those records.

After lunch, as he stood there watching Jorma leave, he noticed a thin man in a baggy bigshirt walking behind him, paying a lot more attention than one male should pay to another. He knew Jorma was a forceful guy who would not have any trouble fending off unwanted homosexual advances, if that was the guy's intent.

But what if he had something to do with what Jorma was doing and saying? Jorma was making some very damning comments about some very important people. People who could afford to tail everyone involved, including himself.

5. Falling for Ava

He was actually all anticipation at Ziadrales, to the point where B'theen noticed. He brought a new boyfriend with him named Illick for Kulai to meet. They were in their initial crush and engaging in lots of petting. Kulai talked of Ava, hoped she would come by. She did not however. It was the

week that went by before he saw her again.

She walked into his office about an hour early, already dressed for darkmeal. She was excited with the things she'd found out about Tdeshi, mainly that someone was probably lying about being her supplier. Unfortunately it was some guy up beyond Chardovia and she was reluctant to go back up there and chase that down so soon. She wanted to find out more about Tdeshi's end, but didn't interrogate him this week. Instead she wanted to go to a dinner movie about halfway to his place from the Kassikan. She waited while he finished up. He'd been untangling some container records this week. If nothing else he had to note where he left off. It took him a good hour by the time he could lock the door. She looked at the names of his reference texts and generally stayed out of his way. If she was still active in her posts, she would never have the time to do this. In those days there were people following her around anywhere she went as she rushed from one meeting or lecture to another.

She was the right height for him to walk with, but was decorous when people were watching. He didn't mind because she was very pleasant while they were discreet and that seemed to make it a bit more exciting. There were nine cooks and a house dinnerware crew at the dinner-screen. They each got a different flavor of stewed zhlindu roll from the same cook. The cook called himself Alan, but Ava said he was not their Alan, not that any of that made any sense to him.

The movie was a detective thriller where the intrepid and busty blond heroine tracks down the missing drawings for

next year's releases for a major fashion house. It was full of climbing across deep urban canyons on hand-thrown ropes in the dark.

"Can you picture yourself doing this?" Kulai asked her, keeping his voice low because the tables were rather close.

"No, if I was going to learn any investigative pointers from this movie it would be about how to know what cases not to take." She sucked in her breath sharply because the heroine's grappling hook had slipped off the larorlie root and she had started to drop. Of course the hook caught on the crystal porch rail one floor down, she was nearly dropped from the rope and hung by one hand for a few seconds.

"Don't take the ones where you have to shimmy across a rope seventy stories up," Kulai said.

"Take the ones where you interview strange or delightful people in comfortable surroundings," she said and touched his thigh.

"But they won't make a movie of that."

"I'd much rather watch the movie than make the movie," Ava said. "I want to find out how Tdeshi ended without having dangerous and strenuous adventures in the process."

"So your investigations have been comfortable?" he asked.

"Well, I have had more sex than I'm accustomed to."

"I understand," Kulai said, "and I meant what I said, Darkmeal does not..."

"It better," Ava's whisper was almost fierce. "I fear investigating her has caused Tdeshi's hormones to take control of me." She pressed his arm to her bosom, even

though people could have seen if they were looking. He already understood that was daring for a Yingolian. “Jorma assured me that daily use has no ill effects on the nether end of my body, and I’ve been thinking of nothing but, ‘if not noonmeal, darkmeal’ since I got up.”

“You are certainly welcome of course,” Kulai said, “but if the time should come, your friendship is welcome without condition. Whatever moments you give me I will treasure.”

They went back to the movie. Afterward they strolled a residential connector on the seventeenth floor on the way to his place. “So if I understood your excited recitation earlier, you now need to go back to the north cities to find Tdeshi’s supplier.”

“Someone’s lying,” Ava said, “I know that now, and I don’t think it was Yorthops.”

“Unless she was the supplier,” Kulai said.

“Why would you say that, you’ve never met her have you?”

“Of course not, it is simply because we have one lie and two people. You need more data than that to draw a valid conclusion. Don’t tell me you aren’t familiar with liar logic?”

“What logic is lying?” Ava asked.

“There is a whole Study at the Kassikan related to nothing but the mathematical analysis of lies.”

“I missed that, is it in Math?” she asked.

“Yes, it reports to Math thru Combinatorial Logic and also reports to Sociopathology.”

“I should have known about it.”

They strolled a few more steps, there were people, steps and bridges to deal with.

“I’ll miss you when you go north,” he said.

“It won’t be right away and it won’t be for that long, I have a few more things I want to look into from this side first.”

“Like what?”

“I want to look up one of the people at the clinic where she was taken.” He noticed she was looking around to see who was nearby. “I’d like to use the name ‘Tdeshi’ on her and watch how she reacts.”

“Is that what you did with me?” he asked.

“Jorma,” she said. “Jorma did that. I would have used the name on the boat crew, and I may do that yet, but of course, it could have gotten to them by now.”

“Few have heard the name.”

“No more than a few hundred. Dozens of people Jorma and I’ve talked to. The Gnomes know. We’ve been talking to people all over the urban complex about this for five weeks now.”

He saw her point. “Yeah, the name has probably lost it’s surprise value.”

“We found that she had already changed her name to Teshi before she O.D.d.”

“That will lower the surprise value of Tdeshi even more.”

“Delurna from Internal Investigations knows it,” Ava said.

“How would he know that?”

“I told him.”

“When?” Kulai asked.

“I was the first one he spoke with when the Internal Investigations started their own probe into what happened.”

“Don’t go getting yourself in trouble.”

“Me?” Ava asked.

“I’m not kidding, you know what we talked about a couple weeks ago, how it could be Althart for all you know?”

“Yeah, we did a few cups that evening but I still remember almost all of it.”

Kulai lowered his voice even more and leaned close. “I’ve heard he was being looked at by I.I. from a couple more guys in the hall.”

“What?” She seemed genuinely surprised.

Even so, he had to remember that there was some chance she was not on his side in this, after all, she was reporting to Delurna. For all he knew she was bait for I.I. As much as he wanted to savor this social encounter, it could be all an act, he had to be careful. Still, his heart believed she was not playing games with him. Truthfully, he didn’t think she had the skill.

“Yes,” he said, “and this might be of interest to you, I was questioned at length by Jorma.”

“You’ve seen him?”

“Yes, he’s still around, he’s also still investigating Tdeshi’s end and he’s still spreading the rumor that Tdeshi’s body was taken for you.”

“What did you tell him?” Ava asked.

“Same things I’ve told you, minus the love notes. I

neglected to mention that you had just left when he showed up. He had, in fact, asked for audience while we were having breakfast, but Athnu told him I was still in bed.”

“Does he normally do that?”

“He turns away all strangers away if I’m still with the woman who shared my bed. If it’s an important associate known to us, he’ll check with me by bell and speaking tube.”

They were already on the long bridge over Third Canal. This level has mid-block streets, but they intersected indoor commercial streets at each end of the bridge and it was crowded. The bridge itself had a fine view of the busy canal but the traffic was heavy and they couldn’t loiter or even converse while crossing. He lead her to an outdoor stairway that lead down between the back walls of a couple fine homes and came out on a roof court very close to his place. This missed the crowds on the eleventh floor indoor street.

“So what has Jorma learned?” she asked him, when they could talk again.

“That Enjteen wasn’t surprised by the name Tdeshi and he’s furious over being re-assigned.”

Ava laughed.

“You found that out for yourself,” Kulai observed.

“Yeah; but I can assure you I did not get physical with him.”

“I know Gnomes gross you out. That’s something like how Jorma feels.”

There were few people out up here now, this court had only some day-cooks and vegetable sellers during the light, Nightday it was deserted but for those passing thru. They still

had a spot of single file. “About me?” she asked when they could walk side by side again.

“Sorry, but he didn’t ask me to keep that confidential.”

She made a face, but clutched his arm, “As long as you don’t feel that way.”

“Actually,” he said truthfully, “I think it’s rather exciting.”

His second sleep with Ava was better than the first. She was more open this time in letting him know what she was enjoying and what she wasn’t. She enjoyed the hands more than the tongue, and that was fine with him. She enjoyed a steaming tub both before and after, as did he. She enjoyed the feel of fine furs both before and after. A real rich man would also use fine furs during, but the cleaning staff and the wear were beyond his cash flow, and she understood that.

They made the same deal, if not noonmeal; darkmeal. He was excited to do so. He had never been social with anyone from such lofty heights of the pyramid and would have never guessed he could feel so strongly about someone like her. He wished her a profitable time investigating Tdeshi at the clinic, and warned her to be careful. She went off into Morningday traffic. He watched her go. From the fourteenth floor porch, he could see the eleventh floor courts. Even from a distance she was rather striking. The gloss of her hair was visible, and the perfect shape of her bottom. All the worlds that woman had seen didn’t show, but his mind could already call some of them up.

Then he noticed something else. The same guy that had been paying an inordinate amount of attention to Jorma as he

walked behind him, was doing the same with Ava. Not that any male walking behind Ava wouldn't pay a lot of attention, but the guy wasn't someone from the neighborhood, and he was following the second person who had just left here after talking about Tdeshi's fate.

Once again he worried about that time. He wondered who had been the source of the shonggot. Just because of all the buzzing around him, he began to entertain the notion that it just might be someone he knew. He was sure it couldn't be anyone he knew well from that time, but maybe someone on an important committee, or a friend of a friend. Back when he needed extra cash, some of his friend's friends weren't as wholesome as the people he associated with today. Some of them were powerful in their way, and some of them might be looking around for a scapegoat about now.

6. Blond Storm

He was sitting with B'theen and the guy he was dating at the mezzanine at Ziadrakes. This was only the second week and he was still loopy over the sleeps he'd spent with Ava. "She gave me a chance to really work on her," he was saying, "I think I like that. Most women are too fast for me."

"You're too modest," Illick said.

B'theen looked at him. "He's right. Kulai likes to lick 'em til they come a couple times before he lets them have any hose."

Kulai blushed. His secret was more in his fingers than his

tongue, but he'd never be able to argue that with a couple gay guys. "Her figure is not so flamboyant as some, like this one coming from your side for instance."

Illick and B'theen turned and the girl smiled and waved. "Illick, what are you doing here?" she asked.

"Just tipping a cup with a couple friends of mine," he said. "This is Bethai, she works in dispatch," Illick told them. "Come tip one with us if you've got the time," he said.

She looked at Kortrax's shadows on the residential trees, then hopped over the rail next to the side of the table he sat on. "Are you...?" she asked.

"No," he said, making room on the bench.

"He was admiring your flamboyant figure as you were walking up," Illick said.

"Oh?" she smiled and took his arm, smothering it in her ample flesh. "I like that in a guy. So what plans do you guys have for the evening?" she asked. Kulai had to admit he was an easy mark for a woman with big friendly ones and couldn't help enjoying her presence.

She made quite a bit of plans in the next forty minutes. By then Bethai was quite wrapped around him, almost sitting on his lap and had just bought the third round. It was just then that Ava showed up.

Up until then Kulai had been too distracted to notice he hadn't thought much of her since Bethai sat down with them. He hadn't noticed how friendly he was getting with Bethai and how quickly time was passing. "Ava," Kulai called and waved, suddenly feeling like he was reaching out of the sea of

Bethai's breasts like a drowning victim. "I was hoping to see you." Ava gave him quite the jaundiced eye as he said that. She had slowed in her approach. He tried to disengage himself from Bethai but it wasn't very easy.

"We're on our way to noonmeal," Bethai said to Ava in a soft stoner drawl, "want to come along?" she also reached out.

"Yes please," Kulai said, still reaching out to her.

"Actually," Ava said, "I've been busy for weeks and you look like you've got company right now," she looked pointedly at Bethai. "so I think I'm going to have a quiet evening and a long sound sleep. I had a great time yesterday, please keep in touch." She squeezed his hand at arms length once, tightly, her eyes tried to speak but couldn't, and she turned away.

"Ava, no," he pleaded. She didn't run off in tears, but her chin jutted and she strode purposefully as she disappeared down the stairs. He avoided looking at Bethai for a few seconds. He was surprised how pleasant that time with Ava had been. He felt like a low-life for being duped out of more by this sexpot. Sure this girl was sexier, but he shouldn't have let her run Ava off like that. He should have pushed her away more forcefully and said, 'make room for one of my favorite ladies.' He missed that chance. Her Yingolian sensibilities meant that he might have just broken something valuable.

"Did I get in the middle of something?" Bethai asked, seeing how he was distracted. She wasn't feigning innocence as well as a no-name actress.

"I think there was a miss-interpretation."

“Someone important?” Bethai asked.

What could Kulai say? “We spent a couple evenings together, we made only tentative arrangements for today, but she obviously misinterpreted your position.” She had her arm around him and her legs over his thigh.

“Some women are like that,” she did slide off onto the bench a little. “I’m just a cuddly person. She must be a jealous person.”

“Are you?” Kulai asked.

She laughed rather heartily. “If I’ve a fault, it’s fickle I’m afraid.”

“Thanks for the warning, I’ve just put up the shields of my soul.”

“Yes, you don’t think vulnerable people get very far do you?”

“If you’re working in the dispatch room in our dusty old shop, then you must be vulnerable.” Illick said.

A wide grin spread across her face. She blushed lightly, briefly, but said nothing.

They had noonmeal and Noonsleep and then he had Afternoonday to himself. Bethai seemed in no hurry to leave, instead she seemed to want to lounge nude in the rays on the main patio of his home, exercising her pleasure domes and idly chatting about the Starship Age. That was a pleasant change from the pop culture, sex and bodies that she had talked about all evening. Athnu made them breakfast and then took the day for himself. B’then was no doubt on his own sun porch enjoying the attentions of Illick, so he really had

nowhere better to be than satisfying Bethai's craving for tit-worship. There were any number of people in any number of apartment trees around this yacht basin who could certainly watch them, but Bethai was impossibly vain about her breasts and probably loved to have the public watch her get them exercised.

"So tell me more," she said, "I was completely left out of the Starship Age."

"That was my part in it," he said, "that and getting burned by the guy who let the transferee wander lost in the halls." He'd told about transporting the coma victims from the starship, but he never talked about the aluminums to a stranger.

"That was when you began to make your fortune wasn't it?" she asked.

He didn't really want to talk about that, but didn't really want to hide it either. "I made a string of good deals back then, from here I know it was beginners luck."

"How'd you get started?"

He wondered if she suspected those aluminums and was hitting on him because of it. "Are you only here about money?" he asked in return, trying to keep his voice even. She certainly hadn't been frugal at noonmeal. She certainly fit the part of a high-maintenance woman so far, and he didn't feel like the type of guy a girl like this was naturally attracted to. He'd be careful of his money around her.

"I'm not charging you for the feel," she said.

"And I'm not charging you for the massage," he replied.

"Thanks," she said, "though you're so good at this, I

would pay handsomely.”

“I hope you’re enjoying it as much as I am.”

“I’m enjoying it so much I was thinking about asking when you’re due for your next boner?”

“I’ve never bought enhancements, so it will be hours,” he told her honestly. He would never promise a woman as much as he delivered and he had delivered all he had both before and after they slept. She was a lot quicker than Ava.

“It is nice here. I could lie here for hours, maybe even til we lose the rays, especially if you have a skin or a bottle we could suck on.”

“I’ll get one,” he said, and did so. He had a bottle of Figman’s Skybreaker he’d been saving, this seemed like a great time to get it out. If she was after money, this looked like more than it actually was.

“Can you get abHg synapsase?” she asked, after taking a two-penny pull on that bottle.

“Huh?” he asked in return.

“A friend of mine says he needs some, he’s trying to do a brain graft.”

“What?” He had taken a good swallow also and the fumes were already hitting. It took a few seconds to bring his brain around to what she was talking about. The stuff was a psychoenzyme they used quite a bit in the Helmet Room. It was also something you needed authorization to get.

“On animals,” she said. “He’s working with klizhorn I think.”

“That’s hardly a brain,” Kulai said. “An enzyme that

strong would probably dissolve a brain like that.”

“I know, but can you get him some?”

“No, of course not” Kulai said, maybe a little too testy about it.

“I’m sorry, it’s just he’s been bugging me.”

“Who has?”

“A guy I know, his name is Daffiel, I doubt you know him.”

“Is he with the Kassikan?” He wanted to write down the name and look him up if he was.

“No, he has his own lab, it’s way out on Fifth Canal. He says if I ever meet anyone who can get some of that to let him know.”

“The Kassikan would hardly want me releasing something from our stores to a competitor. If that’s the reason you’ve been seeing me, I’m sorry to disappoint.” He sat up and took his hands off her.

She turned onto her side toward him. “No, not at all,” she said and propped herself up on an elbow. “I’m sorry I asked.”

“Then why did you seek me out?” he asked.

“It’s nothing but the call of the glands,” she said, “I wasn’t even planning on stopping at Ziadrakes til Illick stopped me. I wasn’t going to stay if you weren’t hetero, but now I consider it my lucky day.”

“You warned me you were fickle.”

“Yeah?” she said. “Well I was planning on passing Ziadrakes and going on to the Lucky Bust for my workout so I must have been in that mindset. But seriously, I’ll want to

see you again. You said you're free for the day, what about the sleep?"

"I have no firm plans," he said, "Duskmeal and Dusksleep are my most likely time to seek companionship."

"Don't let me cramp you," she said.

"I would consider you a major score in such an endeavor," he said, squeezing her once again. He wasn't going to pass any supplies thru her, but he would continue to enjoy her body if she would still allow it.

"Good," she said, and rolled onto her back again. He leaned over her again with an elbow across her waist and kneaded her with both hands. "Score me often and score me deep," she said and put her hand to him.

"I'd have to take a pill," he said. He'd been afraid she was going to leave over the synapsase, he was gratified that she didn't.

"No hurry, I can be patient," she said and lay back and closed her eyes. She talked a little about how he was doing, how she liked it, what genes she'd taken to get so well developed and how she liked to show them off and exercise them. He tried to be at least partly attentive. It was becoming obvious that her tits were her life and he wondered how long it was going to take him to get bored with that. They eventually got around to talking about the evening before.

"So you know the guy Illick's sucking lately?"

"B'theen?" Kulai asked.

"That his name? I forgot, we drank stupid this noon."

"There was that, and his name is B'theen," Kulai admitted. He really didn't want to talk about this very much.

They'd met in the days of his life he was trying to rise above, and he was already suspicious that this girl also had an agenda twenty decades in the past. He would give the broad facts but not the details. "We were first getting into cargo, he had the legs, I had the numbers. It wasn't far from here, I was talking to some guys in a little mezzanine hole not far from Kraggie and Dedik's about lumber and he was with them."

"How'd you handle the orientation?" she asked.

Maybe that was all she was digging at? He wasn't going to get into that either. "Politely, he agreed not to tease me in public, I agreed not to undress in his presence."

"I bet he bangs off about you," she grinned.

"I'd rather not think about that," Kulai said firmly.

She stopped, than asked, "So you stayed in business and stayed as friends?"

"Pretty much." He didn't tell her that B'theen was with the Kassikan for many decades also. "He has some other work besides mine now, so he gets by with just spotting. So how do you know Illick?" Kulai asked her.

"We've been working there together for so long. It must be the better part of a century. We talk, I can even get him to squeeze my tits and ass now and then." He could tell from her face and tone of voice that that was a disappointment for her because it didn't turn him on.

"What were you doing when the starships came?" he asked, trying to turn the conversation to her for a change, without making it seem like he wanted to avoid that era.

"Like I said, I missed all that. I went out to the landing site one Afternoonday in just a very skimpy wrapskirt, but I

couldn't get near it. I got fondled by hundreds of guys but I never met a starman, or even saw one from a distance. I think you're the first person I ever met who's met one."

"So what was your life like then?"

"Same as now," she said with an implied 'of course'. "I still have the same work and the same home."

"I don't think you ever told me where that is?"

"Compared to this, I live in a closet with a compost can."

"It can't be that bad," Kulai said.

"Seriously, your dressing room is bigger than my apartment. It's seven stories above the nearest water, but I don't have a view and only a single window-box of outdoor space. I shower in an all-in-one. This is like a major public building to me. How'd you ever come to own a place like this?"

He wasn't going to go into that, "Like I said earlier, a few lucky real estate deals. I bought it for investment, I never intended to actually live here. But then the market went bad and I couldn't sell it for what I wanted and after awhile I got too accustomed to living here. Since I already had the business space in the building, I managed to find a way to hang onto it."

"It's really impressive," she said, "and comfortable. It's spacious but not inconveniently so."

"That's what I like about it," he said.

"Do you mind telling me what you paid?"

He did mind. "There was more than the home involved in the deal, it was a percentage ownership of the building, more

about the commercial space than the house. I was asking five aluminums for this home, I didn't get close to it."

"I see," she said. She probably didn't believe it and he didn't care, it was the truth. She was a big-boobed bimbo who stayed the sleep, not his most intimate confidant. He would feel more comfortable discussing this with Ava, even though she interrogated him just about as much and admitted she had talked to I.I. "It seems like you don't like to discuss it."

"Bethai, I have a business here. Do you have any idea what year it might have been when the first businessman sent a pretty girl to bed the proprietor of a competing business and extract his financial secrets across the pillow?"

"And you think I..."

"I have to be careful and you are asking a lot of pointed questions."

"I'm sorry, not about your business, your business is boring to be honest. I was asking about the Yingolians."

"Just a few minutes ago you were asking for a potent psychoenzyme..."

"He's been after me, I'm sorry about him, I'll tell him once and for all to forget it."

"I deal in high value commodities in the cargo trade. All open-market stuff."

"Like I said, boring. Who was that girl that ran off?" she asked.

"A good friend of mine from the Kassikan."

"What's she do there?"

"Founds Studies and sits on research committees, stuff

like that,” Kulai said.

“She’s a big-shot?”

“She’s an important sorceress. I’m in awe of her intellect,” Kulai said.

“I’m sorry I got in the way, you should have said something.”

“I’ll try to explain when I see her this Nightday.”

“Tell her I’m sorry,” Bethai said. “I didn’t mean anything by it, it’s just, well, she probably wouldn’t know, but having tits like this, I really can’t resist the pleasure of using them. You haven’t really complained.”

“Not at all, I’ve always enjoyed woman’s beasts,” Kulai replied, though he was getting his fill now.

“You’re very good with them, you’re talents would be wasted on a girl like her.

“Like I said, I’m in awe of her intellect.”

“So you aren’t an item?”

“I don’t kiss and tell,” Kulai said, “would you like me to tell her about last sleep?”

“I’m not ashamed of who I do or how, but do I guess that you would rather I didn’t crow about the wonderful time I had this Noonsleep?”

“A bit of discretion would be nice.”

She wanted to talk about other women he knew. He wasn’t really comfortable with that. He wouldn’t give her names, but she claimed she was just interested in what type of woman interested him. He wanted to tell her he was

interested in women who pushed back the frontiers of knowledge, women who created a new and important Study and who's inventions had changed the world. He knew that would hurt, Bethai and Ava differed more in intellect than in bust size.

Instead he told her about other women who had come thru his life. As he talked of them he realized none had been very important to him. They were casual friends really, with nothing much more between them than mutual physical pleasure. She asked if he met any in his work, and that made him think about Ava again. While he thought of her, somehow the conversation got around to the patients in the deep labs, something he wasn't supposed to talk about.

“So what *do* you know about the girl who was brought in for the Angel?” Bethai asked.

Kulai didn't like this either, especially the fact that she was asking now. “There were a lot of them brought in. That project ran from 55,42,33 to 100,00,23,” he said, “and those facts are trade secrets of the Kassikan and I could lose my position for telling you that much and I will not tell you more.”

“Good grief, is there anything you can talk about if you work for the Kassikan?”

“Yeah, I can talk about your business. You work in dispatch so you must be dispatching something for transportation, maybe our interests align?”

“Or maybe they compete like you said earlier? We can never know that about each other can we?”

“In any business deal,” Kulai said, “there is the specter of

deception.”

“If you say so, I don’t think I ever sat in at a business deal.”

“If you’re here on a Morningday you probably can,” he mentioned.

“Sounds like fun,” she said.

“You just said my business was boring.”

“What will it be like?”

“Netharn will make an initial bid for a shipment of soap,” Kulai said, “I’ll ask him what it includes, we’ll haggle over the details awhile and adjust it a copper or two til we sign an understanding.”

“You’re right, that will be boring. When does this happen?”

“Morningday, I hope,” Kulai said, “or a lot of planning will be in vain.”

“Sounds like it will still be boring. Sounds like it’s not so easy being rich...”

“I’m hardly rich, I made a string of lucky real-estate deals and wound up with this home, and yeah, I’m doing better than the iron or two a week I would make off the boards, but my position at the Kassikan has to see us all thru in a bad turn.”

“To one like me, only a few chips above an iron a week, you seem very rich. You have a man to make you breakfast.”

“Athnu is somewhat driven. He was on death’s door with Norrot fourteen decades ago when I first needed help. We took chances on each other. Please don’t let on I told you

about his past.”

“I won’t.” She got up, went to the rail and looked down at the boats. “You got a boat?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said truthfully, saving the heart of the truth.

“Which one is it?”

“I keep it indoors.”

“Oh?” she asked, sounding intrigued and looking at the doors to the boathouses on the far side. “What is it?”

“A sportpod sixteen,” he said. “I keep it on the rack downstairs, there’s a put-in at the base of this building and it handles two well. I have time to take it out today if you want.”

She looked at him like he had suddenly turned grey and grown warts. “I’ve never really learned to paddle,” was all she said. He figured that was a lie, figured she had a sleeker craft of her own. His was a worn but solid, working-class boat that he used for exercise a few times a year. “I’d need to be out on an irrigation pond in the country to start,” she went on with her act, “not where I could be crushed between barges in city traffic.”

He could point out that he could easily paddle them to the lake but he knew she wasn’t interested “It’s OK, I seldom get to take it out more than a few times a year myself.”

“Which one would you pick if you could afford any one?” she asked. He came to the rail with her. There was one guy on one of the garden floats looking up at her with a small scope. She noticed and waved, throwing her shoulders back and posing. He noticed the guy who had followed Jorma and Ava was still lurking around, also watching, but Bethai ignored

him.

“I would probably stick with the one I have, I just don’t seem to have time for the attention a big boat needs.”

“What’s a big boat?” she asked.

“Put a rig on mine and it’s still a small boat, go beyond that and I start to call it a big boat. All of the ones you’re looking at are big boats to me. If it has an enclosed cabin, I definitely call it a big boat.”

“What do you work your business for?” she asked.

His head drew back, but he answered her honestly, “Athnu,” he said. “He puts so much effort into it that I have to come along and help out as best I can.”

“What would you do without him?”

“Quit while I’m ahead, live with the hour commute to the Kassikan forever.”

“How long is forever?” she asked.

“The final death is when Kassidor stops rotating ten million centuries from now,” he said.

She laughed. He hoped she still thought it was funny five million centuries from now. He wouldn’t. “So what are we doing for Duskmeal?” she asked.”

“We’ve barely finished breakfast.”

“What else can we talk about that isn’t confidential?”

“We can talk about your life.”

“Here you are in a palace with important businesses, a position in the Kassikan and you want to talk about my life? An iron and thirty four clipboard operator in a struggling freight yard? Doesn’t make sense to me.”

“It can’t be all that dull for you.”

“So you want to hear about some fun times I’ve had at a tit club I go to?”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not ready for another ride yet,” she answered.

Still it took little effort to get her to tell some raunchy tales about it. He didn’t know if any of them were true, but they did get him ready again after she’d acted out a few of them on his face.

At the end of the day she got him to treat them to a duskmeal overlooking the sunset and a concert by the HummingWings. That meant he didn’t shake her off until Nightday when he went into the office at the Kassikan. He refused to allow her to come along. He hoped the ‘If not noonmeal, Nightday’ schedule was still on.

The next Morningday horizontal rays found them and the furs were suddenly too warm and they woke. But it was the thick blond locks of Bethai that covered the pillow, not the shining dark fall of Ava. It had been two days and three sleeps since they’d met hadn’t it? He hadn’t been separated from Bethai in that time except for his Nightday shift at the Kassikan. He stayed later than he would have at the office, hoping Ava would show, but she did not. He had arrived home for Dawnsleep to find Bethai patiently waiting.

Bethai gave him a ‘good morning’ peck and went to the front tub. It was down four wide marble steps from here and behind the fixtures bulwark. As she walked away, she wasn’t

as beautiful as Ava. He really regretted that Ava had taken it so hard. Bethai had been all he could handle in bed, more woman than he wanted in his bed to be honest. But she was damn hard to resist when she pressed for what she wanted. He knew that she was in control of this fling. As long as she was entertained, she would stay, when she was bored, she would go. He didn't want to let that happen. He needed to start taking his space back.

She knew Bethai had spoken with Athnu, he reported it when Kulai returned from the Kassikan last evening. She had asked a lot of the same questions, Athnu had given away far less than he, as it turned out. Of course, Athnu hadn't shared a pillow with her. In fourteen decades, he had never detected Athnu to have an interest in women.

He didn't join her in the tub this time. He was pretty spent actually and would have to find a way to say 'no' to another round if she was to ask.

She caught up with him on the breakfast patio. It was quite warm already, she had lingered in the bath and probably used a whole bag of fuel. He sat where the homes above cast a bit of shade. She was carrying her bag, which was now stuffed with her Nightday attire. She was following her torpedoes, wearing only a short and thin, yellow pleat-skirt in spite of how early this was in the week. The chill kept her forcefully pointed. "I'm having breakfast out," she said. "Would you like to join me or has Athnu already started cooking?"

He was glad to hear she was going out, maybe he could get some time to himself. He answered truthfully however. "I

haven't seen him yet today.”

“So you coming?”

Were he a juvenile he certainly would be coming, the way she pressed herself to his face and the way she was built. But he was centuries old and had handled better than hers several times in his life. “I'm sorry my dear,” he said, “but I have a busy schedule ahead of me today and really can't spare the time. Thank you once again for a wonderful sleep,” he said, squeezing two and kissing three. She wound her hands in his hair and tried to smother him between them until he stood up and took her in his arms.

“Will you be free by noonmeal?” she asked.

He thought about that, how much time did he want to buy from this girl? If he could repair what was getting started with Ava, he wanted a lifetime loose from her. He wouldn't mind Bethai as an occasional change from Ava. Ava wouldn't and couldn't put on a display like Bethai would flaunt as she swayed thru the early sunshine on her way to brunch. “I'm not sure, you can check with Athnu and see if I'm free, but I'm afraid I might not be.”

“I'll see you soon then,” she said. She put her hands up to tie her hair. Athnu came thru the door and she turned toward him while she finished tying her pony tail. As he watched from the side he noticed just how tall the points on her ears were. Once done with her hair, she swung her bag over her shoulder and swayed off toward the stairs to water level.

“She's not staying for breakfast?” Athnu asked, still blinking.

“No,” Kulai answered, but said no more. “Would you like

a few layers of blunth this morning?”

“Would you like yours here?” Athnu asked.

“In the business office if you don’t mind,” he said and got up to make his way there. Once in the main office down on the tenth floor, he grabbed the keyboard and began composing a note to Ava.

To: Ava, Founder of Virtuality, Kassikan

-Dearest Ava,

Either you have gone to the north cities or you have seriously misinterpreted what was happening with Bethai when you saw us. I only thought of this because of a little you’ve told me about Yingolian social customs. I may have misinterpreted and if I have, please forgive me. She was a co-worker of a friend of a friend being drunk and disorderly. I was trying to get out from under her without being insulting when you left. I really wish you had stayed, I was about to introduce you and put you between us, but you didn’t give me time.

I am open this noon, and all the sleeps thereafter you may wish to claim. I will be conducting business in my office for the remainder of Morningday. I wish that what we began could continue, those encounters were significant to

me.

With love, Kulai

Of course this would be the day several major shipping deals had to be decided so he barely had time to post it and print it out before the whirlwind began. There were arguments about what prices would be paid in various ports. He developed a headache before he had lunch and these guys were all beer drinkers. The Morningday sun was already bright on the plaza by the canal where they ate their lunch, and before they were done, Kulai was afraid the whole deal was going to fall apart because of the beer. His headache was much worse by the time he soothed that argument.

It was already nearing noonmeal by the time he finally got to Ava's room in the pyramid with a hardcopy of that note. He hoped to see her in person, but got no answer to his call. He wasn't surprised. The possibility that she was not answering was real, but so was the possibility that she had already gone to Noonmeal. These quarters have no cooking facilities, so she would have to have noonmeal out. He had missed her again, all he could do was leave that note.

7. Warnings

He got back to his business office late that Morningday, week Zawmathii, only to find Ava waiting there. "Your message said you were going to be here," was the first thing

she said.

“I left a hard copy at your pyramid room.”

“I picked up the eye copy while I was having lunch,” Ava said.

“Have you been here that long?” He would be very remiss if he had kept someone of her importance waiting since lunch.

“Actually I thought I might be too late,” she said. “I’m sorry I was jumpy the other day, how secure is this room?”

“What are you talking about?” Kulai asked.

“We may be under investigation,” Ava said, “I think I.I. is watching me anyway.”

“No?” he said.

“I’ve been followed,” she said. “I caught someone at it.”

“A thin guy that wears bulky clothes?” he asked.

“That’s him,” Ava said.

“He followed Jorma too, I saw it from here.”

“We might all be watched, that bimbo who came between us might be bait.”

“No?” Kulai said, even though he knew she was probably right, but he thought anyone working for Internal Investigations would be much more subtle about it.

“I never should have talked to Althart,” she said. “Even if he knew he was guilty he would start that investigation.”

“Is he guilty?” Kulai asked.

“No,” Ava said, “But whoever is guilty was trying to win his favor.”

“Guilty of what?” he asked.

“Of getting Tdeshi to O.D. on Shonggot so they could deliver her body.” He could see how hard it was for her to say that. She wouldn’t exist without that body.

“You think someone did that?” Kulai asked. “You really think Tdeshi was killed? I thought you said she was a known user.”

“But she had been doing it successfully for some time. Someone could have tampered with her supply.”

“She would have O.D.d eventually,” Kulai said.

“Twenty decades ago I found many people who were regular users who survived.”

That changed a lot. The woman he was falling in love with might owe her existence to a heinous crime. This body might rightfully belong to the girl he examined on that table so many decades before. “But do you have anything definite?” he asked.

“The probabilities don’t add up,” Ava said. “She came in too quickly after the picture went out. Internal Investigations is taking this so seriously that I think they know something.”

He couldn’t comment on that. He didn’t know that she wasn’t the one working for Internal Investigations did he? After all, she had talked with them. Bethai could be working for the shonggot supplier Tdeshi bought from. So could Ava for that matter, after all, she was the one who benefited the most from the overdose. He knew he couldn’t trust anyone with all that was going on, but he was infatuated with Ava and more comfortable with her than with several of the other people who had been around lately. “So how long were you going to wait here?” he asked.

“Until I finished the article I was reading in that magazine,” she said. “Maybe another ten minutes, maybe even fifteen if I found something more in there I wanted to read.”

He didn’t see how she could, it was a trade mag, ‘Center Lake Shipping Digest,’ that was not known for gripping suspense or moving human interest. “Then what?”

“I would have tried to bull my way past Athnu upstairs.”

“You are on the welcome list and I think he likes you,” compared to Bethai he did. “You will be admitted any time to anywhere but Athnu’s private suite.”

“To your private suite?” she asked.

“To my private suite, especially,” he said.

“Let me start by saying those two Dawnsleeps, they were a special time. I really enjoyed that.”

“I’ve been meaning to tell you that myself,” he said, “you ran too quickly.”

“If you ever need a break from Bethai, I’d love to do that again.”

“I’m sorry, Ava,” Kulai said. “I let her lead me and scare you away, but I miss you.” He reached out for her. “I will chose you over her every time you will allow. Bethai can bid on your leftovers.”

She hesitated, but came into his arms. “I’ve missed you too,” she said, “I wish I had known that. I didn’t see any way I could compete with a woman like that, especially if she’s professional bait. And I was mad at myself for thinking I could play in your league.”

“I’m almost afraid to play in your league.”

“Why?” she asked incredulously.

“Founder of a Study, on the Photovoltaics Committee. I hardly move in those circles.”

“I’m a grind, I don’t feel like I could compete in your social circle.”

“I’m sorry you felt that way,” Kulai said. “I mean that, if it’s a choice between the two of you, I’ll send her away every time.”

“No need to do that, You see, I have to go.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I seem to be under suspicion for the body I’m in. It seems they suspect I might have somehow set it up when I was an Angel, before I was controlled by the Instinct.”

That was possible wasn’t it? He wondered if her sister could have done it and kept the memories from her. He didn’t dare ask. “So you’re running away from them?”

“Not really, I’m going to follow up that lead up beyond Chardovia. I think the best way to clear myself is to find out how it really happened.”

The good news was, she could stay for noonmeal and the sleep. In fact she wanted to stay off the public paths until she went to book passage. He sent Athnu to purchase a small blenth and watch that it was butchered properly. His kitchens had the equipment for a way to cook them that Ava knew; and it was superb. There is a spare bed behind the dressing rooms that is dark and cool for Noonsleep and she was delighted to

spend Noonsleep in the dark. It seemed that she had been over a week without release and was as enthusiastic as Bethai but with a much mellower rhythm and social parts that fit comfortably in his hand.

The bad news was, they couldn't linger too long over breakfast, he had a long errand of his own today and she was packed for a trip of over a week. His business had access to a closed coach and he sent her in that to help her keep from sight. He would make better time on the canals anyway.

“So before I go, let me ask you something,” she said as she turned into the seat.

“Please, anything,” he said.

“Did you mean that offer about putting me up? I mean now that we know each other a little.”

He stood there slack-jawed, “From my soul's core,” he mumbled, but didn't know if she heard or even waited for his answer. She shut the door and the kedas heaved and his coachman waved as they disappeared down the cargo tunnel. He tingled with excitement at the thought of a serious continuing relationship with her.

The journey across the city was tedious. Things were a little tight to be taking a public needleboat, so he got on a u-paddle and figured on getting his exercise for the week on an eleven mile paddle. He got on with a group of tourists however and they gawked at the miles of crystal walls they had to paddle thru where the canals run close to each other. They had to take snapshots and look up many of the megastructures on glossy maps, leaving the natives with a lot

of the paddling. Someone else pointed that out a couple times. They got off the second time someone complained, but by that time it was only two more miles til he got off. He walked from there, it was little more than three more miles but there were eight canals and all their locks in those miles so walking was much faster. He was above the twentieth floor by the time he got to Eleventh, without climbing much at all. He crossed a very small bridge to the canopy of an apartment tree in a textile neighborhood. He had to climb way down out of the residential levels and into the basements of the commercial and industrial levels below them to reach the appointed rendezvous.

He hadn't really hung with Kemberra much at all since the landing, it seemed a little strange that he wanted to meet him in a grimy bar deep in the cellars of the garment machine district down on the rugged canyon rim. He knew Kemberra still worked in the stockroom of the deep labs. Kulai didn't go down there as often these days, but he certainly could have dropped by his office at the Kassikan. Kulai got a cup and joined him, he was at a small, tall table all the way in the back.

"You didn't take a direct route here did you?" were the first words out of his mouth.

"What?"

"You've had a girl from Internal Investigations on you."

"What?" Kulai repeated.

"Shh!" Kemberra said. In a low voice he asked. "Is she, or anyone you've ever seen her talk to, here?"

"What are you talking about?" Kulai asked.

“That boob-girl who’s been on you. Her real name is Shaney, she’s a bait-girl for I.I.”

“The girl I’ve been hanging out with is named Bethai.”

“That’s her operation code name, take my word for it, you better watch your ass.”

“Are you jealous because I’m getting some ass?”

Meaning it more about Ava than Bethai, but a little testy that he would bad-mouth someone he had been with, especially if he dragged him eleven miles thru the heart of the city to do it. Kemberra was a one-girl guy and their friendship had suffered because Kemberra and his woman never joined in socializing. Kemberra’s current involvement began just about twenty decades ago didn’t it? But Kulai’s changed habits could also be the main reason they had seen little of each other these days.

“Don’t throw away our years of trust on a two week fling that screwed up your chance with Ava.”

Kulai was hurt by that. He wondered how Kemberra knew and he wondered why he even cared. But hadn’t he spoken with Kemberra about Ava decades ago? He was surprised Kemberra remembered.

Kemberra continued, “I believe what I was told about Ava because a big-wig in I.I. was down to talk to me this week also.”

“What were you told about her?”

“She’s making trouble upstairs.”

“And?” Kulai asked. He knew that, and wasn’t going to tell Kemberra that she was caught up in the trouble herself, or that he was helping her, or about the reports he’d had to fill

out concerning this. He didn't like how this was going but he tried to keep his adrenalin under control.

“That bottle of psychoenzyme you signed out has been traced to the shonggot that took Tdeshi.”

“What?” He almost jumped up. “It was tagged?”

Kemberra grabbed his arm. “I'm not supposed to be telling you this. I made sure I wasn't followed across town. I need to keep my job right now, so I don't want anyone to know I told you. But as a friend I thought I had to warn you.”

“I was assured...” Kulai hissed.

“How could I know?” then, “Is that her?” Kemberra pointed, changing the subject.

The girl who came in did look a lot like Bethai. She was tall with long smooth blond hair and a big, proud, chest.

“Close but no,” Kulai said. “You're paranoid.”

“I'm telling you, if an I.I. guy can get into where I work, the heat's way up. They know it's that bottle and didn't mind telling me. I shouldn't be trying to help you like this, I should just let them strip you like you did Enjteen.”

“You set me up,” he said, “and they may be setting you up by seeing where you run if they feed you a fable about that bottle.”

Kemberra didn't say a word at first, Kulai expected him to argue. “I hope you don't have that bottle,” he said. He stared at Kulai as he finished his cup and stood up. “Just remember,” Kemberra said, “we know a lot more about you than you do about us.”

So in this dingy and unfamiliar place he was left alone with that reality. Kemberra and the Gnomes he hung with knew all too much about Kulai's past. If they wanted to, they could create records of his past that showed more than ever happened. How did he know Kemberra was even right about that bottle? It was a friend of Kemberra's who bought it off him anyway. He had to admit that both he and Ava were right about Bethai. She had nosed into his affairs almost from the start. He'd suspected she was working for a competitor right from the beginning. She wasn't the kind of girl who would normally be interested in him. Girls like her were more likely to leave him to women like Ava.

What were the chances of encountering someone as sexy as Bethai who was interested enough to compete with Ava? Bethai was bigger and better with her pillows of course, but Ava was much more intelligent and to his eye much prettier because of her normal size. Bethai was a plastic play-girl who had him now because of her aggressive pursuit, Ava was all depth and no surface.

He didn't really try to hide his tracks on the way back from the lower south end of the center city, he took Eleventh for a little while. Eleventh is just a crooked u-paddle tunnel on the buried canyon rim for those miles. It's small, crowded, shady even on what are called open streets down here. He climbed twenty floors to a busy commercial streetcar level where he got a streetcar to Second Canal. In front of forty stories of crystal he took a public needleboat a little way beyond his neighborhood and walked back thru the cellars.

All the time he chewed himself up over how he allowed

himself to be distracted like that, like a bumpkin, by something as simple as a bigger pair of tits.

He didn't go right home but stopped at Taudly's, a tiny tap that really catered to little more than the businesses and residents of his building. It was down on the cargo level, and since he wanted some liquid before attacking the stairs, he stopped in. There was Bethai, sitting in the end one of the five stools Taudly kept near his tap rail, her tall cup nearly done with a fill of his green. She was in a cable knit that hugged her closely, with her feet up on a stool. The knit was loose enough that her nipples poked thru. "I was about to give up on you," she said, waving the cup. "I heard Ava's gone north so maybe you'd like to accompany me to HarzleTard, I'll buy this time." She got up and swayed toward him, took his arm deep in her jugs.

Did he have any doubt at all in what he'd been told? None. It would be suspicious to drive her off now wouldn't it? He had to pretend he hadn't been warned. It would be suspicious to act nervous because he suspected. All he could do was watch everything he said and pretend to be having fun. It would be nice to be taken to such an upscale show to fill the time til Ava returned. He might as well get his hands as much exercise as he could, and squeezed her enough to make her purr while they embraced.

But when Ava came back from Chardovia, he would waste no more time with Bethai, Shaney, whoever she was, if Ava would have him. He knew how he felt, and he would make those feelings known. Providing the investigation into his own past gave him that chance. He still had five of those

aluminums hidden away in his house. They had not yet been entered into circulation into the financial system, sealed in an envelope with test results.

They strolled a fifth level promenade, he had to admit, she had the best figure for strolling that he had ever experienced, she was just the right height for his elbow and liked to bury it deep in and between. She babbled about popular prittle-prattle for most of the walk, media stars and people who had been famous. She brought up older things that were more famous in the media. Kulai noticed that the neighborhood was little changed over that time, and they had somehow worked there way back to when the Brazilians were all famous and how they landed in their starship.

He was not going to say anything more about the fact that he had been present at those starship gates when the first Yingolians arrived. Those were all Brazilian Yingolians. But when the ships gates first opened, he had been one of the people gaping up into it and the glittering fortunes on display. He didn't bring it up. She talked about the media view of them and then mentioned that she'd heard a Yingolian ghost was rescued from Narrulla's Tear. "I was wondering what happened to that transferee," she said, "the Yingolian who was a ghost at one time."

"I don't know who that is any better than anyone else at the Kassikan," he said, maintaining the house line. Even at the Kassikan, only the few who had been in that lab that day really knew. Just because Ava had admitted it to him, how could he be sure that Tdeshi hadn't woken up from the

overdose with fabulous dreams of outer space? The science of virtual humans in silicon and transferring personalities via helmet is something he had to either believe or not, but either way, he knew he was drawn to the soul that was in that body now, however she got there.

“Isn’t she that girl who ran away that day?” Bethai asked.

Kulai strove to control his breathing and say calmly, “I guess she had as good a chance as any of the claimants, but she’s studied with the Yingolians so she’d have a good chance of faking it too. But I didn’t think she was listed as a claimant?”

“You wouldn’t expect the real one to be a claimant would you?” she giggled heartily, causing him to blush in spite of the truth. The silence stretched between them, anything he could say would be a lie or would break a promise or both. When he didn’t say anything more voluntarily about that, she asked. “So how did they get the body?” she asked, “the one the ghost was rescued into?”

“Why do you want to know?” he asked, sensitive to Kemberra’s warning. He was also sensitive to the fact that some of it he was supposed to know and be responsible for as part of his job. An Internal Investigations operative, even one who seemed as cow-stupid as Bethai, would have access to all of the internal records. If someone had told Kemberra, it is pretty well documented.

“I’m interested in your work,” she said, “you and B’then were there. The starships are the big news of our age, anything around them that you had contact with, I had nothing, like I wasn’t involved in history being made. I had

the same grinding job the same seventeen miles away.”

He sighed, figured that she knew it already and could be testing him with it, “I will remind you once more, nothing personal, but I have taken oaths about certain matters pertaining to my job at the Kassikan and I take them seriously. I will confirm that the Kassikan has performed experiments on victims of shonggot.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“A drug, it comes from ancient Dempala. In all but the tiniest doses it erases the mind.”

“Who would take it?” she asked.

“In just the right tiny dose, it gives one perfect memory, you can hear a lecture or read a book and retain all of it without errors. People still experiment with it and a few fall victim every year in this urban complex.” This was all public knowledge, he would be expected to know that for his post. If she was from I.I., she could be quizzing him on more than just Tdeshi couldn’t she? He had to filter everything she asked, and everything she’d asked in the past, past that suspicion.

“Is it only known here?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “The victims I deal with come only from here, but I’m not supposed to admit I’ve had to work with those victims. Once again you seem to be trying to quiz me on what I’m sworn to keep confidential.”

“So we’re back to that again,” she said.

“You were fine for hours when you weren’t asking about things I’m sworn not to talk about.

“We’re almost there anyway, we have to climb down here

and take a boat.” She started down the six flight switchback of steps to Fifth Canal.

He sat with her thru the show, but withdrew more and more from her. The show was a rock-opera movie with beautiful nude dancers, and a very good live band with powerful instruments. It was in a Zhindu-style hall of high vaulted arches, all grown from shaftwood, well-carved with pictureglass lanterns in the halls and the enormous pipes of the speaker system filling the whole center of the end wall. They sat three rows back on the balcony halfway down the hall. It was bedlam on the dance floor below and live sex near the front of the stage but that was too small to be distracting from here. They could see well from where they were and get into the story-line.

It was during an intermission in the show as they walked back to their seats with filled cups that she asked, “Daffiel told me you can get abHg synapsase. He said you’ve done it for Kemberra.”

He tried not to stiffen. He wondered how much she really knew. She didn’t know he got it from Kemberra, not for him for one thing, less than I.I. admitted to Kemberra. That wouldn’t be true if she was from I.I., unless that was a clumsy attempt to cover herself. “I understand that the Kassikan has reasons they want to keep certain things out of the hands of the public,” was how he answered.

“So you won’t get him any?” she asked.

“If you want to put it that way. We’ve been thru this before, I take the trust the Kassikan puts in me seriously.”

“But you didn’t in the past?”

“Anything I signed out was for a legitimate use in the lab,” he said.

“So what was the use for abHg synapsase?” she asked.

“I don’t remember what it was after all these decades. Are you interrogating me?” he asked in return. She did seem to have memorized the word, it seemed out of place in her speech.

“So how do you think they make shonggot?” she asked impishly.

His suspicions were on edge by this time, especially since she acted like she didn’t even know what it was an hour and a half ago. He made sure he stayed calm and said, “I’m sure I haven’t the slightest clue,” with so little emotion that even a keda wouldn’t have been able to smell a thing.

“I wonder if abHg synapsase is used in it?”

His heart was hammering and he really wanted to panic. This certainly confirmed what Kemberra had told him and Ava suspected. What he said right now would have everything to do with how this went. He wanted to run from her but that would be even more suspicious wouldn’t it? So he said, “I don’t know, but now that you mention it, I wouldn’t be surprised if it is.” The fact that she asked pretty much confirmed that it was, he tried to look distracted.

“I wonder where we could find out?” she asked. She was trying to play innocent and playing it broadly.

There was no one really paying any attention to them, they had come to lean on the wall beyond the cup-rail out of the busy traffic walking by. Why not have this out with her

right now? “Do you think I.I. would know?” he asked, and looked her in the eye.

That hung there a few seconds, “Do you think I?...” she gasped. “First you thought I was working for a competitor, and now you’re accusing me of working for them?”

“You are very full of very pointed questions. I think it’s probably a competitor of mine that hired you, I could probably have a personal talk with a few of them and figure it out. I’m pretty sure I.I. would have someone a lot more suave working for them.” Someone more like Ava, he worried, in spite of what Kemberra thought.

Her face screwed up and her eyes got wet. “I’m just trying to take an interest in your life and all you do is get all suspicious about it like you have something to hide.”

“Yes, all I want to hide is how boring it all is. You saw it.”

“Yeah, yeah. You know what? I don’t think this is going to work, I should have known a rich guy like you could never be comfortable with a penny peon like me. Enjoy the second half, it’s much more colorful than the first.”

“But...”

“I warned you I can be fickle,” she looked back as she backed away, “you’ve been suspicious of me once too often.” She strolled away, quickly at first, but then slowed and began looking at the people in the hall. A little ways down the mezzanine she noticed a couple other guys leaning on a tap-rail watching her. She opened her top as she approached them.

Nightday of Chezhervizhod; the office was slow again.

No doubt there was something else interesting the founders these days because comatose bodies were not getting a lot of attention. With nothing to do he sat and worried just how much evidence was piling up against him. He didn't know at the time what that enzyme was used for, or the reputation of Kemberra's friend. They both said he had his own helmet.

Ava was on her second week in the north cities and Bethai had been absent for the last three sleeps also. He thought Ava should be back early this Nightday and was hoping she would show up before the shift was over. He half believed what he said to Bethai, that she was only working for a competitor, and it was Ava that was working for I.I. He would be careful of what he said, but he wasn't going to be careful with his affection. Even if she was working for I.I., after he was found innocent, he wanted to continue this relationship with her.

It was early in the day still, he hadn't taken lunch, when someone he thought he was done with showed up excitedly at his office. "So they haven't gotten here yet?" Enjteen asked, looking surprised.

"What are you talking about? Not that you have any business in these halls."

"I just wanted to see for myself," he said.

"See what?"

"I heard some rumors about an Internal Investigation," Enjteen said, "concerning the circumstances pertaining to arranging a shonggot overdose to profit from the availability of a certain body."

"Yes, so?" Kulai tried to act like he had no idea what he was talking about.

“I heard a rumor it’s all going down today. I heard a certain female operative has been pulled in. My guess is they’re about to take some action.”

Part III. Lone Investigation

1. The Morningday After

She runs thru dark and deserted catacombs all hung with tubing labeled with abstract patterns. She knows it is a 3D reality trap but she is powerless to bring up even her med panel to do anything about it. Thirst assaults her, hunger pains her as in the basest simulation with all her powers stripped. The walls are invincible and she has no powers to deal with them and no powers to blunt the pain of trying. At no time since she'd first become a system administrator had she been so stripped of control.

She is in a lattice of identical hallways, floor upon floor of them. There is no light but a dim green glow from the hallway ceilings. She hears voices in the distance but cannot find them. She finally finds a doorway with light beyond. She bursts thru it into a large and ornate chamber. Rows of glowing crystal balls line the upper level, a huge glowing crystal onion ringed with six ornate thrones dominates the sunken central portion of the room. Even as she shouts her distress at being without her administrator privileges, she recognizes the Helmet Room and knows that her med panel, her villa on the Caribbean beach and all the powers of the Afterlife are irretrievably gone. She has descended from heaven into an alien mortal realm.

The blessed light of a new week woke her from that old

familiar nightmare. That was her part in what happened twenty one decades ago when she took Tdeshi's flesh and committed the deed that scared Jorma sick. No doubt Jorma running screaming into the dark when he learned of it was what reminded her of that time and made her wake up sweaty with it this Morningday.

She didn't really remember what she'd said to Kulai yesterday, it probably wasn't polite, but probably a lot more polite than her thoughts. She was too stunned to vent her full wrath on him yesterday, she didn't know her full wrath until now.

From the window she could see that the boat was gone. Of course, the way Jorma had run from the room he might have taken it and gone back to Sinbara with it. It wasn't an easy trip in a needleboat, but he certainly wasn't thinking very clearly when he left. She hoped he wouldn't do something really stupid, hoped he wouldn't hurt himself in his anger and revulsion or make some other irrational move that would leave him bankrupt. He certainly couldn't spare the three coppers he had spent on that boat.

Why did she care? He certainly didn't care about her, he only cared about Tdeshi. Once he finally faced the fact that Tdeshi was really and truly gone and was never coming back, he had run from Ava the electric ghost in panic. Why did that hurt so much? Was it just her ego being bruised? She couldn't really care for such a low-life bumpkin as he, could she?

They hadn't gotten along all that well, their time together had been a constant battle over sex. He had never cared for her for any other reason. Had he? Why would he care for her

at all with that constant struggle?

Didn't he remind her of Earth? Not since Herndon had she known anyone who fit the Earthly male role as well as he did. It was more than just his deeper voice. Any normal native man who was as incompatible with her would have just politely said good-bye at the first sign that they were mismatched. But in spite of her rebuffs, Jorma had persisted like an Earth man, letting her slip into the familiar role of the man wanting more and the woman striving to deny. That role had caused most of her troubles in all her relationships in this culture hadn't it?

Why did she do that? Just because she could. She certainly wasn't disappointed with his lovemaking. Quite the contrary, he satisfied her so well that she was sated with just once a week. Tahlmute had joined with her that often, thru most of their time together, but she had been far less satisfied. In fact she had been the one to adapt native ways in their relationship and seek 'variety' as the natives called it, once or twice more per week. She had never done that when she was with Jorma.

When she got back from Kulai's office yesterday, all Jorma's things were already gone from the room but his toothbrush and a couple hair ties that were lying on the washstand. Today she picked them up and held them. She couldn't use them as an excuse to go looking for him, even though he had so few possessions that he would surely miss them. Even here, even Jorma could afford to replace them and would certainly do so rather than face the monster he now

thought she was.

She still held them as she went to the room's small window and stared out into light of a new week. It was still too cold to open the window, her breath made moisture on the glass as she looked down at the canal-side street. A couple walked by with their arms around each other and she couldn't hold back the tears. She threw his things roughly to the floor, then threw herself across the bed.

A good cry wouldn't come however, her face screwed up and she mewled and whined, but she could not let loose and drain it out of her. Part of it was because her intellect wouldn't let her. The relationship was just too one sided. Her attraction to him scared her. She wanted too much from someone who was only making love to her body and the memory of the previous eager young soul that lived in it. She had to keep him at arm's length for that reason didn't she? It was her unrequited love that had sent her two cabins down when they sailed. Being with him that long would have left her utterly dependent on him. She already was perfectly content to provide for him financially, he was such a cheap date that he was just about free.

Why couldn't she become like a native woman? Why couldn't she take what she got without strings, without regrets, without attachment? Why couldn't she be just a man with a vagina? After eighty years in this native body, why did she still have to think like an Earth girl? Why did she still have to hurt like an Earth girl? Why couldn't she be like that casual slut Jorma had simply taken in when she moved down the hall?

And after that, why did she have to get attached to him all over again once they got here? Why did a simple peasant have to look so manly at the controls of that needleboat on that stupid ride? Why couldn't Tdeshi's hormones let her be unmoved by the line of his jaw, the ruffle of his hair in the breeze as they cruised the canals all the way to the north end of the burbs and back?

What was she going to do next? She HAD to stop thinking of him. She had to understand that he was gone and get herself together. There was far more going on here than a simple infatuation gone bad, and she had to get her mind off of that and onto the seriousness of the situation. Jorma's accusations made too much sense for her to just lie here crying about it. She knew, from her investigations of decades before, that the amount of time between deciding they needed a body that matched her self-image and the arrival of Tdeshi's body at the Kassikan, was suspiciously short. By the odds it should have been a decade or two til they found one with her look, build and mental capacity, instead it had been only weeks.

She could not believe that the Kassikan itself, especially the founders that she knew personally, could have deliberately overdosed Tdeshi to proceed with the transfer. If nothing else, they were too patient. To people five thousand Earth years old, the wait of another decade or more would have been trivial. They had been working on the problem almost twenty decades already. For another reason, they were obsessed with the honor and reputation of the Kassikan.

However, individuals within the Kassikan could have

done things for personal gain, and that was something she really should look into. It was true no one could terminate Tdeshi directly, but it still was possible to harm another indirectly. As long as the conscious mind can be fooled into thinking that your actions don't actually injure or use direct force on another, the Instinct can be circumvented.

It was so long ago and she had tried so hard when this was fresh. She thought there was probably no progress she could make. She could talk to people here again, she could look up the person who knew Tdeshi from her home near Chardovia. She was armed with that address and the name Tdeshi, a lot more than she knew about the body than when she went at this in the past.

What else did she have to do? Go back home? What is home now anyway? Could she go back to the house she owned in Sinbara? Without a doubt Jorma would be going back there and he knew most of the people of that town. What would he say to them? How would she be received once he told his colorful tale of demonic possession by an electric ghost from the stars? How would she feel herself?

Right now, after this disaster, she didn't think she could fit into the small town of Sinbara with Jorma around. She'd paid nearly an aluminum for that property, so she should at least go back up there to sell it, but at nearly a year in each direction, she didn't want to waste the time. She could cut the time in half if she rode coaches thru the interconnects, but that would burn a good portion of what she could get back out of the house. Going by air would cut the time even more but borrowing a floater and pilot again would cost more than the

price of the house. The house could wait, while she was here now, she should find out what she could.

Who would have something to gain by bringing her a body? That amounted to who would get recognition from it? Certainly the physician she was brought to. She had been all thru him before, she knew he was clean. She had checked into everyone in the office at the time and come up with nothing.

She went back to the Kassikan and got her old documentation to start. She had a storage room in the pyramid with a few boxes of paper from that time, and Hallelujah! A data stick, possibly holding a few hundred meg of data from her previous investigations. There was still some serviceable faculty clothing in there also. Next she found she still had a working key for a private little out-of-the-way faculty workroom. There was an eye in here that still worked. She had some new information she could cross with her old. All the seats had been filled in the class Tdeshi had a scholarship for, there was a list of names. If she had the list of names of those who the scholarships had been issued to, she could match up all but one, the one who was not Tdeshi. One of these people went to that class on Tdeshi's scholarship. Almost a third of them were associated with the Kassikan in some way, counting those in close association with a Kassikan employee or contractor's employee.

She got the names of the people who attended the seminar. The attendees were almost half male and over three quarters were from the central city area. She crossed it with other lists she had from the time. The data stick still read and

this eye eventually processed it against the lists on the cube.

It took hours to type in all her written lists of names to cross against all the attendees, but she got a match. Fenais, the name showed up on the list of people who had worked for the physician that Tdeshi's body had been taken to at that time. If there had been enough data capacity on this planet at the time, she would have found this out then, both these lists were old data.

She looked up what she could of his clinic, both in her old data and on the current system. The doctor had some viewable data, he was still running a walk-in street medicine place. He had connections with credible specialists, but was mostly a casts, stitches and ice man himself. He had a staff and his street-front facility was open every hour of the week.

She didn't waste any more time at the terminal but hopped on a public for the hour ride up to that clinic. She spent a lot of time waiting to get admitted, only to find that Fenais had left her career over twenty decades ago, and had been there only occasionally since, coincidentally, year 100,00,23. By showing her Kassikan medallion she was able to get a copy of her career certificate and that included a thumbprint.

She spent Afternoonday and Nightday looking up all she could of Fenais on the eye. She found the name was fairly common, there were three hundred something in the Kassikan, thousands in the city, but none at the address on her employment certificate with the clinic from that time. It was an address that co-incidentally was on the same boat-stop where Tdeshi got on her last ride. She got no info on where

that Fenais might be now, but she had a thumb print to use so that bore following up. She would have to question all the local Fenaises in person, so how many could she wheedle into thumb prints?

What would she find out? That the girl, or boy, for several Fenaises were recorded as male, snatched the scholarship certificate from the body before anyone noticed and made use of it, never knowing Tdeshi or Ava. If she lied and actually did know Tdeshi, how would she find out? If she remembered Tdeshi, she would probably jump when she saw Ava, especially if Ava pretended to be Tdeshi. And when she found her, what could she accuse her of? Stealing a forty five iron scholarship certificate? A week of her royalties today. That hardly seemed a motive compared to currying favor with a founder of the Kassikan.

Perhaps she should go talk to the one that favor was for, her lover from the helmet who brought her into flesh. One of the five supreme owners of this planet's most influential institution.

2. Suspicions

They went out onto the surface of the pyramid to talk. After a day of interminable waiting he finally had a moment free to see her. This was well up on the pyramid one floor down from the founder's lab floor, the decks connected by a stairway in a corner of the pyramid. "So now what can it be that brings you back with such concern?" Althart asked as

they walked down those few steps.

Ava waited til they were seated. This was a small corner space above the balcony of the High Mechanics Council. The mountain lace were in bloom in the planters and their smell was so fresh. They were a thousand feet above the lake here, but facing North Canyon nine hundred feet below that. Kortrax was getting low enough that he didn't reach this balcony they were on and so the heat was already gentled. "Where my body got the shonggot," she said, once she was settled.

He took a second to call up the memories of that time. The wizards had extensive bionic enhancements to their minds, all their research could devise. "In the neighborhood where she was found was our suspicion as I remember," he said. "We did send people out to nose around out there, make a friend and then ask."

"The whole circumstances surrounding her overdose." She knew so much more now because of what she knew about Tdeshi. "I also conducted my own investigation into that area as I remember," Ava said, "I wasn't able to score shonggot there."

"We found few leads and got to houses sold and people moved away in all cases." It seemed like Althart had enhancements that allowed him to have the entire contents of the world's data system memorized. "Just knowing that someone was interested must have spooked whoever sold it after they heard about the O.D. Whoever sold it probably would have heard about it, it was news in the whole neighborhood of that canal." The guy who owned the boat

was shook about it for years and talked of it to everyone he could.

“I’ve traced the girl’s origins.” Ava said, “I followed her trail before she took the shonggot, who she was and where she came from. She was very young as you thought, still a few years short of four.” Ava knew native decades by feel now, it was Earth years she needed arithmetic for. “I’ve just come back down from her home town in the company of one of her old boyfriends.”

“That must have been interesting.”

“Too interesting in some ways, it seems she was quite sexual in her former life, something that doesn’t show in a body’s form and coloration. The guy who knew her up there is quite a bit more active than I was ready to handle, even with the hormones this body produces.”

“I fear you sometimes felt that way about me my dear.”

“I think I sometimes did, you’re quite the goat at your age.”

“What is age? My hair is from the helmet.”

“Your age is something over what I called five thousand in my civilization.” She could talk to him of Earth. The wizards of the Kassikan were interested in the worlds of other stars and in human origin. She was an important source of information on it for them.

“Over thirty centuries here,” he said about his age, “well over thirty centuries. Infinity in any day-to-day sense. Still, these are exciting times, here you are with me again, a visitor from another sun, flesh visiting with flesh again.” He put his arm out to her.

She was a little reluctant, she was trying to question him, but she let him enfold her. He wasn't wearing robes now, a knee and elbow length worker with tall, soft-knit boots to his knees. The worker he was dressed in was whiter than his hair. He didn't smell 5281 or whatever he was in Earth years as much as he looked it, and he only looked about one percent of his actual age. "Good to be visiting," she said. "It take's longer to get here in flesh than it takes to get here by helmet from Narrulla. It took us a year and a week to get to the city, this is my third week here."

"Why didn't you drop by earlier?" Althart said.

"I'm not sure I wanted to bring the guy I was with, one of Tdeshi's old boyfriends, up here. Right from the start he was suspicious of anything to do with the Kassikan. He wasn't keen on the ghosts from virtual space thing from the very first mention of it so I never admitted it to him. I do like the guy, he is attractive and personable in some ways even though he's narrow minded in others.

"But he insisted on seeing Kulai and sure enough Kulai went and blurted it out and Jorma just plain freaked out. He ran out of my presence and I wouldn't be surprised if he cut off his own dick, he was that freaked."

"I would guess you haven't remained in his company since?"

"True, I found the place I used for storage in 31h43115 was still unoccupied, so I crashed there."

"We can arrange quarters at your convenience below the hundredth," Althart told her.

"Oh I can afford quarters, but that's good enough for now

if you don't mind. I'm just not sure where I'm settling for the time being, I'm only here to find out some things about the shonggot."

"What can I help you find out?" Althart asked.

"The guy who bought the house from another of her former boyfriends said she got it down at the Kassikan."

Althart didn't answer right away. "I regret to admit that I would never let this institution be policed so closely that we could prevent any lab within our walls ever being used to produce it. I have to say that now that I'm forced to think about it, that means that a portion of that sold and consumed in this city must be produced within our walls."

"Could it be openly hawked in the dockway court?"

"Not inside the walls, not for long. We would encourage people to harass any such hawkers away from their streets anywhere we knew about it also."

"Was there a reward for bringing in a shonggot victim fitting my description?"

"Reimbursement of any expenses incurred."

"I've noticed in the record that the needleboat team got a lot of good press and that two now sit on committees, that's a remarkable coincidence in just twenty decades in the Kassikan."

"It's happened before."

"I have to remind you, in the century leading up to my transmission, about one or two people per decade answering my description are found O.D.d on shonggot in the Yakhan."

"What does this imply to you?" Althart asked.

“That maybe someone just went out and found someone who looked like me.”

“Impossible.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Besides the Instinct, they weren’t dispatched til we received a message from a medical practitioner toward North Treeland.”

“They could have sent someone, an accomplice.”

“That would be deliberate harm to a fellow human, the Instinct would prevent it,” Althart said. “You are paralyzed when you attempt any action that you know will cause a fellow human harm, you’ve known that since your expedition lost Alan. That’s not something we invented, that was done in Brancetrabble’s labs in the 45th when Lbront Nevn came storming out into the East Trenst Basin bent on conquest.”

She already knew that ‘local’ history, even though it happened ten thousand miles away and when Earth’s year had three digits. “The accomplice might not have known what he was doing,” she said, “the Instinct can be defeated that way.” She may have only been on this planet eighty-odd Earth years, but she knew the high points of it’s history, life and society.

“At any given moment, there are several crews that might be chosen, they might have just set up another crew. But I know a couple of them. There isn’t one of them that could dream such a devious stunt could be imagined.

“But still,” he continued, “it should be investigated thoroughly. Two of them did get promotions and this institution really has nothing to sell but it’s integrity, so we

must investigate everything.”

“I think the only way is to track down how she did get the shonggot.”

“Twenty decades ago?”

“I know,” she said, “I should have followed up on that address a lot sooner.”

“It seems so, but a year’s journey each way is a bit inconvenient. What can we do about it now?” he asked.

“There are two people who knew her back when she took it, or just before she took it. I wish to set out looking for them. One is named Yorthops, I have names and addresses of two of her friends, I intend to check them out and see what they have to say. I also have the name of a guy she was living with up past Chardovia, a guy named Hyondahi. There was also a girl named Fenais who may have stolen her scholarship certificate.”

“Even that is actionable by the canons, but those are thin leads, do you have a picture?”

“Not of any, but I have descriptions of Tdeshi’s friends and a thumb print of Fenais. Hyondahi has a big Gnome forehead but he’s mostly Highland on the Nordic side. Yorthops is more Wood than Highland, curly black hair, curvaceously plush.”

“You’ve done the eyes?” he asked

“That my old codes will get to, I’ve probably run up over a copper against my royalties since Knmonawweep. I’ve been away three decades so my codes aren’t that current.”

“The Kassikan eyes are still on the ancient crystal, the world eyes are insulated off on a newer ring that is read-only

in hardware to the old one.”

“I was on the right crystal, because I did them in both places. I don’t think there are any matches in the Kassikan, there’s a few Hyondahi’s worth checking out in the city, but I’m doing Yorthop’s friend’s places myself first since I have names and addresses. It was said that Yorthops could be privy to Tdeshi’s drug habits.”

“And Tdeshi is?” he asked, genuinely unknowing.

“The name of this body’s former soul.”

“I see,” Althart said. He took a breath, “So we are on notice that the possibility that one or more of the boat crew drugged her in hopes of future gain has crossed your mind?”

“Drugged Tdeshi. It is not disproved, but it certainly is not proved either. I am letting you know what people are saying about the Kassikan, people like her old boyfriend. He used to live with her at that address she had on her. My intent is to find out how Tdeshi did get the shonggot.”

“I see. I will dig into the Kassikan’s shonggot involvement. I have people who like to infiltrate secret webs.” She didn’t say anything after that, he didn’t either for awhile, Then he changed the subject. “So tell me about your travels?”

“Since I left?”

“Yeah, it’s been decades, you could have traveled around the globe.”

“I haven’t done that, I’ve been to the south end of North Lake and back. I stopped at a few places on the way and learned gardening and such. It was no big deal, the same kind of country that’s right outside the city here.”

“Just being in the country, I long to try that again sometime. I haven’t had much of a country life since the expedition.”

“Yeah this camp’s getting a little grown up now,” Ava joked. The ‘expedition’ set out while Atlantis thrived on Earth, beyond what the Elves of that time called the Uttermost West. The city had begun as a campsite at the end of that expedition, a place so far away at the time that they could never be bothered. There was an intermittent stream in a canyon they could dam up and use as a little irrigation for their campsite. Geographers all agree that the contiguous urban area that has grown from that campsite is now over a hundred million people. The original canyon is filled in and forgotten except by the Gnomes and those who use the labs that still function a hundred stories below level zero of the current Kassikan. The Canyon Lakes are in what was once the lower canyon, a dam one third as high, one eighth as long that held back a body of water one ten thousandth as large.

Alhart had already seen civilizations rise and fall when he and several others founded this camp, this little camp that had grown into the Main Hub of All of Land. She wondered how seriously he took the petty tribulations of the starship times, now that the starship age seemed to be over already. It had changed their world, but not as much as their world had upset the balance back at Sol.

“How sure could one be of getting noticed on that boat crew?” Ava asked him, bringing them back from where their thoughts had wandered.

“There was no way to tell who would be chosen for the

crew. It was probably more a matter of who was there, we don't pretend every crew is people who have been practicing together for some time."

"Is there a record of every crew that goes out?"

"You know the forms you had to fill out when you took a boat out?" Althart said.

"Yeah?"

"Those are still stored away somewhere down there. The bureaucrats always thought every scrap of paper with writing on it had to be saved and a bureaucratic post established to oversee every ton with the requisite senior and oversight councils over them."

"It's the Gnomes," Ava said.

"Their industry provides a useful check on our systems," Althart said.

"All they do is re-do and push paper in each other's way."

"But now, if you want to know who was on the crew, they can find it. They have many times as much data as is on the eyes."

"I know, but I want to know what is the chance that someone stole this body from it's rightful owner by deliberate overdose of shonggot? I have reason to believe," Ava continued, "that Tdeshi was already a known shonggot user when she O.D.d. We found a lot of evidence that she had already undergone many personality changes from what her old boyfriend remembers."

"Where is he now? I would like to discuss this with him."

"He took off running when he found out I was the

Yingolian ‘ghost’, as the media so colorfully puts it, and may not have stopped yet. For all I know his next landfall could be the start of the Interconnects.”

“That’s too bad, it might have been an interesting conversation.”

“I’ve had many interesting conversations about it already. Tdeshi was a very driven individual. I’m very sure she took the shonggot to try and enhance her learning at a year’s seminar she was attending.”

“That’s the more common reason I understand,” Althart said. “I was just forced to admit that some is probably made right in our own labs. Certainly no one is authorized to do so...”

“That is just a matter of how far up the chain the knowledge went.”

“Very sticky,” Althart admitted.

“But you know these people? The people who were on that crew.”

“D’l’thon and Hessiah I’ve met personally.”

“Do you know them well?” Ava asked.

“You are right. I am reluctant to examine the possibility of corruption within my own organization. I don’t know each of them personally at all. I can say I know two, have met two others when you get right down to it. We cannot overlook the possibility.”

“Can we find out if they happened to just ‘be there’ at the time this happened?”

“The Gnomes will have that info, the ‘on site’ sheet for

that shift,” he stood up.

“Can you send for it, or do we have to go get it?”

“If I send for it, I might get it this week, if we go there we will know in a few minutes.”

“So OK.” She got up to go with him. It would be more than a few minutes, it was more like half an hour to get down to the record keepers.

Ava had always been nervous when out and about in the Kassikan with Althart. He had three different persona’s depending on what part of the institution he was in and who he was talking to. He didn’t want to be known by the general population as one of the founders because then he would have no privacy when wandering about the place. Of course he shouldn’t just wander all over place the way he did like his time was free, but then he had told her many times that as soon as he had to stop playing in the labs himself, he was done. That’s what he liked about being one of the founders, there was no one to keep him on task. If he felt like riding the elevators and walking the halls, he could. It kept up his enthusiasm after all the centuries.

She had always wondered what he had seen in her that he had taken her as a lover. Of course it was the initial curiosity about her interstellar origin and life in silicon. Her need to keep her status low key as well as his own. He was that type of person, he had a strong need to teach one on one and a strong need to learn. She knew from his old pictures that he had looked like a very old man for many centuries, not assuming his present appearance til the 40th century. There

were still a few wrinkles around his eyes, but compared to Earth records of how people looked as mortals, he looked about forty to fifty except for the hair and beard.

The hair and beard were not a dead giveaway in the Kassikan. Anyone who's used a helmet in the last local year has snow white albino hair all over their body. There are thousands of helmet users in the Kassikan. All but eight of the working helmets known in the world were in the Kassikan. There are the six secret ones in the crystal room, that she knew about, an unknown number more secret ones that she didn't know about and twenty eight others that she did know about in different departments, several of which were open to novice use.

The hallways and elevators were crowded, most people who knew him in these halls knew him as professor Mithrandir who taught Troubled Times History of the Ttharmine Basin 218 (The Dark Lord and his fall) and 221 (The Wars of Magic and their aftermath), both very popular courses that he taught faithfully until the starship age. It was down to about one year out of six during the starship landing because he'd been too busy in the labs with discoveries they inspired to get up enough enthusiasm to teach more often.

He took her down a corridor that ran thru the courts of many quadrangles, "I need to get outside as much as I can," he said. "I need to make sure I get enough air, exercise and sunlight." They were outside the pyramid. The Kassikan's grounds were about a mile by a third of a mile with the pyramid at the top, sloping up directly over the original

canyon so most of its grounds are a third of a mile deep. He went into a door hidden between immense pillar bases and began to lead the way down deeper and deeper stone stairs.

“I should get more exercise also,” Ava admitted, “At least we’re going down.”

“Yeah, I’ll take an elevator up.”

The air got heavy as they went deeper. Gnomes lit with candles rather than bioluminescent panels and the smoke and smell of old wax or even grease, mixed with moldy paper dust, their own personal odors and the residual odors of a cuisine heavy in fried wevn, kvarit and mushroom, never left the passages. Everything that was down here had once been above ground. As the lake and city grew, these levels had been filled in, for the most part. Originally Gnomes hollowed parts of it out secretly, but they would be killed in the collapses. The race was thirty generations old before they were discovered by the mainstream. When they found they would be accepted as humans, they learned where they could open rooms and where not. Since the 40's the passages to leave open had been planned when filling in and there were many Gnomes on the facilities committees.

He took them into a passage that looked like the portico of some old federal court house. Buttressing the old granite portico was a wall in reinforced concrete. The row of polished granite pillars that ran down the middle of this space were six feet in diameter and fifty high. From the end she could look up a strap-up stairway, barely visible in the sparse candle light, and see there were seven levels to the planks that had been put up in here. There were lots of tree-trunk posts and

between them, piles of tightly-strapped bales of paper.

Alhart knew the Gnome who kept this place personally, as professor Mithrandir, and greeted him as he came thru the door. The man's name was Pengem. He was tall, broad-shouldered and quite a dark grey, what Ava would call almost elephant grey. Gnomes were very inbred, there are few females and few of the males are naturally fertile. Any cross breeds or for that matter, any full blooded Gnome who wants to see a geneticist, has a tolerance for natural light and can go outside. Most grow up secure and content in their lives and see no need, if they wanted to see the outside they could go any Nightday and not give up the vision they used in their everyday lives. Enough did come out on Nightday (with goggles), that the whole of downtown Yakhan was pretty comfortable with their presence.

Pengem had his records well ordered and was proud of the fact that he moved the older ones up so that the most recent thirty decades were always on this floor. They took the bale for that decade to a worktable deep in the center of the space that Ava had to light with her torch. Pengem put down his goggles once she had it lit. She still had to be careful to keep it from shining directly into his eyes.

“It looks like everyone who was on that team was just here at the time,” Alhart said after finding the page for the right shift.

“What's this mean?” Ava asked about a scribbled signature in the margin.

“The shift supervisor who received it,” Pengem said, “That's Kulai.”

“As it should be,” Althart said, “But look here, you were transferred on K’shitn, but this wasn’t entered to the files til Kyebenwae, does Kulai usually take that long?” he was looking at some of the other crew sheets nearby in the piles he had made, they were all filed in the same week. “It doesn’t look that way.”

“No, they were filed as soon as they were brought in.” Pengem said, “I keep the current year as active files here in the drawers, I rotate the old year out to the building bale and put the new stuff in every week. Here are two others filed from other shifts that K’shitn, so I was working that week. It would have had to have been held up in the department.”

“Who would that be?”

“That would be Kulai,”

“And he would be off site this time of the week wouldn’t he?” Althart asked Pengem.

“I don’t know if he’s still on Nightdays?” Pengem said, “I don’t see him that much, he usually has someone run his shift’s paper down. Once a year or so he might bring it down himself.”

“He lives an hour from the Kassikan’s gates.” Althart told her, no doubt using the enhanced data storage in his brain once again.

“We might as well make note of it and talk to him this coming Nightday,” Ava said, “Not that he will remember after all this time.”

“Doubtful.” he answered.

Pengem raised his finger and said, “There is a way to cross check. In Employment Dormant Records they should be

able to dig up the time sheets for these people on that day, you can see the dates on that, if something was made up later, those might be later dates also.”

“Lotta work,” Ava said, “You can’t take your time with it,” she told Althart

“You are probably right, I’ll have to see Delurna and get an investigation started. In fact, I’ll introduce you to Delurna and you can fill him in on what we know so far, he can send a couple guys down to go thru those files. The High Mechanics Investment Council meets late today and they’re probably looking for me already.”

The institution known as the Kassikan made most of it’s money by spinning off industrial concerns using technologies that were discovered by the Kassikan. The Kassikan usually financed the whole company and was the ‘owner’ in this society where the only law was natural law. The Investment Committees were very important. “I wouldn’t doubt it,” was all she said. All of them were always so tardy to meetings that they often had to hold them during sleeps and the interlocking positions let them hold two or three meetings at once to catch up. Ava had never been at any of these meetings of course, but Althart had complained of them taking his time away from her in their early days together.

Althart was looking at the runs that were a few days each side of the one of interest. He noticed that the one for the shift before had also been entered a week late. He noticed that shift supervisor tended to hand his in every three or four weeks while Kulai was always that week. None of the names on that run showed up on any other runs within three shifts, but that

other one could have been altered. It was a no-data situation.

Meanwhile Ava tried to pump Pengem for anything he ever noticed about any of the people who were on that run. She had the names, she had already looked at the only files they had in here indexed by person, employee records. She found all of them were normal in their files, but she was alone with these files, it was likely Kulai could have been alone with these files at some time also. He worked in that department, he had every reason to come down here to look at these files. Or up here, considering where he really worked at that time.

Of the five who had been on that run, two had been promoted and two others were no longer at the Kassikan but had outside interests. She took down the latest addresses for all of them, only D'l'thon had the same address twenty decades later. Finally Alhart was ready to go up and introduce her to Delurna.

3. Internal Investigations

Ava was not as senselessly terrified of the Gnome regions as Jorma had been, but she was glad to get up where there was some natural light and fresher air again. Delurna didn't work in the pyramid, he was eight levels up in New Orthanc. This structure was a recreation of the first structure ever built in any of the Elven worlds with the crystal building technique. The original was built about 2700bc, long before The Fall, the new one about 1000bc when the Kassikan was

only a few hundred Earth years old. It was once much higher but the land has risen hundreds of feet around it since then as the lake continued to rise. It now rises eight hundred feet but descends four fifty since the new tower is built to eleven thirds scale of the original.

New Orthanc looks black from the outside but enough light was conducted in to let one see quite well thru the walls, it looked like one was behind smoked glass. The extra light was conducted thru the glass of the walls and frame to the interior and levels now far below ground. New Orthanc's elevator shafts are ten floors high, Delurna was still on the first one up from the current level zero. Ava had no idea what was farther up in this tower. Most of what it holds is secret, even from the staff of the Kassikan. Althart himself had to have his identity verified to enter, but she noticed that they verified that he was indeed professor Mithrandir, and tried not to snort.

From up only this far there was still a pretty view with the late-week rays painting the turret-tops. This section of the campus wasn't the orderly rows of quads the pyramid and dome were on. This was on the old canyon rim, the high ground, and the oldest part of campus. From here it was a wild tangle of towers and gables, overhanging floors, arched covered bridges with round and oval windows. This level of the tower was up in the top of all that. She knew much of the old stone now had crystal below it to make sure it stayed up, but it was light and lacy anyway. Not that this stone was really that old, for this world, probably built in the mid to late 40's; between the fall of Rome and the Crusades in European

history.

Delurna was behind some tall cabinets near the outer wall. The view took her attention while Althart made the introductions and said, “Ava has brought a situation to my attention that I think deserves an internal investigation.”

“Oh?” His back was to the cabinets, his table faced out over the view of turrets that Ava was still distracted with. “What does it concern?”

“The person who inhabited her body before she was brought in with a shonggot overdose. It seems the boyfriend she had at the time thinks she could have been duped into an overdose and may even be trying to investigate that on his own. He is extremely hostile to the fact that his former lover’s body has been given to the Yingolian Angel. It seems that Ava was afraid to tell him once she found out he was prejudiced against them.”

“You are the Yingolian?” Delurna asked.

She hated to admit it, but if she was going to pursue this, she was going to have to. “My soul is, I have found out this body was previously inhabited by a soul called Tdeshi who was very much a native with a boyfriend and a father interested in her demise.”

“I don’t believe we’ve met before, but I have heard your story.”

“I didn’t want the publicity.” Ava said.

“I promise not to request your autograph nor repeat your tale.”

Althart spoke up, “They’re probably waiting for me up top for a Mechanics Investment Council, Ava knows more

about this than I do, she'll fill you in. Ava, I would love to have you join me for a late duskmeal, if you could meet me at the One Thirty Third lounge about the hour of second magnitude stars.”

“What should I wear?”

“Something that will withstand the outdoors up there,” he said. She knew that meant he could be late.

Alhart left to return to the Pyramid and Ava spent the remainder of Afternoonday with Delurna. He questioned her in detail on all they knew so far. Ava was glad she brought the relevant papers, he wanted to see them all and copied most of them. He keyed in some data and looked some stuff up. His Eye was focused only on him, she saw just what you'd see if he just had a glass ball in front of him, no trace of a screen showed. This was one of this world's ancient devices, not a modern re-creation with a photo-voltaic light gate at it's heart. His device worked using a technology that looked like magic to her. “You know you have very little data to do a veracity study with, and only the people you accuse have any veracity rating on file.”

“The others are all up north,” Ava said. The local dialect has two pronunciations of ‘up north.’ One for North Lake and the interconnects, another for the cities like Chardovia and Sistril in the northern part of the Yakhan's urban universe. She said the northern parts of the urban zone.

“You have no way to check anyone's story, no corroborations, no physical evidence.”

“I'm not the one who needed it, I'm just following a

trail.”

“Yes, but if you don’t know the trail is the truth, you don’t know if you are following a trail or not. You have evidence that Tdeshi was awarded a term in fashion arts. It says here eight hundred of those were given out that year and all were redeemed. I have confirmed that there is no record of a Tdeshi fitting your description but the one you found who applied for a job and never showed up.

“I would say, it is very likely that Tdeshi did leave the Chardovia neighborhood with her coupon in hand. She did make it to the Kassikan, comatose and without the coupon, just some of the literature that came with it.

“My theory,” Delurna continued, “after hearing all this, is that Tdeshi did have belongings stashed somewhere and had the brochure on her to show whoever she was buying the shonggot from that she was a serious student with a legitimate need. She was just out to pick it up, and unfortunately tried it on the way home.

“But that is not my investigation, that’s yours. My investigation is the doings of our boat crew and other personnel in those times. I might bring Kulai into it also, Enjteen doesn’t have the intelligence for me to get anything out of him, I’ll have to send someone who can translate. I’ll probably do the interviews with the others each myself, I only have sixteen other cases open right now.”

“May I find out the results of your investigation?” Ava asked.

“In a year, maybe less. We don’t take these things lightly, if there was any chance there was someone from or of the

Kassikan involved in this, we will track it down. That person will be expelled from the Kassikan, I have the authority to expel Althart if I have to.” He must have seen the look of shock on her face, not that he would think Althart was involved, but that he thought he could expel him. He must have noticed and quickly went on, “I won’t have to, I’ve spent my lifetime knowing that. Objectivity is higher, the higher you go.”

“I caught Althart being less than objective today. He admitted it when I pointed it out, but he was favoring the credibility of promoted individuals on that list over that of people out beyond Chardovia.”

“He would be least likely to be objective about this list. I have to be careful to keep him and his influence out of this list.”

“Why is that?”

“Because he likes you quite a lot. He enjoys your company on every level, as you must know because he’s saving a late Duskmeal for you. Please do not discuss this case with him. He knows or can look up everything I’ve told you so far, so you don’t have to worry that you will compromise anything. No one is above suspicion,” he said, and looked at her. She knew no one was technically above suspicion, but was he telling her personally that she was not above suspicion? “Althart knows these things about himself and he will not want to discuss it with you. No doubt you will continue to conduct your own investigations and you are welcome to report anything you find to this office. By the charter of the Kassikan I cannot divulge any information on

this case to you until it is closed.”

Ava stood and turned from him, “Do you like your view?” Ava asked as a way of giving herself time to think.

“Yes, that’s why I face the view and not all the people who report to me. This way they must talk behind my back.”

She didn’t join his half-hearted chuckle. “When are you done work here?”

“When I chase the last of my people out. Right now, I’m going to chase you out so I can talk to a few of those people and get some informed photons impinging onto eyeballs before we close the office today.”

Ava was hoping he might ask about darkmeal, but nothing of that sort happened. She should try and get on good terms with him if she wanted to learn anything. She knew that many a charter confidentiality rule was broken when wrapped in a quilt and she had heard he had a weakness for women. She said her good-byes and tried not to show her disappointment. She had hoped to be part of his investigation, this way was no help to her at all. If anything, this was more cover-up. ‘Tell us anything you find, I will tell you nothing.’ She would keep a council of one unless it was something she wanted brought to their attention.

The lounge at the one thirty third was really the highest public space in the Kassikan, the highest in the whole city. It was the last stop on the last elevator. There was a very nice kitchen to the northeast, very nice outdoor tables to the southeast and west. More indoor tables in the middle. The corners each had a tap of yellow, there was the same kegman

there at the southwest corner that there had been twenty decades ago. The pyramid was still over a hundred fifty feet wide at this point. Kortrax was on the horizon when she got off the elevator. The floors are so smooth here that the light reflected down to the shafts was dazzling. The interior room was over three stories high at the top of the elevator shaft, the huge arch in the shaft where it turned over was exposed. The next floor that closed over this was the upper throne room, the one in the middle of the founders lab. The other parts of this room were only one story high, there were six important committee rooms between this and the founder's lab that could be reached from the stairways that went up from here, or via corner balconies on the outside.

She grabbed a little cup of gold over at the corner and endured a few minutes of the kegman's complaints about how long it had been since he had seen her before she took it to the western balcony. From here she could watch the sunset down the length of the whole inner Dromedian arm. Kortrax had gone from orange to red as he reached the water and was now a hazy maroon on the bottom. It was a hundred twenty miles to land due west of here beyond the lon of the Dromedian shallows. The distant land could barely be detected, Kortrax couldn't quite meet his reflection, there was the tiniest line between them. She had been assured by several that was just because they were up here in the thin air, as thin as two thousand feet above sea level where she was sitting. The lake was a little above Earth's sea level. Canyon Lake was below sea level on Earth by the barometer.

The whole forty mile curve of the dam seemed to circle

this point. She could see neither end while she sat here on the western face of the pyramid. To the north, the beach curved out of sight. From directly in front of her, around to the south were the towers of the waterfront, their tops only a few hundred feet below this aerie, hiding the docks but revealing all the thousands of ships at anchor just off shore.

The second light of the local year 100,21,22 was ending. Even after being away at least seventeen Earth years, it was amazing how quickly she was back here at the Kassikan, and how homey and familiar it all seemed. She had sipped this gold at this balcony so many times before. There hadn't been a decade that passed of her first thirteen in this flesh that she hadn't been here at least once a year and usually more often than that, sometimes every week, probably averaging four times per local year for those sixty Earth years. Now it had been almost three decades since she was here last, but there was still nothing she could notice different about the view or the nectar of Kgyrla's keg. He had been bringing his brew up here much longer than the mere decades she'd been coming here, the date he claimed was in Earth's fourteenth century.

She was there for the whole cup. A few people stopped to chat, there were still quite a few who sprung for the elevator ride up here for the sunset, and she knew a few of them. By the time she was alone, it was just about dark. She knew Alhart would be late but she liked it here and wasn't adverse to spending a few hours lounging and catching up with a few casual acquaintances. She didn't really have any place to stay, she had let the room in that little inn where she stayed with Jorma lapse last week. The place she called her 'storage

space' in the heart of the pyramid was really a nice bedroom with it's own bath, but no window. Most of what she had stored there were the books in the reading alcove and the clothes in the closet. They were things she only wore in the Kassikan, like the thin layers of sheers that she had on now beneath her shoulder-fur of russet miniscamp. It was nearly a uniform for off-duty faculty.

When he appeared he had a bottle with him, not this gold, an emerald green. He must have come down the balcony stairs from one of those conference rooms, two of them reached here via intermediate small courtyards like they had met on earlier in the after-lunch. It must have been while she was distracted gazing at the ship's lanterns coming out on the lake. He must have stepped over the back of the bench because when she noticed him, he was just lounging there, tipping back that bottle like he'd been sitting there awhile.

Once she came down from her start and said hi, he explained about the meetings and all that had to get done and signed. "The silicon caster's are the worst, the fad is over, we know what the real worldwide use is now and we can plan accordingly. They whine of their excess capacity. Rather than the Yingolian year and a half lifetime, we compromised on a decade as I remember, but the marketplace didn't accept that."

Ava knew that all too well. It was about a local decade that the devices reliably lasted. A lot came back with notes on them like -You throw your disposable device away, I'll never get another one of these 'use it ten times and throw it away' things again-. No; the Kassidorian marketplace didn't accept

that. In this city's factories there was precision machinery still in production use, that was manufactured before the birth of Christ. Not very much machinery had been manufactured since Europe's dark ages, just some replacements and updates, a few new specialties. The heavy industry was considered 'done' by this society. Consumer durable goods were expected to last from a decade for cheap clothing, to a century for light duty devices that aren't exposed to the elements. The time period they translated as 'century' is actually two hundred twenty nine Earth years. The phone and computer certainly qualified as light duty. In spite of the longevity problem, there was still business to be done with public rooms, but that had settled down to a fairly low volume compared to what souls on the expedition used. But this was a very different culture. "This marketplace would accept it if it lasted a century."

"And how do we achieve that?" Althart asked.

"No way that I know other than even greater feature width. You could never make anything portable but calculators and it would take a thousand square feet of solar collector to run a server."

"I think we're better off staying with a decade and letting the average person 'rent' them, since they are going to consider it rent. There are a few who will use them enough to buy their own, but they are going to be less than one percent." He paused in his lecture, "But you haven't had duskmeal either have you? Let me go talk to the cook and have something sent up. What would you like?"

"I did zhlindu for noonmeal so any old diddle will be fine

as long as it's still hot.”

There was a new diddle cook in the kitchen up here who wasn't bad. He had five little pots, she got hers with orange spiced flaked whitefish, while Althart the White took the black darter in purple lon shreds. The guy's diddle sauce is really great, smooth and thick without being pasty and he keeps it bubbling right along. He has nice bowls with foam cores to keep it warm and good glazing to keep it clean, but an iron deposit to take them off site. The few residents of the nearby floors all have copper deposited with him so they just mark a sheet and bring back the empties once in awhile. They went up to Althart's airy rooms on the very point of the pyramid among the suntower crystals. They had a nice dinner and that bottle of green while the lights of the city twinkled below. They talked about silicon reliability problems until the stars were reflected in the mirror of the lake and the city was a wood full of fireflies at the foot of their mountain. They kept going until the dark was starting to get cold up here and they were almost too tired for sex.

It was a good thing they had nothing to do Nightday before lunch because they got up rather late and lingered over brunch at a stylish indoor cook's court thirty floors down from his apartment on the point. She got him to talk about his helmet-scan of Tdeshi, but all he could tell her was how her mind was just empty room, there was no memory in there of the name Tdeshi. He could tell her that she was intelligent, well coordinated, intellectually energetic, and young. “It was like walking thru large but empty white rooms,” was how he

summed it up.

He wasn't very interested in Tdehsi because he had other things on his mind. He could tell her there were still no signals from Sol, either Mortal or Angel. He could tell her there were three more starships coming in, but the one from the Pan Solar League she already knew about by mail from her sister. She was not aware that a former lover of hers was worried that one of them might be hostile and had written to that effect. However, the hot news of the year around the Kassikan was another disease organism discovered in one of the Brazilians and how he'd gone missing in West Gengee. It had infected some in Gengee City and an unknown number of the Brazilians. One had died and his body had been brought to the Kassikan for medical study where it was possible the infection could have been released. Next to those issues, the fate of Tdeshi didn't seem worthy of taking up his time.

4. Enjteen and Kulai

Nightday after-lunch Ava went down to see if she could find Enjteen. It was a long ride, eight shafts of elevator getting down from that cook's court in the pyramid. She wondered why Althart stayed so far up, but then understood it was the only way he could get privacy. Of course the view had a lot to do with it also. Getting his air and sunlight and exercise walking to and from elevators was probably another reason.

Enjteen and his mother shared a home down in what had

once been student quarters ten centuries ago. They took the lounge as their main room, a whole floor of bedrooms as their own for sleeping and storage. These areas hadn't been filled in yet, there weren't that many floors above them so a few crystal columns had been enough.

Enjteen's mother was home. She was big, with a bigger skull than even Enjteen had, and she appeared to be a very pronounced grey, at least from what she could see in this light, with thick wrinkled skin, what she could see of it. Her hips were enormously wide and her hair covered most of her body so that Ava couldn't tell if she was wearing any clothing or not. Her breasts and belly hung down over it anyway. Since Gnome women were in such short supply, it seemed they didn't have to care how they looked.

The home was a bit dusty, but didn't seem to be in too bad of condition from what little she could see. It was lit by a single big candle under the teapot in the main room giving just enough light to keep her from bumping into things. His mother left the room without it and went upstairs. After many minutes, Enjteen returned without it. He was still as much of a dandy as ever, dressed in a sleek, supple carapace with a flared, ruffled collar and above-the-knee slipper socks and gauntlets. "Ava, isn't it? Though I haven't seen you in so long, ten decades at least. To what do I owe the pleasure?" He was quite flushed she thought, though it was hard to tell in the gloom, and a little short of breath. He was very attentive, but didn't say more.

"Same as always, investigating the person who took the shonggot." He wasn't someone she would think of seeking

out socially.

“I hardly remember more all these decades later.” Then his voice rose, “No doubt you heard I don’t work down there any more.”

“No, I hadn’t heard. Have you been re-assigned?”

“Temporarily. I was cataloging in clothing records last week. Mother has no income so I must remain employed.”

“There’s nothing wrong with cataloging,” Ava told him.

“I didn’t mind, I hope they want me there again next week. It’s a living and the supervisor is a lot more personable than my last one.”

“I thought he was Kulai, I thought he was your friend?”

“Did you hear how it happened?” By this time Enjteen had lead her to a couch and poured them each a cup of tea. She hated walking on a floor she couldn’t see, and sitting on a couch she could hardly see. She heard only a few small animals scurry behind the furniture as they sat down. “Did you hear what he did to me?” His voice was squeaking as he got to that.

Ava was worried that she was going to hear about it, and hear about it she did, in detail, at length. She figured his narration took somewhat more time than the events actually took. Ava took it with a lidded eye because she had worked with Kulai in the past and found him passively charming, but Enjteen didn’t say anything she knew was a lie.

“I’m interested in the boat crew that brought me in this time,” Ava said when he finally wound down about the key and pill.

“I don’t even remember who they were.”

“Nairn-Toh, B’theen, gZarvik, D’l’thon and Hessiah” Ava said, listing him the names.

“Kulai hangs out with B’theen, you ought to go check on him.”

“Why?”

“Because I tell you Kulai is not on the straight and narrow you think he is. I told you about the place he’s got.”

“He has a business in real estate and another in shipping.”

“How’d he get that? And how’d his buddy do so well?” Enjteen asked rhetorically, with no pause at all he went on, “He might not have been the one to get promoted, but he’s got a really nice place out that way also I understand. I’ve been out there on Nightday to check them both out, they didn’t buy those with a few coppers they saved up, they needed aluminum to get those places. If there’s any one of them on that crew that wasn’t on the up and up I think it would be him.”

The tea was very hot and very strong, Ava could barely touch her tongue to it even after listening to Enjteen’s long harangue. “Why do you think there’s something suspicious going on?”

“Because they shouldn’t be doing that well, Kulai has a servant I hear.”

“Yes he does, and with his businesses he would need someone there at the office when he’s not home.”

“I’ve known him too long,” Enjteen said, “he doesn’t add up. He never had any money to get into the real estate business, his family never had any money. He’s got something going on, him or his buddy. I never asked around

to see if I could come up with any shonggot, but make friends with a student and get her to look around those guys and his neighborhood. You might find something there.”

“You think I won’t find anything out myself because he’s warned everyone off me?”

“Years ago, right from the very beginning. It wasn’t long after you came across that Kulai began living better you know.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, within a decade or two. He tried to take it slow and casual, I saw it happening. He’d start with a little nicer place for lunch, a little better cup of yaag. Pretty soon he had friends I couldn’t afford to hang with, then within three decades he was in that house, ‘caretaking’ he said, the first decade or two anyway. Something happened around that time. We knew each other for decades before then and he never had any money.”

“He did get promoted just before I transferred.”

“And again while you were away,” Enjteen reminded her. She already knew that about Kulai from the meeting Jorma ran from.

Enjteen tried to get her to stay, but he had no more information, just more invective and innuendo. Besides that, Ava could never bring herself to couple with a Gnome. She found someone attractive in just about every other native race she had encountered so far, but there was just something about Gnomes she couldn’t get close to.

Since it was closer than her cubby, Ava had no excuse not

to go up and see Kulai just to be sure he couldn't remember why he was two weeks late with that boat sheet and see if she could find out anything about Enjteen's suspicions. It was not quite the end of the Nightday business shift yet, he should still be in his office. She hadn't really given Kulai all she wanted to for driving Jorma off either. Jorma was quite the clod in some ways, but quite the male in others. Not as much as Herndon, but more than Tahlmute. As long as she kept him separated from direct confrontation with her planet of origin, Jorma had been a fun ride.

Kulai was always very polite to her, almost solicitous at times. He'd never seemed to be withholding, but he was always too apologetic of Enjteen. Now that Enjteen had been expelled from the lower floors and Kulai had been forced to do it to keep his position, as Enjteen had lectured her at length, she wondered if that might have loosened Kulai's tongue in the mean time? She wondered what Enjteen had done to bring it to that point?

"Ava my dear, what brings you here?" Kulai asked when she looked in his door. A complex of emotions crossed his face on seeing her, all of them escaped her understanding.

"My feet; on a quest for naughty gossip about Enjteen."

"You didn't hear it from me," Kulai said, turning around and motioning her to a guest chair. He whispered conspiratorially but was obviously eager to spill all regarding Enjteen's transgressions. She listened to the story as attentively as she could, believing his version of it much more than Enjteen's.

When she could, she asked, "What about the boat slip you

signed that day, when would you have turned that in?”

“My habit was to turn in the boat sheet, along with all the other shift logs, on my way home every single shift I stand.”

“But you don’t know why that one would be two weeks late?”

He paused briefly, no doubt trying to dredge the distant past. “Not one from twenty decades ago, not the one from the shift Enjteen deserted you and scared your soul.” Kulai said, “I would have been paying a lot less attention to it than normal that day. But I want to apologize once again for my impropriety the other day. I should have thought about the possibility that your friend didn’t know, that you were incognito in that regard.”

“It’s shit on the table now,” she said, not forgiving him, but not wanting conflict since she wanted his cooperation on the boat sheet issue. “He couldn’t handle it. Other than that I liked the guy. He was a really good lay.”

“I would try my best to make up for his loss if you like?” Kulai said.

Her initial reaction was to slap him, but then she understood, after twenty decades, how that was still Earth prejudice in her thought. She had spoken of Jorma only as a sex partner hadn’t she? Kulai was just trying to make up for the collateral damage he caused. She didn’t want to let that distract her from the inquiry she was pursuing either. In this society the most polite thing she could do was ignore that offer entirely and ask, “If one of the crew came up and said, ‘oh I forgot to hand this in last week’ would you remember?”

“No,” he sighed. “That happens once every year or two

with one or another paperwork detail.” He went on to talk freely of what he would remember and what not, and admitted he would remember little detail of those days. She should know, when she was a little girl few lived long enough to have memories that old.

Kulai talked freely of those times like he had nothing to hide, just a regular guy trying to get by while doing the best he could. Conscientious but not obsessed. It was the same impression she’d always had of him. She asked about shonggot in connection with the boat crew, but watched his reaction for any hint that he might be involved. He didn’t seem uncomfortable, so she guessed he was not involved. He seemed honest enough to be naive in fact, she entertained the thought that she had under-appreciated him.

He took an interest in what she’d learned so far and seemed to want to help her in her investigation in whatever way he could. She shared what she knew of Tdeshi with him. “I know her mother was hired by her rich father to produce him the best possible baby. Her mother left the household after her contract was up. Tdeshi was raised by hired women under the control of her paternal grandmother. She grew up in the manor home in front of the tenant-cropper cabin where Jorma lived. That cabin was the address Tdeshi had on her.”

“Jorma?”

He must not have remembered the name. “That guy I was here with a couple weeks ago, the one who ran screaming into the dark.”

“I can see why she did shonggot,” Kulai said.

“It couldn’t have been that bad, she grew up rich.”

That give him a shot of adrenaline that he strove to hide. “What does that get you?” he asked, sitting up a little straighter at his desk. “When you have no more family than that to grow up in. More headaches for her father, more people bothering him and her also at too early an age.”

“I understand you are doing quite well financially?” Ava asked, noticed that comment really rang his bell. “Are you complaining of your headaches?”

“I have those outside investments in real estate and shipping.” He tried to hide his nervousness. She wondered what that could be about. What if he was involved in the shonggot? She could have easily misjudged his reaction. “They give me the headaches of the rich but do little better than break even,” he went on, “so in a way I guess I am. I managed to get myself a nice dwelling in the process, that’s really the best I’ve done. It barely all pays for itself these days.”

“I guess I really don’t know what I would do with it either,” she said, leaving his finances alone even though she worried that they could be significant. “The only investments I have are the products I helped develop. It gives me a modest living for as long as I want to retire.”

“But you grew up rich?” Kulai asked, unsure of his question.

Was he making the same mistake Jorma was and thinking she had Tdeshi’s memories at her disposal? There was no one she knew, not the least babe of the poorest single peasant she’d ever met in the deepest countryside of this world, who grew up as poor as she did. “I wasn’t her. I can’t imagine her

life. You were there for the transfer, you know who I am. I first grew up in an abandoned concrete parking garage that my dad had planked in.” No native lived in a climate where they had to endure as long and cold a winter as Reston. No child on this planet ever lived in as much fear of the pistol as she did as a little girl. Her mother often got hurt when the few tins of food she’d been able to buy were stolen from her on her walk home. “It was in a city in Virginia that was abandoned with Washington,” was all she said about it.

“Yes, and I always found it intriguing, though we’ve never actually talked about it.” She imagined having the time to get him to understand what that was like, but he continued, “What I remember thinking about you is how remarkably normal you seem for someone from that far away and different a culture. I once met a guy from Lumpral, you’re much more mainstream than he was.”

“But I’ve been here twenty decades.”

“But I had those thoughts when you had been here less than ten years, it was before the Brazilians landed and the guy from Lumpral had been here for the best part of four decades already.”

“In that case, I don’t think land of origin was the cause,” she said.

“No, he wouldn’t have been much different if he grew up in a religious family at YingolNeerie from what I can see. But let me ask, would you have been as beautiful if you’d brought your flesh from YingolNeerie?”

Was he trying to actually learn of her original life, or was he just angling for Dawnsleep? “Possibly, but probably not. I

would have succumbed to the poverty and diseases in my homeland.”

“How is that?” Kulai asked.

Maybe he really wanted to understand where she really came from. “The common people were abandoned by our civilization, lets see,” she had to translate a hundred and fifty years to local time, “over forty decades before my time. Life was bare survival. My mom had a serving job, that was our only income.” She didn’t want to tell him about her father working an old landfill that had been busted open. Pistoleiros kept the government and Judge’s troops from closing it but exacted a heavy tax. Her father darted squirrels and possum’s with a blow-gun made from a length of stainless tubing he’d found in that land-fill and managed to sneak by the gang’s inspectors. She wondered if there might be time some day for all those details. “By the time she was thirty five, almost ten decades, she was already starting to sag.”

“I guess I’m glad you didn’t bring that flesh.” He would probably never understand how miraculous Heaven had been to her. He wasn’t talking about that, he was probably only talking about the body she was investigating the origin of because he went on with, “You look remarkably better than you did when you were brought in, did I get to tell you that back in Knmonawweep?”

“Thanks,” Ava said. Tdeshi’s soul had been abusing this body, Ava had merely been neglecting it. “But it must be from lack of trying because I really don’t devote as much effort to it as I should.”

“Seeing as it’s now late in the day, I would be glad to help

you in that cause by providing a little nutrition. Would you care to join me for darkmeal?”

She really hadn't thought ahead enough about this interview turning out this way. She'd never thought of Kulai socially before, her encounters with him had always been business. She had planned for alternatives with this meeting ending with shouting about what an ass he was for costing her the partnership with Jorma and even some slamming of doors.

But then, she wondered, how many meals had Jorma bought in the last few weeks? She would have liked to think about it more, but what happened from here really all came down to what she said right here and now didn't it? She might give more information than she got if she talked about Tdeshi's demise any more, but she might get some help and she felt she might get the most comfortable company she'd had since this investigation began. So she agreed to accompany him to darkmeal.

He bought her a very nice darkmeal and she wound up having a surprisingly good time. He was cultured and considerate, had a bit of dry humor, and a wide range of knowledge. She learned nothing more about the case and nothing to verify any of Enjteen's suspicions about Kulai other than that he was obviously getting more income from his businesses than his position at the Kassikan. She did get to tell him more details of her brief life on Earth and her long years as an angel and about her villa in the Caribbean, the thing she missed the most in the Yakhan. He took her out to a beautiful gymnastic event that she actually found fascinating

and she found herself getting cozy and comfortable with him as he told her of the fine points of the competition.

She gladly agreed to spend the Dawnsleep with him and found that he was a fabulous adventure because of the skill of his hands and the most especially the length of time he was able to employ them before he needed consummation. She was delighted to find that she was an adventure for him because of what Jorma had taught her about Tdeshi. On top of that, he provided a delicious breakfast, made by his servant, on a deck overlooking a yacht basin right back of Third Canal. It was, in it's way, a grander setting than she dared have, even as an Angel.

Her head said he should be one of her prime suspects, probably second to the boat crew. Her heart felt that he was one of her prime allies in this quest. She hoped she was right, she had trusted him with much more than she should considering what might have happened and the positions of people who might have been involved.

5. The Boat Yard

There are about fourteen places where a boat can enter the Kassikan. Almost all the water inside the Kassikan's walls was indoor and most of it was on two levels, that of Second Canal's third small, and that of Third Canal. There are indoor locks connecting the levels at two places inside the walls. The larger one is across from the main boat house in a long, arched space that echos with the water and has ornate swirled

pillars along the side. Most of the boats belonging to the Kassikan are stored and serviced in a shop that is near the bottom of that lock just inside the boathouse.

Ava had a friend named Shikone down here. He had been more of a friend once, less now because their breakup hadn't been totally tranquil, but it had been twelve decades ago. It had been the first of dozens of short relationships of only a few years each, and close enough to Herndon to call it a rebound. He was another masculine looking guy, she picked him more for that than any connection their souls had.

She thought it was safe to see him by now, especially since he had terminated the relationship with her. She had met him when she first investigated the person who's body she was in, but was too timid of native customs to bed him at that time. Shikone faulted her for lack of interest in sex and too much interest in crystals when their affair ended.

He was still there when she got to his grotto, and before she could finish saying hi, was already demonstrating more interest in her body than he had the last year they were together. "So what does bring you down here if it's not another go round?" he asked, probably because she didn't return as much erotic contact as he made with her.

"The crew that brought this body in, what do you know about them?"

"Nairn-Toh's rather pompous I think. I forgot who else was on it and would have forgot he was on that night if he hadn't bragged about it."

"B'theen, gZarvik, D'l'thon and Hessiah" Ava said.

"The third one you said, he was with one of the cutest

girls sometime around that time. Oh my, was she ever sweet/hot/tender tasty.”

“What else can you remember about B’theen?”

“He’s gay. He once took a long hike in the Dromedian forest all the way up til he could smell the fumes of the volcanoes. He talks about that to this day, especially the size of the trees and the amount of animal life.”

“Did he ever tell you how he got his house or his money?” Ava asked.

“He’s got a pretty nice four-story row house and dock, shady, on a little canal off Third, a couple miles up from here, but he loaned his testicles on it,” Shikone said, “I wouldn’t say we were close, so I don’t know who he’s in hock to or how much, I only talk to him when he’s down here. I don’t know what he paid, but he could get aluminum and two for it now, easy.”

“What about gZarvik?”

“I don’t really know him, I know who he is. I once heard him mention that it would be a good thing to be on the crew that found the girl they were looking for. He said it before, once, instead of crowing about it every week for the next ten years.”

“As I remember, that was a big topic of conversation down here, both before and after.”

“Oh yeah, more so after, once we saw how well you matched the Angel picture. One of the other guys, who wasn’t on the boat but saw you on the way, said they must have used your picture on the poster.”

“Do you think gZarvik or Nain-toh would have done

anything to make that happen?” Ava asked.

“gZarvik was down here a lot in those days, just hoping to get on that crew, but I don’t see what he could have done to make it happen?”

“Arrange for a known user fitting my description to wind up with the wrong dosage.”

“I heard no hint of a rumor of anyone even thinking of anything like that. The only thing he did to help his chances that I know of was hang here available for duty more often.”

“Has he said anything about that incident since?” she asked.

“I haven’t seen him much since then.”

“He’s on the Procurement Operatives Committee now,” she told him, “You didn’t know that?”

“No, like I said, I never really knew him. We never really talked, just idle chatter on his way by when he was down here.”

“Did you hear such a rumor from anyone, any one of them say anything about knowing a shonggot user, anything like that?”

“I heard a conversation here once about what else might erase a human soul besides shonggot but they didn’t come up with anything.”

“All the other injuries and chemicals that put someone in a vegetative state leave the brain too damaged for the Kassikan’s purpose.” she said. She had been thru that an Earth century ago while still an Angel. He had nothing further on that apparently, so she asked, “What about Hessiah?”

“He’s another I never really knew. He kept to himself a lot, I didn’t see him spending a lot of time with anyone.”

“And D’l’thon?”

“I haven’t seen him around much lately either,” I don’t think he pulls boat duty at all these days.”

“He’s on the Recovery Committee now.”

“You don’t say? I wouldn’t have expected that of him. He was always more into a good time than anything serious.”

“Kulai thought he was due for the promotion anyway.”

“Who’s Kulai?”

“The shift supervisor in medical that they turned the girl over too.”

“No one I know,” he said.

She wasn’t surprised, she didn’t think Kulai ever actually took out a boat himself. “So D’l’thon’s a partier?”

“He was a goof. I don’t think he drank to excess or anything like that, from what I’ve seen he was a little slow with his cup, but he was always joking around and playing for the women. He was a real slut that way.”

“Did he ever say anything about picking up the shonggot victim?”

“Just that she was a hottie and wished she was awake. Made me wish I had seen her.”

“You’ve seen me many times since.”

“Yeah,” Shikone said, “But him talking about you was one of the reasons I wanted to meet you. I didn’t pass up either chance when you came down here asking around. I won’t pass this chance up either, have you made plans for

next Dawnsleep yet?”

“No, but I remember you found me unacceptably dull.”

“I remember you didn’t stand up to everyday use too well, that’s what I thought the problem was. I didn’t really think you had to disappear altogether.”

“Oh I’m still here in the material world, I’ve had a busy schedule these last few sleeps but if you’d like I could stop by sometime soon, next Dusk maybe?”

“Try the house, if I remember I’ll be there. I’ll write it down when I get home, but I won’t look at any note we write here til next week.”

“How about this Noonsleep, is that open for you?” Ava asked.

“Yeah. I just got to hook this tiller cord back up and wash that one down, ol’ 354 still hasn’t broke since we took it out. Remember when I used to take you out in Dawnsleep, deep into the lake when it was calm...”

“And so cold we needed two quilts,” she remembered.

So yeah, she made it three sleeps in a row. Three great daily meals, two of them with reminiscing and a good buzz to go with it. The Yakhan and the Kassikan already seemed like she’d never left. They did most of the reminiscing while she washed down ol’ 354. When she was with Shikone was the period in her life when she’d done the most boating, but not the most sailing. It was a great evening and sleep, but then she remembered he wasn’t much fun to wake up to, so she woke up early and left quietly while he slept, thinking how like Tdeshi that was.

6. A Visit With Yorthops

Afternoon of week Ekendosa Ava set out to look for Yorthops. She arrived at the first of Yorthops' friend's places, not long after breakfast. She wasn't overly impressed. It was all aging crafted structure, nothing grown. Yes it was near the lake, but it was down below water level in a cargo zone and in the back of one of the oldest sections of the lakefront. It looked like this had once been a place where deliveries were made, but most of the businesses had gone since then. It looked like some places had been converted to cheap housing about a century ago and never maintained. The rest might have been taken over by squatters with no recognized title. There were a few businesses still operating here, a soap maker was one she passed, one who was obviously not prospering, and deservedly so from the smell.

She found the place, it was just a door. It was locked and there was a speaking tube. "Hi, My name is Ava and I'm looking for any news of Yorthops. I was given your address by hSkaiya from up beyond Chardovia."

She waited almost a minute, then heard something garbled thru the tube. She hoped that indicated someone was on the way, and within another minute, someone did appear. She was a small and fragile looking woman, very thin with no shape at all. Ava wondered why she chose to look like this. If

it wasn't for her face, Ava would have thought this was an old woman. She even had the voice of an old woman, though she had never met anyone else on this planet with the exception of the Brazilians who might know what an old woman sounded like.

“Yorthops I know,” she said, “And you'll be welcome though I've never heard the name hSkaiya before.

“hSkaiya is from Yorthops' country home.”

“Oh yeah, she's been away decades til now.”

“So have you seen her lately? Do you know where I can find her?”

“Why do you want to find her?”

“To see what she remembers of my mother. She used to know her twenty decades ago. I'm trying to find out how and why she O.D.d on shonggot.”

“Yorthops?” she recoiled in horror.

“No, my mother, Tdeshi, though I understand she was calling herself Teshi at the time. So have you seen her?”

“Teshi?”

“No, Yorthops.” Ava wondered what she would find Yorthops to be like. If she made no more sense than this, she was on a dead end.

“Oh yeah, I seen her pretty often a few weeks ago, but she's not staying here now. She's got a place that she's watching for some people who took a few years to see the tunnels and the south. Come in, I'll find that address.” She lead her deep into the old stones of this structure. Three rooms in, she came to a room with a window on a courtyard

with natural light. Not direct light, but at least natural light. She left Ava there, and left with the candle to delve deeper into her dwelling.

‘She’s part Gnome I’m sure’ Ava thought as she waited. There was a big milliclamp in the apartment and it was inching along the rail. It turned it’s biggest eye on her when she reached out to pet it. Some of these had less personality than some klizhorns and this seemed to be one of them. She left it alone after that. There were plenty of other species around the place to entertain her, though not many of them were what one usually thought of as domesticated species. There was a big wax-paper nest of small flying fish up between the windows that certainly hadn’t been disturbed since the last coat of paint was applied, probably about the time Tdeshi O.D.d.

She soon came bustling back, “Yes, here it is. I know where this is, it’s down beyond Seventh Canal about six locks south...”

Ava copied down the address, noticed it was the other one hSkaiya had given her, and began to try taking her leave.

“...there’s a Mason-Klaggin right on that corner, but you can get across on the upper deck. Anyway...”

She had to eventually walk out. She wondered why that woman didn’t get out more, but then thought she might have been sent home from everywhere she went. She could understand why Yorthops wanted to get out of there.

The neighborhood where Yorthops was now staying was in much better condition. Only two locks down from Seventh,

it was out of the bustle of the major canals, close to neighborhoods she was familiar with. The block had no water access, but wide well-paved streets went only a few blocks to small commercial centers. It was five floors of stone, probably put up in the late 40's when this was a separate town on the contour eleven miles northeast of the Kassikan. It was now overgrown with vine and had grown two shaftwood turrets ten floors above the original five. The remaining roof was still open and was probably a nice yard for the residents of those shaftwoods. As she got closer she saw that each home went thru from the street to the interior court and was five floors high and averaged about twenty feet wide.

She found the one easily enough. It also had a speaking tube. There were steps down to a lower floor also, so the place was six floors in all. She could see that the front half of this floor was taken up by the foyer. She was professionally greeted and a servant was right down to get the door. "The lady is not in at the moment, but she said she would be having Duskmeal at home this week."

"Do I have the right Yorthops? Stubby, curly black hair, pretty face and very cheerful, is the description I was given."

"Yes ma'am, you do." He was leading her up the stairs already. "I have known her myself for decades."

"How does she know the owners of this property?"

"She is a descendent of the owner, fourth generation I believe."

"Does he know how many descendants he has?" Ava asked.

"He has eleven, he expects us to know them all, especially

the ones who have been here. Yorthops is one of the most pleasant to know.”

They had come up into what must be the main room of the house. This whole floor was one room except for the stairs and posts. The stairway was wide to the floor above that held the dining and cooking areas. There was an atrium in the center thru which she could see them. There was a data connection with a large flat-eye at one end of the room. This home had it's main outdoor space on this level also, on the inside of the court, this was ground level. Their deck was only a step or two from a large common yard in the center of the block.

“Would you like to wait here or would you like to be notified when she returns.”

“It looks quite comfortable here, but certainly you aren't alone here. The staff must sit and gossip somewhere?”

“There's just me and Marsi and she doesn't sit and gossip with me much, she rarely stays home when she's off duty.”

“She must be on duty now,” Ava said, remembering the voice at the end of that tube.

“The tube's funny, a small diameter I think, it changes the pitch. Marsi is not on duty at the moment, I have a few hours of kitchen work to catch up with. May I get you anything?”

“A nice cup of yellow if you have it.”

“I have bottles, will a Sunworks Eleven be all right?”

“I'm sure it will,” an eleven week sun steep could be potent if good pods were used. “I'll just laze in the yard if it's all right?”

“You may attract company if you move well into the open

area.”

“I’ll be right over here where it’s sunny.” Kortex had not yet hidden behind the end of the quadrangle this Afternoon. If duskmeal was late in this household, it could be many hours til Yorthops returned. When he came back with the very nice looking bottle, she asked the time of Duskmeal.

“We begin it about horizon time normally, but I’ve had no instructions on what the meal should be so she’ll likely have me run out for something.”

Ava didn’t mind. The last rays of the week were warm, the yaag was potent and tasty and she might have even taken a little nap because she noticed she wasn’t in the sun any more and it was getting cool. She entered the main room from the deck just as Yorthops was coming up the stairs. She fit her description so well, but was much cuter than she would have expected. It must have been the smile and the dimples and the round little buns. “You must be Yorthops,” Ava said, “you match the description hSkaiya gave me.”

Yorthops was looking intently at her. “hSkaiya, yeah, I typed to her just last year, just a few weeks ago.”

“You let us into your home to look at the stuff Tdeshi left.”

“You mean Teshi right? That’s you right? You do look familiar. It’s been so long and we heard you...”

“Yeah, she did. She used to pronounce her name with the roll up in her native land but seems to have given it up down here.”

“We slur our words a lot here in the city, I’ve heard that said by many.”

“So you knew Tdeshi?” Ava asked, “I’ve gotten used to saying it that way even though I grew up in the city. I never felt the name was mine to change.”

“You’re not Teshi? You look a lot like you always did, well I’ll admit you’re not quite so bone skinny and hollow-eyed as I remember you.”

“Didn’t hSkaiya tell you in her message?”

“No, she said you came back looking for your stuff.”

“I didn’t even know she left it. I’m Tdeshi’s clone daughter Ava. I never met my mother, she died in childbirth, with me, all due to a shonggot overdose.”

Yorthops pulled her head back, “That’s tragic.”

“Sorry, my story does scare a lot of people.”

“I’m just watching,” Yorthops said, “I’m not afraid of it, I’m sorry that happened to you. You don’t remember a thing?”

“I’m not the same person, many people have told me I don’t have the same personality as Tdeshi.”

“That might not be all bad.”

“So you knew her?”

“As much as anyone did. I sold the house to Hyondahi and moved downstairs. You moved in the other first floor room, the one I’m in now. You got it started growing in like that.”

“Tdeshi did.”

“Yeah,” Yorthops said, “But I kept it up, even when I was

upstairs with Himla.”

“You’ve done very well. I have no idea what it looked like when Tdeshi left it.”

“Thinner trunks, more sunlight, no vines over the front walk.” she took a quick breath and asked, “So what are you trying to find out?”

“Where the shonggot came from. I want to know if she did it to herself or was it done to her.”

“Ouch, why would anyone do that?”

“To gain favor in Kassikan politics. Two of the people who were on the crew that brought her in have been promoted.”

“In the Kassikan!?” Yorthops exclaimed. “That was only twenty decades ago. I’m sure several schools have put up new course monuments by polishing the old one since then.”

She didn’t need to tell her the monuments were polished once a century. “Kulai has also been promoted.”

“That name means nothing to me.”

“He was the supervisor of the guy who should have been monitoring me,” Ava said. “The one who went out for a piss, he says, since then I’ve heard there was also a bottle involved.”

“Why would he get promoted?”

“For firing that guy I think. He was involved in several other fuck-ups. Kulai had to be promoted to have the authority to fire him or some lame excuse like that.” She wanted to go on and whine about how he was also the one who told Jorma that his young love had been erased by a

Yingolian ghost and sent him running off into the city to cut off his genitals, but she refrained. Maybe she was getting a bit more healed, maybe it was the delight Kulai had given her to make up for scaring off Jorma.

“So what more can I tell you about Teshi?” Yorthops asked.

“Did you know about her and shonggot?”

“Now I do, but not until after she disappeared. I was second level removed in hearing that rumor. She was a boost addict at the time, I knew about that.”

“Elanda never guessed,” Ava said, relating what she’d been told at the Bigtree. “Byara said she suspected and Hyondahi admitted to them that Tdeshi had done it before, after she disappeared.”

“Who else was there?”

“Himla, but he said he never guessed a thing about Tdeshi doing shonggot.”

“Oh I don’t know about that,” Yorthops said, “I know Hyondahi knew what was going on. I know he felt guilty about it. If Himla wasn’t the one who sold her the stuff, it was another of his close friends.”

“That’s interesting, I thought he was against her doing it?”

“I’m pretty sure Hyondahi was, and I don’t think it was him that had it, I think it was one of his friends. I think there was tension because of it. I have to say I was trying to keep my nose out of your, I mean their, business. It was pretty messy from what I overheard.”

“Yeah? What did you overhear?”

“Mostly her last sleep before she went downtown, not that there was any sleeping in the upstairs quarters that sleep. She was screaming about her same old drivenness and he was trying to talk her out of it by telling her how stupid and hopeless it is. They were both carrying on at volume ten with plenty of jumping up and down and flopping on furniture.

“She was arguing that she had to spend the year without sleep to earn enough to live on and he was saying that it couldn’t be done, she would kill herself. He was an unwitting dupe, challenging her in a way she could not resist even if she wanted to. Now she had to prove it could be done and that she could do it,” Yorthops said, “I remember thinking something along the lines of ‘everything you’re saying is making it worse’ when I wished I couldn’t hear it and could get some sleep.”

“But you think Hyondahi had something to do with her supply?”

“I think he knew who it was. I think it was one of his old friends so he couldn’t fight as hard as he should have.”

“Do you know who?” Ava asked her.

“If I had to guess, I would say it must have been Himla, but I hate to say that because I really don’t know. All I have to go on is that Hyondahi and Himla go way back, and that there was a very great tension between them at that time. It started when Teshi won that trip to the Kassikan. To each other they were always very civil and never got into shouting matches the neighborhood could overhear. I also understand Hyondahi got a very, very good price for that house from Himla.”

“Would you have a number?” Ava asked.

“Let’s just say almost twice what it was worth to a stranger.”

That would be close to aluminum, Ava thought, but didn’t need to put it in numbers now that she knew there was that much hidden in the price. Could it be Hyondahi was paid off by Himla? Who were they trying to hide what they did from? What had they done other than waste a life on shonggot?

“I’ve heard that Hyondahi was pretty shook up over what happened to Tdeshi,” Ava said.

“Yeah, he was as shook up as if he’d accidentally killed her. That’s why I thought he might have actually given it to her. Until I heard what he got for the house, then I didn’t know what to believe.”

“You were with Himla for awhile,” Ava said, “Did he do anything to make you believe he might have dealt shonggot?”

“He would deal anything he could turn a penny on, that was one thing about Himla and a big reason why I’m not with him still. It’s said he got even more for the house from hSkaiya.”

“It is a very fine property, I could see someone paying aluminum for that.”

“Yeah?” Yorthops said. “Himla offered it to me for fifty coppers when we separated and I told him no.”

“What was it like then?”

“Well, let me tell it this way, with hSkaiya ensconced in her rocker and me at the helm of the gardens, it has improved as much as it would under my ownership, which is to say, about doubled in value. That has come up to what you think it might be worth, almost half of what I think hSkaiya paid.”

“Over two aluminums?” Ava asked.

“Two and thirty is what I heard one drunken evening.”

“Whoa. Why would she pay that?”

“Because she was already living there and wouldn’t have to move. Partly because her money came from business she did with Himla at the time, she was practically moved upstairs already.”

“You returned downstairs,” Ava observed.

“Well before that sale. Me moving downstairs eventually lead Himla to want to sell. All the time I was upstairs with Himla, I always had a toehold downstairs. He could be a good time but I couldn’t take the slob in him after a few years, much less the shady business.”

“How did Bekthi come to the house?” Ava asked.

“When hSkaiya’s old room became available. We’ve all known Bekthi for years, she was tops on our list to move into the house.”

“But she never knew Tdeshi?”

“For years, as in not even a decade when she moved in, Teshi had been gone for many decades by then, went away to the city and never returned.”

This seemed to the a very transient house. “Who do you think was the last one to see her?” Ava asked.

“Probably Hyondahi, before he finally fell asleep and let Teshi pack in peace. When you were going to go without sleep for a year anyway, what’s one more sleep?”

“Were you still awake to hear her leave?”

“No way,” Yorthops said, “When Hyondahi finally gave it

up I was under in no time. By the time I woke up Teshi was already on a public making her way downtown. No one at the house ever saw her again.”

“Do you know what week of the year it was?”

“Probably still Kivundeer.”

“Nightday?”

“Dawnsleep,” Yorthops said. “I didn’t hear about the O.D. til Kyebenwae or so of that year so four weeks later sounds about right.”

“You knew that Tdeshi had O.D.d?” Ava asked.

“We didn’t really know that, we knew no one got a chance to ID the body because she matched an alert put out by the Kassikan and she was snatched into the Kassikan before anyone could get down there.”

“Is that right?”

“There’s some of that. There’s some of taking awhile to get anyone to go all the way down to North Treeland and look at her. Everyone thought it should be Hyondahi but there was no way he could afford it. He was broke from what he had put into the house already, and what he had put into Teshi.”

“What did he put into her?”

“He paid for the last two terms at ol’ Northie, he provided all her food and spending money. He paid for her supplies and equipment.”

“Why?”

“For sex, pure and simple as that,” Yorthops said. “She was his sex pet, and she kept him well supplied, everyone on the block as well as everyone in the house could hear that just

as well as their fights.”

“How much do I look like her?” Ava asked.

“Any still picture taken of you could match a still picture of her as well as anyone’s eyes could see. Any minute or two with you and there is no doubt you are alike only in surface. It seems like you are more considered and logical than I am, Teshi was so much less. I would think that would be something you would have inherited from her?” Yorthops asked.

“Are you terrified of Yingolian ghosts?” Ava asked.

“Not at all,” she said. “I could give a presentation to a room full of them, while nude, and not raise a single goose bump if the temperature was eighty or better.”

“So the fact that I am one doesn’t scare you?” Ava asked.

Ava watched this native Wood Elf girl think about that for a few seconds. “I know what they are,” she said, and probably did know the facts and figures of the starships. After all, the population is literate. “You may have been one if you claim to be the one who was transferred,” Yorthops said, “but you’re stuck in flesh now honey, hate to tell ya. I bet you already shit today.”

Ava’s body blushed. “I know, I came awake thinking I was stuck inside a 3D reality box in a video game. It was the deep old labs at the Kassikan.”

“Sorry,” Yorthops said, “I’ve heard about video games, but never played with one myself. It’s much more organic than that here.”

“But relatively free from parasites,” Ava said, wondering how far into space she could get this person to converse. She

had noticed that Yorthops had been drinking during the time she was out.

“No, we have few parasites on us right now, but most humans take action against most parasites sooner or later, that’s probably had more to do with our success as a species than the fact that we can communicate or the fact that we are an invasive species with few natural parasites. You actually come from YingolNeerie? Are there parasites there?”

“No one is ever totally free of them,” Ava said, “Among the poor they are universal.” It would be hard to keep Yorthops on the subject of Tdeshi. “So anyway, what kept Hyondahi from looking into what happened to Tdeshi?” Ava asked.

Maybe the thought that she would have to hear about parasites and insects and spiders if she asked more about Earth crossed her mind because she answered that, “His poverty did, poverty that Teshi went a long way towards causing. But he did follow her down there, it just wasn’t til after he sold the house.”

“How long was that?” Ava asked.

“Oh, a few years, not more than four.”

“Has anyone heard from him?”

“I have no knowledge of anyone hearing from him. I don’t know if he’s alive or dead. I was afraid he’d follow her into shonggot, O.D. himself to join her. He was so hung up on her.”

“Do you know why?”

“For the sex. He was oral, she would do it. He liked a loud woman also and she was that. But a lot of it was about

her body, and you've become quite a bit curvier than she was at the end."

"Yeah, I understand she was down on yaag and I'm an addict, that'll pad a body out a bit. I understand she was quite the athlete but if I want to work out I'll read a sports book. I'm quiet when I get laid and I think one good one a week is fine, and that's what I do for exercise other than daily life."

"That's about all I do also, but I do read quite a bit, but not sports books. I've got a trade as a kitchen designer now and then, just a few clients in Eleknane. I just space in the garden a lot, I've got a taste for the vine myself."

"You might get along better with this body now," Ava said.

"I already do. So it looks like Blapak gave you a bottle already."

"Yeah, but I'm only half thru it." Yorthops had extended a hand already and Ava slapped the bottle in it.

After a good pull she asked, "What would you like for Duskmeal?"

"Whatever your cook's good at," Ava answered.

"I don't know if I'll have him cook or not this meal. He can, but nothing adventurous."

"Any kind of zhindu roll would work for me," Ava said, "If Tdeshi was a fussy eater, it wasn't genetic. My problem is, food is delicious and I'm prone to overdo."

"Yeah, me too." Yorthops was walking upstairs to the kitchen. Blapak was two counters back going thru a bag of raw beans. "I'm back," she called to him.

“Welcome, and you found your company I see.”

“Have you started anything for Duskmeal yet?”

“No m’lady, I was waiting for directions.”

“It looks like it’s only the three of us, we’re willing to whip up something zhindu if you don’t mind.”

“Takes me off duty, I don’t mind at all.”

“You want one?” Yorthops asked him.

“Well I know how to make a zhindu roll, but I don’t know if we’ve got any fresh thesh.”

“I was just going to use pre-mats.”

“Oh, well, don’t bother with one for me then, but let me look.” He got up and began rummaging in the cabinets. He found a bag of it, not very full but with enough for three. It was all folded over. “I’ll have to heat some water to soak this in.”

“Do you think that’ll mat?” Yorthops asked.

“If we hot-water it.” They had a gas flame here and he put a thin pan of water on it and gently coaxed the thesh under.

“And will it be better than a pre-mat?” Ava asked. She had never used anything but.

Blapak looked at her like she was from YingolNeerie.

“Yeah,” Yorthops said, “we got fresh thesh up past Chardovia so I know the difference. It’s well worth it.”

“I’ve had plenty of fresh thesh,” Ava said, “But like I said, food is delicious.”

“Yeah, it’s already starting to soften.” Blapak said. He had soon coaxed the stalks into the warming water and was matting them only a couple minutes later.

Yorthops knew the kitchen, what was where and asked what she'd like for stuffing. "Try not to punish me with pounds I'll have difficulty removing."

"I've got a nice brace of kalic, let's shred some of that up." she was already handing Ava a grater and then a couple kalic.

"Skins and all?"

"We've got a mini-vat here," Yorthops said, "and thill oil."

Thill oil was known for not soaking into the rolls but getting them to oil temperatures. It produced a drier, more well-done roll. It was something she knew they didn't even have in Zhindu, at least not forty decades ago when Alan was there.

"You know," Yorthops said, "I have enjoyed your company more in the last few minutes than I did of all the years I knew Teshi. She could not have just done that, she would have had to question the skins deeper."

"I got deep enough at my career."

"What was that?"

"Yingolian crystals," Ava answered

Yorthops treated her to a good belly laugh, "It figures. So they can make them at the Kassikan now right, they didn't all come on the starship?"

"They're made all over the place now, it takes a pretty nice furnace to cast a good crystal, a fine cutting string to slice it and a good photo press to put the image on. That's what the basic steps are like, it's barely more specialized than that."

“This has all happened since Teshi,” Yorthops said.

“Actually no,” Ava said, “the Angel I was before I came to this flesh learned most of this knowledge a half century ago.”

“Angel?”

“Ghost,” Ava translated, using the term most natives knew, “the resurrectee who took over the body Tdeshi vacated.”

“And a good job you’ve done,” Yorthops said, and passed the bottle back.

There was a swallow each. She took hers, passed it to Yorthops who then passed it to Blapak before taking the end of it. She had no trouble grating all the kalic Yorthops passed her way, and some nice big chunks of dried lent too. She couldn’t get away from satisfying their curiosity about Angels and YingolNeerie. Blapak didn’t believe her because they had been testing all the claimants for decades, in fact he thought the whole story was a little funny.

“That story’s getting old now,” he said, “it’s decades in the past.”

“I believe her,” Yorthops said, “Because I knew Teshi. If you knew Teshi, you would be sure there is a new person in this body now,” she said.

“I tell you this was in all the cheap rags,” Blapak said, “decades ago. They’ve come off it by now, now they’re into secret alien invasion by nano-machines.”

So they had a very nice little Duskmeal at the counter by the window in the kitchen while she answered all kinds of off

the wall questions about daily life on Earth that she just couldn't generalize. All she could talk about was the rough squatter's camp in the abandoned parking garage where she had been a child. There were fights over garden boundaries and neighborhood sentries and raids by the constables. She told of the night her big sister had been carried off by the constables in their big armored vehicle to be raped to death.

It was such a contrast to this life here. It was still light enough to enjoy the view of the plantings in the center of this block and watch a couple playing point-toss with a bioluminescent triangle. A jungle city of peace and beauty. Yeah, this was a rather upscale dwelling, but her decades among the folk of the fields convinced her they had it much better than she did as a child. These natives of this world heartily agreed and could hardly believe the brutal test of survival she and her family had faced.

Blapak stayed with them til they finished eating. Yorthops said it was time for another bottle. Ava said she was game for another, Blapak got it but said he better clean up before helping with it and went to do that.

“But I will say,” he said as he left, “that you sure know more about YingolNeerie than anyone I ever met.”

“So what are you really trying to find out?” Yorthops asked her as they sat there on the stools.

“If Tdeshi was taken to find me a body.”

“Oh yeah, yeah, you said that didn't you?”

“Not in so many words, but that was at least a bottle ago,” Ava said.

“You worry that the Kassikan would do that?”

“I have very little suspicion it is the official Kassikan, but some suspicion that some individuals within may have done something to further their personal ambition. I believe the Instinct would prevent anyone from knowingly harming someone, but it is possible to set someone else up to do it unknowingly.”

“Remotely possible,” Yorthops agreed.

“What I have looked into,” Ava said, “was how many people answering my description normally turn up in the period it took for me to show up. Fifteen weeks from the time they decided it was worth doing until I was awake in that crypt. I went back over the records of all Shonggot victims for the past century. I see one, maybe two that look enough like me to be suitable in a decade, but none that close.”

“I see,” Yorthops said, “it’s like, as soon as one was wanted, it was provided.” She was clearly contemplating this while Ava watched her, but then she said. “You know, it could be that only a small fraction of shonggot victims get reported until there is a specific one that someone is looking for.”

“That’s hard to control for in an investigation.”

“Yeah,” Yorthops said. “But I’m not surprised that she O.D.d. Teshi was just in too much of a hurry. If she would have just laid back and taken it easy and gotten half as into Hyondahi as he was into her she could have had a really nice mellow life for herself right there in Eleknane and done real well realizing her dream of being an artist and clothing designer. It just doesn’t all have to get done today, but it could have been done by now. You know, you have a career right?”

“Over thirteen decades in Yingolian crystals right here in the Yakhan, most of it in the Kassikan.”

“Do you think they would do that?”

“I know a founder personally, I know he would have done no such thing. The top council’s main mantra is that the Kassikan has nothing to sell but integrity. Their only goal in founding it was to promote honesty and peace and understanding among mankind, so I really don’t think the High Elves would have anything to do with it. But what they’re sitting on top of is twenty five centuries of build-up, a staff of hundreds of thousands that they hardly know. All the founders were immortals from ancient times, most of the executives have stayed on since the 35th. The intrigue gets deep in there in the deep places.”

“What’s it like in there?” Yorthops asked.

“There’s a race in the Kassikan called the Gnomes who have never seen Kortrax, as a first order approximation. The canyon dam is nine hundred feet deep and nine miles long and riddled with passages, since it is the old filled-in buildings of the city, layer after layer as the lake rose thru all the centuries this civilization grew. We don’t know where all the passages are. The Kassikan cannot get as accurate a census of it’s inhabitants as the top cartographers can of the remainder of the Yakhan’s population.”

“In percentage?”

“In absolute numbers I think.”

“So what you are saying is the Kassikan is beyond organization?” Yorthops asked.

“It is at the same time over-organized and under-

organized and counter-organized. It is like the most ancient home. Some parts have had to be hollowed and reinforced. Some parts have had to be grafted. They had to bring in a little help with this and that, new centers of growth have taken over old, what was once the broken-off trunk has put up shoots above everyone now and knee-roots have grown into trunks. There's the equivalent of all kinds of different plank-ups with different people's notions of what was supposed to connect to where. Not everyone inside the Kassikan is singing the same song and even those that are, have no way of telling what bar they're in."

"So someone might have done it on their own?"

Ava paused a bit, "What I think is most likely, is something a lot like this: A guy who would be standing by on the boat crew that night is saying to one his of friends, 'you know, a lot of good things could happen to me if just one drop of this was to fall into Teshi's glass at Hargor's party next week while I was on duty.' So then his good friend does see that a drop falls into her glass because what he suspects is that his friend hungers for a sample of Teshi's body, since anyone would have noticed all Hyondahi had done to keep her as his sex pet. He probably thinks they will both be at the party and it is an aphrodisiac that will make her hunger for him as he does for her."

"That's a pretty wild circumstance."

"But there are just as many others with the same result, someone 'forgot' a step in the dilution because he knew his friend would be on a boat crew that night when someone answering the description would be picking it up."

“No one could,” Yorthops said, “because he would know he was erasing a life.”

“I’ve never personally tried it to see if I would know that,” Ava said. “The person doesn’t actually die from the shonggot and they don’t have to take it and the one forgetting this doesn’t actually give it to them.”

“I think the odds are that it was just lucky that someone with the right look happened by right away. I wasn’t surprised about Teshi when I heard, I thought there had to be something going on with her to get her as tight as she was all the time. It wasn’t just amphetamines, and I knew she was doing them to addiction already. I knew she did way too much caffeine too, but she was like that when she got to us.”

“You didn’t like Tdeshi all that well did you?” Ava asked.

“Tolerated OK, didn’t let her get to me at worst.”

“I see.”

“Yes, sorry she’s gone,” Yorthops said, “but thanks for taking her place. I never sat and shared a bottle with Teshi.”

“From what I heard so far, Tdeshi was quite down on yaag.”

“She never wanted anything that could slow you down or help you enjoy slowing down in any way. She sometimes lectured us on the time we wasted down at the Bigtree.”

“I see.”

“Speaking of which, when I’m done with this,” she held up this bottle which was already over half gone, “I’ll feel like continuing the dusk celebration. I’m up for going out and getting my crack stuffed this evening, how about you?”

“Just anyone?”

“No, I know where a few good friends will hang out, I’ll tell you who’s wholesome and who’s not.”

“I was pretty much monogamous for almost two years with the guy who knew my body’s former inhabitant.” She was reminded of how that happened, “And can I tell you something, it is such a pleasure to have someone who can accept me for what I am and still believe I’m human.”

“Or believe you’ve had to adapt to being human after being in that body twenty decades. If you had any trouble, you sure seem human enough by now. That’s the main argument against you being the transferred ghost.”

“I was born human, in flesh. I had a childhood playing with toys. I didn’t like some of the food my mother gave me. My father was drunk on the day I died, on liquor, what folks call gasoline or lantern fuel here.”

“Yeah, I know about that,” Yorthops said. “I’ve had it, even liked it for awhile. But anyway, were you trying to tell me you’re still monogamous?”

“Not really, I was trying to tell you I’ve never kept up my hunting skills.”

“Oh no problem, all you’ll have to do is pick which one of the guys I know down there you want to bring home.”

“I’m not quite that casual.”

“Well, I want to see if one of them’s down there while I’ve still got this buzz. It’s right on that corner across that street. I don’t mind if you stay here or not. I’ll be back in twenty minutes to an hour with one of six or seven of the neighbors.”

“Oh O.K., I’ll come with you, but I may not come back here with you. If I don’t get to mention it again, thanks for all you’ve told me, you’ve been such a help with this investigation that I can only begin to repay you by buying your drinks for the night.”

“That’s silly, and besides, I drink a lot.”

“A nickel would be nothing for the help you’ve given me.”

“Me and my friends wouldn’t drink a nickel,” Yorthops said, “but it could be an iron and change if there’s a lot of us there.

“Then lets go,” Ava said.

“Let me wash up and change. I might have something else you could put on if you want, you could look pretty good you know, you could do well.”

“I just don’t know if I’m up for it.”

“Well at least let me show you, it’s just one more floor up to my level. If you bring someone home you’ll get the room one more floor up in the front.”

“I’m just not that casual,” Ava kept trying to tell her as she lead the way upstairs. “I should think you would have gotten along well with Tdeshi in this regard.”

“Oh Teshi was a lot more casual than me. Like I said, I know these guys, I like them all, probably actually love them all in some way. I guess I can’t feel the way they’re strangers to you. I wish you’d just wait til we get there. What to you like in a guy?”

“Intelligence.”

“We’ll come up with that.”

“Fairness.”

“They’re all fair,” Yorthops said, “You’ll never have to worry about any of that kind of stuff. I don’t mean anyone in the place tonight, I mean the table I’ll sit at. There’ll be prettier guys in the place, the guys I know are good looking enough, they’re not ugly anyway, but they’re kind and intelligent and certainly fair and honest.”

“So I’ll come down with you, but don’t promise me to anyone.”

“No problem, everyone’s calm, everyone’s polite, everyone takes ‘no’ for an answer without having to get up and leave and won’t bother you again.”

“What if I change my mind later?”

“Then you have to let them know you changed it.”

“Then I’ll be comfortable at that table, what about at the taps?”

“It is possible that someone you find on your way might have forgotten you said ‘no’ the last time and ask again on your next trip but seriously, you may leave alone if you choose and no one will even raise an eyebrow at you.”

Ava did get talked into wearing a tube top and wrapskirt with a fluffy tasseled cape she had to admit did make her look pretty good and not so tall and goofy. And she was right about her friends. They didn’t talk about the Tdeshi case, nor was anything pertaining to YingolNeerie mentioned again. She did meet a guy, a half Dwarf, half Nordic guy with a nice cushy beard who was mellow enough to really enjoy. Tdeshi’s hormones kept her at Yorthops’ place til Nightday breakfast

was over. She knew she would be seeing Yorthops again whether she found out anything more about Tdeshi or not, til either Yorthops went back to Chardovia or she went back to Sinbara. If she ever went back; she was beginning to wonder.

She was going to look up Hyondahi however, and to do that she wanted to get back to the Kassikan again and get more eye time. The I. I. probe might have turned up something by now, she'd have to see what she could find out about them on the eye. After that she would have to go north and look into Himla.

7. Driven Into Hiding

She made it five in a row, sleeps with a man that is. Maybe it was just something to help her get over Jorma, maybe this body's hormones were taking over. She was going to get dinner and a movie this dark, but stopped by Kulai's office a little before he would normally leave. She had found that his hands more than made up for what he lacked in manliness compared to Jorma or even Yorthops' friend. She had been thinking more and more about Himla, and discussed it with Kulai. He got her to understand it could just as well be Yorthops who was lying. It could just as well have been Yorthops who was Tdeshi's source. She understood where he was coming from, logically, but he hadn't been with Yorthops so she didn't give that any credibility.

The sleep was the best she'd ever had. His place is a veritable palace, they bathed in a delicately carved marble

bath both before and after. A bath big enough for him to completely submerge between her legs and demonstrate how long he could hold his breath. There was a tall gas flame to dry in front of, its heat welcome in early Dawnsleep. The stone of the place held a lot of heat however, so it wasn't as cold as a place in the trees would be without a fire. The bedding was the smoothest she'd ever had, even in her virtual life, but his hands felt smoother, til she was ready to explode. Breakfast was superb again, behind glass this time for it was a chilly dawn. They made the same plan, if not noonmeal, darkmeal.

She was on her way back to her room from Kulai's, on Third Canal when she really noticed the same skinny guy who had been in the hall outside Kulai's was getting into a u-paddle right behind this public. She tossed her ten to the driver and got a seat halfway front. There were three passengers already. She was only going a couple miles down the canal.

At the next stop, the guy getting out was pretty fat and everyone had to hold tight to the dock while he climbed out of the boat. By the time they were under way again, she turned and saw that the u-paddle had nearly caught up to them and that guy was staring at her. He looked away as soon as she looked in his direction. She turned around and waited a few seconds. Before they were too far ahead she looked back again and caught him again.

She was worried about that. Kulai had said not to get in trouble. If the shonggot supplier was big-time, this could be a

pretty dangerous investigation. If the supplier was the Kassikan itself, or some faction within the Kassikan that I.I. had stirred up, how much trouble could she be in? She thought of the movie they had seen the previous evening and was reminded of the fact that dozens of councilmen at the Kassikan could cause more trouble for her than the owner of any fashion house.

She went one stop beyond her usual into the Baginzike commercial area just outside the wall. She had to find a bank and withdraw a copper from her account. There are no cash kiosks in this society. Then she stopped and bought herself a pocket-eye. This was what was called a phone back on Earth when she was young. It was packaged in a large hardwood seed-pod with a crystal ball clipped in the tendrils of one end that one used like a microscope's eyepiece. She got one without audio. The native devices that provide audio need a pressure source. For something portable, that means you blow up a balloon. She needed this for data access, a voice channel was an expensive and little-used option here.

It took some time, but it was still well before lunch on Morningday when she was back in the pyramid. There were few people hanging out in the local cook's court. There were a few students with a snack, usually with their face in a book. And there was that skinny guy in a bulky hooded shirt. He tried to follow her with the corners of his eyes only, she followed him with the corners of her eyes only. She did not leave the court using the hallway her room was on, she walked normally around the corner, then stopped and looked back. He was just getting up, headed this way. He saw her,

stopped and went the other way. She watched, she saw him look back, then keep going when he saw she was watching. She watched him leave the court on the opposite side.

Immediately she took off down that hall, then cut thru a study room and a supply aisle to come out on her hall. There was no one here so she ran and got into her door unobserved. She put her bundles down on the sitting room table and backed into the corner of the couch with her feet up, staring at the door. Her mind buzzed with fear and wonder.

She certainly didn't recognize the guy. It was no one they had talked to directly about Tdeshi. She wondered if she should have confronted him directly, chased him down and demanded to know what he was doing. He would have spun some fable, maybe even claimed he admired her but was too shy to approach. Whatever he said, she had no way to verify it and no skills to detect whether he was lying.

She'd forgotten to get lantern fuel, but still had sugar-water for the ceiling so she would have to make do with it's light. It was enough to make the pocket-eye work in here, she was very glad of that.

The first thing she looked up was anything she could find out about this investigation. She searched all the news on this world's data sphere. There is quite a lot, many amateurs post notes, most of them are gossip. She had to filter out some noise pertaining to a performer named Teshi who was attracting some comment in the Sistril area. She found Enjteen had made postings, but found nothing of interest.

She put a note in Althart's mailbox, requesting to meet

him, but not saying anything more. There is no security at all on this world's data sphere, obscurity is the best one can do. It was exceedingly difficult to make a posting to a founder of the Kassikan obscure.

The next thing she ought to do was go find Tdeshi's old boyfriend and talk to him, so she looked up the name Hyondahi. There were quite a few of them, some were too far in the past or too recent, but that still left too many to interview. There were a few who had eyemail addresses so she inquired of all of them, hoping they would get back to her in a reasonable amount of time.

When she went down to the cook's court for lunch, that guy was gone, but there was another who kept an eye on her. Now maybe she was more sensitive to it because of earlier, but she thought it was more than simple lust that drew his gaze. She would make a point of going to a different cook for noonmeal. She really wished she could take him up on his interest, pretend her interest was social and see what happened. As overcome as she had been by Tdeshi's hormones lately, she would invite him to her room for sex where he would fuck her lights out and she would wake up for Afternoonday with all her notes and data cleaned out. She decided not to brazen that out but merely smiled as fetchingly as she could and kept walking, again down the wrong hallway and back to her room without incident.

She figured there were probably optical fibers into every room in the structure anyway. She guessed that if I.I. wanted to watch her, they could select a view out of her reading lantern onto the eye on their desk. There was a limit to how

paranoid one can be, at some point paralysis sets in. If they can do that, why even play? Even if they could do it, did the right person know she was here? Since she saw no evidence that anyone knew she was here, so she decided to continue on but stay low.

In the afterlunch she tried to narrow down the list of Hyondahis and maybe even go talk to a few of them. She wasn't finding out anything more with this pocket eye, so she was about to put it down. She made a last check for messages and found one from Althart.

- My Dearest Ava,

Due to the ongoing situation concerning the girl who's body you were transplanted into, I don't think it would be appropriate for us to be seen together at this time. I'm sure this whole thing will be cleared up satisfactorily in a little while and when it is, I will surely make time for you.

Yours, Althart -

Her head buzzed even louder after reading this. She put down the pocket-eye and sank into the cushion. Did she even dare try to go out now? What had she started?

She knew she was guilty of nothing when she occupied this body. She knew she had to be talked into it, over long years, to accept the fact that a shonggot victim is truly gone.

But at the same time, any casual observer would think she was the one with the most motive for taking this body. She was also completely conscious that in this society there is no court of law. If the people in authority at the Kassikan decreed it, her royalties could be cut off and she could be banished from the campus, or for all practical purposes, from the city, and she knew of extreme cases where they had hounded people out of the Highlands altogether. There is no recourse of any kind except to convince a higher council in the Kassikan.

Alhart knew that she was innocent, but she could not be sure that he was innocent, could she? He seemed the most honorable person she had ever met, almost like a holy man at times, but she knew him well enough to know he had human faults also. Would he set her up for a fall to protect himself and his four thousand Earth year career as one of the heads of this institution?

For noonmeal she left over an hour early, went down the back hallway, out thru a facility store room and up to the elevator two floors above. She went four floors below zero, down thru the plastic recycler's gate and up to Second Canal where she got a public. She had a bit of a walk getting to Ziadrakes from Second, but it gave her more time to think. What did she really think Kulai could do? Come to think of it, might not he be followed also? If nothing else they could compare notes and maybe work together to defend themselves. But then how did she know he wasn't being so solicitous to set her up?

She came up the stairs to the court Ziadrake's was on and saw Kulai. There was a woman with him, practically on his lap. She was tall and blond with magnificent jugs that she was pummeling him with. Ava slowed down as Kulai noticed her and waved. The girl looked at her and Ava could tell she recognized her, though Ava didn't recognize her at all. One thing Ava was sure of however, she was an obvious bait girl. If Kulai didn't know that, she couldn't warn him now. She wasn't a good enough actress to join them and not give anything away, all she could do was take his hand once and try to tell him with her facial expression, and leave.

When she got back to her cubby, she found Yorthops sitting outside the door on the short railing at her portico. "I was just about to give up," she said, "and go get some noonmeal."

"I wonder if I dare?" Ava said.

"So you heard already?"

"No, but someone has been following me."

"That too?" Yorthops asked.

"Why, what do you know? Let's go inside."

"I'm hungry, have you eaten?"

"No," Ava said, trying not to let the hurt show, "But I don't dare go to this cook's court, they've got it staked out."

"I'll pick us up something at the one on 94th." she said.

"Good plan," Ava agreed, and went inside.

She was surprised to see Yorthops this soon and didn't know she knew her way around the Kassikan enough to find

this place just from it's cubicle ID. Of course there are plenty of friendly information booths all over the Kassikan campus except in the places that are meant to be secret. She seemed like she had some important news for her.

Ava had a little cask of a pretty good gold that was still half full so she set that out, along with a couple of the old cups she had stored here, washed in the bathroom sink. By the time she had that and an aromatic candle going, Yorthops was back with a dainty little stuffed thorp, still steaming. She had also picked up a couple sprigs of dried hoyberry to chew on in between.

“I notice you have a tape player in here,” Yorthops said.

“Yeah, it's an old wind-up pneumatic. This actual device actually pre-dates recorded music on Earth.” She got down a platter for Yorthops to put the thorp on while she said that.

“Got any tapes for it?”

“A few from my Zhindu phase back in the eleventh decade.”

“Perfect, put something on.”

“Sure, you carve,” Ava handed her the camping knife she had stored in here. It was an effort to wind up this player, but she got it done and put in something by Alan's girlfriend Desa, an overpowering sword and sorcerer tune from back when she was with Sarsawuf when Alan first ‘went feral.’ Her sister said it was one of Glenelle's favorite songs when they went to their virtual Zhindu back up there in Heaven.

“Good,” Yorthops said, “that's great. Point it at the door while we sit over here. I'm doing this only because you said you've been followed.”

“I think I have.”

“It might be one of those times when we can’t be too careful.”

“You’ve been all mysterious ever since you got here, what is it all about?”

“You were only gone an hour, Tilthane was still with me when I got another visitor asking about Tdeshi...”

“Kind of a tall, broad-shouldered guy with thick dark hair and beard, kind of on the scruffy side?”

“No, maybe a bit scruffy in an oversized cowl-shirt but skinny and sharp-nosed.”

“That’s the first guy who followed me,” Ava said.

“Well he’s interrogating after you, let’s not be in denial about that. He asked me for a word-for-word of everything we said. I chased him out of my house.”

“Thank you,” Ava said. “Thank you for noonmeal and thank-you for telling me what’s going on.”

“What is going on?” Yorthops asked.

“A very thorough investigation by the Kassikan into Tdeshi’s demise. I’m afraid it’s my fault this all got started.”

“Smooth move ex-lax.” [It’s an approximate idiomatic translation of equivalent slanginess and context.]

“So they are investigating me?” Ava asked.

“And me, I felt,” Yorthops said. “Why call at my door twenty one decades later?”

“You did know Tdeshi.”

“The over-driven blasted slut,” Yorthops added.

“You didn’t get along.”

“I could be polite in her presence,” Yorthops said. “I think it was my respect for Hyondahi.”

“Do you think you could find him?” Ava asked.

“Hyondahi?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think so,” Yorthops said. “All I know is he went downtown after selling the house to Himla.”

“I’ve looked up a list of Hyondahi’s, could you go find out if they are the one and ask these questions if they are?”

Yorthops took the paper Ava handed her. “You want me to be an investigator?”

“I’m being followed.”

“Maybe I will be too, after they questioned me and maybe followed me to your cubby.”

“Let’s hope you’re not,” Ava said. “I’ll pay for publicans wherever you can use them, streetcars too of course. Start with the closest of the most likely.”

“Who’s paying for this?” Yorthops asked.

“I am,” Ava said. “I might as well do something meaningful with my royalties.”

“Paying me to find Hyondahi?” Yorthops asked.

“Finding the truth about Tdeshi,” Ava answered.

“Yeah.”

The thorp claimed their attention for awhile, it was fall-off-the-bone done, tangy but not over-marinated. She was glad to see that Yorthops put that list of Hyondahis well out of reach of that marinade.

Yorthops didn't stay for the sleep but it was late in Noonsleep when she left. Ava spent a nervous week waiting to see what Yorthops might learn and dodging any further tails anyone put on her. She found herself constantly looking around any time she went out. She bought some bags of staples and another cask. She could feed herself in that room and saw almost no one at all for a week.

She made no progress at all that week, there was nothing more she could look up on the eye that was of any practical use. Instead she got distracted into looking up old cases of people who had been expelled from the Kassikan. There were some that had happened centuries ago who were still being hounded today, and only got peace when they moved to a different basin. Most of the people who inflicted those punishments were still on their committees.

She debated long and hard with herself about going to Kulai's office as Nightday got late. She really wanted to, but she worried that could only make things worse. He was sensitive about something financial, she was being followed and he was in the clutches of an obvious bait girl. In the end she convinced herself it wouldn't be prudent, while another side of her mind said she was just afraid to go out and still a third opinion that he might even have something to do with it after all.

On Morningday she took a long walk south on Second Canal. She was doing nothing but getting some sun and exercise. She blew an iron on lunch, drink, a news sheet and streetcars. She made sure that if anyone was following her, they saw nothing that pertained to the Tdeshi investigation.

She was nothing but a retired scientist on a day off.

She actually did socialize at Noonmeal with a few random guys. She imagined them as Internal Investigations operatives and lead them on a merry chase. They didn't get it and she didn't care, and wound up laughing at them and having to leave, leaving them dumbstruck and wondering what she was on. 'Just nerves guys, sorry,' she thought.

Yorthops returned early the next Afternoonday and stayed for a good part of the day but had nothing to report. The most interesting bit of information was, "One with a cute blond housemate did mention that I was the third person in the last couple weeks to come around asking if he was that Hyondahi."

Nothing was of any use to her. It was of some interest to hear how thrilling two of them were sexually, but it didn't help find out how Tdeshi was lost.

Yorthops also had plenty of stories to tell of Kassikan investigations. She had been a student once, she took some mechanics and three years of architecture. She knew about Internal Investigations and scared her even more by saying she thought their agents were much better at their jobs than the one that had followed her. She figured those guys must have been sent by the one she was trying to find.

By the time Yorthops left, checking the hallway carefully before leaving, Ava knew the only thing she could do to remove suspicion from herself was find out how it really happened.

8. Driven North

She picked up a message from Kulai while eating lunch in her hole that day. She didn't know if she could trust him, but she didn't know who she could trust at this point. She could go look up some people she knew decades ago, but the last close friend she had before she left was Tahlmute and he would always be on the Kassikan's list of people to keep an eye on. She wouldn't be low profile there, and she hadn't left that relationship amid sunshine and rainbows.

The office she was visiting was not the one in the Kassikan, Kulai's Morningday business was conducted from an office on the sixth floor of his building. It does have a back stairway that actually connects to his home, but its front door was four floors above the business street in this neighborhood. It was a nice place, comfortable without being overly large. He wasn't in his office like his message said he would be, but it was open and she made herself comfortable. She got into a copy of one of his trade mags and learned quite a bit about the math behind figuring the margins and what odds to figure for the weather on any of the lakes. Her mathematical mind was actually interested by the time he came in the door. "Your message said you were going to be here," she said.

"I left a hard copy at your pyramid room."

“I picked up the eye copy while I was having lunch,” Ava said.

“Have you been here that long?”

“Actually I thought I might be too late,” she said. “I’m sorry I was jumpy the other day, how secure is this room?”

“What are you talking about?” Kulai asked.

“We may be under investigation,” Ava said, “I think I.I. is watching me anyway.” She told him some of what she knew already, told him that she had to go confront the guy up north once again. “I think the best way to clear myself is to find out how it really happened.”

“Do you have to leave this Noonsleep?” He asked.

“You see I’m packed.”

“I see you needn’t return to the cubicle they’re watching, but you can go up the back stairs to my place. We can make sure you are not seen from a window.”

“Yes, let them think I’ve already left.” She agreed.

She cooked them a great meal of roast blenth, then he took her to a wonderful place out of view of any eyes, a bed deep in the carved marble of the building that was dark and cool for Noonsleep, a luxury she could scarcely price, something she hadn’t had since she was virtual. It had now been over a week since she’d joined with a male and she went after him with some vigor.

At breakfast however, they scared each other with talk of how much damage a bad finding by I.I. could do them. More than ever she felt he was her best confidant in this matter. She noticed once again how comfortable she felt here, in this home and with Kulai.

But she couldn't dawdle, she had to make her way to the docks and a lake runner that would take her all the way to Chardovia. She had everything she needed for two weeks on her when she left the cubby in the pyramid. She could wash them out and continue on if she had to, but she was following the trail that lead thru Himla til it ended.

Kulai was generous to lend her an enclosed coach that his business had at their disposal. He would send her on her way in that. She drew a wide-brimmed hat down low on her face and put her pack on her shoulders. She asked one parting question of Kulai as she climbed inside.

“Please, anything,” he said.

“Did you mean that offer about putting me up? I mean now that we know each other a little.”

His eyes got big, “From my soul's core,” he stammered.

“I'd like to talk about that when I get back,” she said, but didn't know if he heard because the kedas heaved and the door swung shut as they lurched away.

Once she was on the docks she stopped for a couple quick cups and tried to sound like a tourist. She took a public two tenners up First Canal just cuz and got well north of the Kassikan, just south of the beach, but not out on the Knob itself. It wasn't a well traveled area for lake runners as it turned out. She walked out a lot of docks to find luggers that could get her to the north shore by dark.

She did have a nice lunch, she would have called it Chinese breaded calamari as a little girl, it was called vedned mumf here. While there she pulled out that pocket-eye and

found that the closest lake runner listed was almost three miles down the docks. Yeah, there might be one closer that didn't bother listing on the eye, but she couldn't walk up and down that many piers in what remained of the day.

She got there in plenty of time to get a ticket on the darkrunner Argon's Racer. She got her cabin, unpacked and still had plenty of time to kill and what better way than by catching a few calories and maybe a cup at a corner table out of the way. Right above the dock was a little place called Ishi's that looked as nondescript as any of the hundreds like it along the docks. It was deep among the tackle and bales, full of burly dockworkers laughing at tall tales. Its sign said seafood cakes and a tap, it looked like a good place to kill a few hours, so she ascended the weathered plank steps.

She had barely entered the room, all hung with discarded cargo nets, when she did a double-take. He wasn't dressed for the office today but she was pretty sure it was him, though she had only met him once. "Delurna?" she asked over the noisy conversations, knowing she sounded stupid. There was nothing she could do but tough it out.

"Ava," he said, "What brings you here?"

"A bit of hunger," she answered. She could see he was going to pretend he had just happened by and deny she was under surveillance.

"You're heading somewhere?" he asked.

She could pretend she came down here to the docks for the sea food cakes couldn't she, but didn't think she really had the deception skills to pull that off. Instead she just let him know exactly where her mind was at seeing him here.

“Your people probably have a copy of my ticket, don’t they?”

“We have no way to get copies of tickets on every vessel that crosses this port. We wouldn’t have time to read the list of the names of the ships.”

“Then how did you know I would be here?” Ava asked him.

“How did you know I would,” Delurna asked in response. He jutted his chin when he said that.

She thought he was trying to flaunt his maleness for her, he did have a beautiful chin. She wished it didn’t stir Tdeshi’s hormones the way it did. “You were the one who came looking for me.”

“I was already in line when you came thru the door.”

He was really playing the part and daring her to call him on it wasn’t he? “So you are here completely at random? You didn’t seem surprised to see me.”

“When you’ve been around here since the 52nd, surprise comes harder,” he answered, languidly. “I am here for the seafood cakes, they are superb. Shall we split a large?” he asked.

“Can we have a cup with it or are you on duty?” Ava asked him. She had the feeling even if he was putting on an act, he wouldn’t do it under the influence.

“I drink little,” he said, “on duty or off, but I could sip from a cup of yours.”

He was definitely trying to use hormones on her. “I’m sleeping on a darkrunner, in case you need the warning.”

“Thank you,” he stood up a little straighter. “I regret that I

can't join you, though the idea has merit." He had progressed to the head of the line by now and dealt with that. Since he was buying enough for both of them, Ava slipped out to the keg in the next stall.

"So where you headed?" he asked with false casualness, when she got back to the table with the mug. The table was an antique capstan with a clear-plast top scratched almost opaque. The backless stools were wobbly.

"Out on a darkrunner," Ava answered, determined not to confirm data they already had. Just to show how she wasn't going to play a game with him she asked, "How's your investigation going?"

"The charter forbids..." he started.

"Mine does too," Ava said, getting her point across. "No doubt you'll have me followed, even if I give you the slip."

He made a face, paused, and drew a deep breath, "Did it ever cross your mind that you had a lot to gain by what happened to Tdeshi?"

It was about time he dropped the act. There was no sense in pretending the other didn't know what was going on, was there? "So you're admitting that I am under suspicion?"

"Everyone is under suspicion," he said, a stock answer. "You might be interested to know that several of your lovers are high on the list of suspects as a source of the shonggot."

Her mouth was full, so she took a minute to answer. They must have decided that Hyondahi was involved. She nodded at that, and decided to lead them on from there, "Yeah, I'll tell you the next step, I'm pretty sure it was a friend of one of Tdeshi's lovers, not one of her lovers himself."

“One of your lovers, not one of Tdeshi’s,” Delurna told her. As if he could understand the difference between Tdeshi and Ava perfectly and knew exactly what he was talking about. “They all had something to gain.”

That was unexpected, “One of mine?”

“Has anyone hinted at any of that? Recently or in the past?”

She was a bit off balance with this, reeling, she said, “I don’t think I can remember anyone in my past talking about it in any way except to express sympathy over what happened to Tdeshi.”

“Have any of your past lovers known Tdeshi?”

“That guy I came down here with knew Tdeshi too well. I got to thinking he was trying to turn me back into Tdeshi.” What if Jorma had something to do with this? What if Jorma was driven mad with jealousy when Tdeshi left him for the city. What if he HAD followed Tdeshi down to the city at the time? There was certainly more to Jorma’s relationship with Tdeshi than he’d told so far. Nothing he’d said so far explained why she was so important to him.

“Any others?”

“No one but Jorma, his friends where she was a child,” she had to admit, “and a few people I met north of Chardovia have ever known Tdeshi. Some of them may have been Tdeshi’s lovers, I don’t know that. I know none of them were mine.”

Delurna backed off and ate his seafood cake for a few seconds. Maybe he had learned all he wanted to know, but she hadn’t. “Did you sic that hottie on Kulai?”

“What’s a Kulai?” Delurna said and gave her a stupid grade-school grin. “I can guess he might be a lost lover?” he frowned in false sympathy. That meant he must not know that she had seen Kulai the sleep before. Good, she quickly let her face pretend that still hurt, but talked about the facts that Delurna seemed to have forgotten. “We went over him when I started this case.”

“I don’t have my notes with me,” Delurna said.

“Oh come on,” she said, wondering that he could pursue this masquerade so deeply into the absurd.

“Ava, I can’t discuss the case. I can ask questions, I can’t answer them.”

Good, we will get to the point. “Kulai’s a decent guy, he’s too kind-hearted.”

“Everyone is under suspicion,” Delurna said, a stock answer again.

They argued some more about it, but she didn’t learn anything more from him. She pleaded Kulai’s case as well as she could. She used a bit of defiance and sarcasm to cover her fear. He gave up questioning and turned to small talk about carting luggage around while traveling and his favorite means of travel. It actually became pretty cordial as the afterlunch waned, to the point where she wondered if he was trying to be the bait boy playing her. She had already warned him she was sleeping on a dark-runner and she meant it, though Tdeshi’s hormones would have made it a difficult promise to keep if he had pressed her on it.

“So you’re going to signal to the next one of your agents

to pick me up as I walk out of here, right?”

“Go, Ava. I’ll sit right here...”

“And pull out your pocket eye,” she said and watched him blush. “See, I was brought up with them,” she said.

She walked casually toward the stairs til she was just out of sight, then swung over the rail and darted back thru the kitchens. A few guys shouted but she charged thru. She was so glad she had already unpacked on the boat and didn’t have that pack on her any more. More glad when she charged up the back porch steps to the third floor above the dock. She never considered herself an athlete, but the genetics on this world kept one’s body in top form with relatively little effort and the lack of energy resources ensured that everyone got enough exercise. The third floor was the dockhands circular, it could get rowdy up here and there were a lot of drug sellers, but she walked briskly along here til she was at the dock of her ship. There she went down to the cargo level and dodged teams and wagons and came aboard with a load of brined karga that would probably be Nightday dinner on Grand Canal. While she was in the hold she got an offer from one of the crew that she followed up on to her delight the next day. To the best of her knowledge she was not followed after that.

She should have gone after Himla sooner, she thought, rather than hiding in her cave. She wasn’t cut out to be doing this kind of thing. Other than that one encounter, she only went thru the motions of life on Argon’s Racer. She couldn’t pay attention to her fellow passengers, and gave short answers while she stewed. The more she thought about it, the

more it made sense that Himla was the one who did it. She looked out for anyone else following her, but saw no hints. She didn't mind if they followed her now did she? 'Please follow me to the killer,' she thought of painting on her cape, all she cared about was that they didn't stop her.

All thru Nightday and well into Dawnsleep she paced the deck while the darkrunner toiled in foul winds thru Shipping Cut and the Grand Canal. The stops in each city seemed interminable. This was one of the times she regretted the world of her exile. An ancient ski-boat from her grandparent's time would have had her up to Chardovia in several hours. So would a moped for that matter. Now the week was getting late as she paced the deck back and forth, as if the speed of her steps could be added to the speed of the boat and get her there sooner.

As they beat back and forth across the canal in the chill glimmers of dawn, a needleboat cruised by them, and she couldn't help herself thinking it was Jorma. She had paced to the far side of the deck at the time, she hurried back to that side of the boat but by then all she could see was the hair and jaw line, not enough to be sure, and it was at a distance in dim light. Was her mind trying to tell her something? Was he the reason she came down on this adventure? No, her body was the reason she went on this adventure, why she left the Kassikan and why she went north almost three decades ago. There was a soul in this body before her, a soul she now knew was named Tdeshi. The fate of the soul called Tdeshi was the reason she was going to see this investigation thru to it's bitter conclusion, even if the hormones it flooded her with or

the cups and bottles that medicated her sorrows caused her hallucinations.

She tracked Himla to his house. He was alone in it when she got there, before lunch of Morningday. It was functionally a second floor over the tiny stoop-over barn below. It was on a little sliver-lot between two other smallholds only a half block from the back side of the Bigtree. He was laying on the cushion and was probably about to spark a big bong when she called at the door.

“Teshi,” he said, “or what’s your name now?”

“Ava,” she said. “Teshi was the girl you killed, my mother.”

A lot of looks passed over him quickly. There was a split second of gut-shot shock, before some other consternation but they passed and he settled on angry.

“It won’t do you any good to bluff and bluster,” she said, “I have a pretty near eye-witness account.”

“From who?”

“So you can retaliate?” Ava asked. “I don’t think so.”

“Some rumor behind my back then, so what? You aren’t welcome here, get out of my house.”

“The Kassikan is investigating, I’ll lead them here next.”

“What can they do?” he said, but she could see he was actually worried.

If they censured him, it could make life very difficult for him. The Bigtree would certainly honor a Kassikan censorship. “For the deliberate loss of a life, they might do

quite a lot.”

“I did not end Tdeshi’s life. She was fine when she left here and she left here without anything I ever sold her, on her or in her. She was doing a lot more boost than she was shonggot, I’ll tell you that right now. And I’ll tell you one more thing, anything, you, Teshi or anyone else ever gets from me is safe and effective, no matter what it is.”

“So you were her supplier,” Ava confirmed.

“While she was here. And while she was here she was fine.”

“Jorma knew her back in Sinbara.”

“What?”

“Where she came from before she moved to your neighborhood and became a good customer of yours.”

“I didn’t push anything on her, I just did her favors. She came here with the needs.”

“That’s not what Jorma says.”

“That guy you were with?” he asked.

“Yes, Tdeshi was his best friend’s daughter. He watched her grow up. She left his house to come down here.”

Himla cackled with laughter. “Then she learned a hell of a lot on the boat coming down here,” he continued, “because she was on caffeine and boost when I met her. Elanda used to call her ‘bags’ because of her eyes on a Nightday. She only used to sleep Dawnsleeps you know, the whole of the last few years she was here.”

“So you saw the change in her?”

“She was a mean, skinny mindune when she got here. She

got angrier as time went by.”

“If she was going to a year’s seminar at the Kassikan, I’m sure she would have wanted some shonggot for that.”

“Oh she did, and she hounded me like a pack of hakkens for some, but I was out.”

“So where would she go next?” Ava asked.

“I sent her to my supplier,” Himla said. “He had more but he wouldn’t sell it to me.”

“Who was that?” she asked.

“Your lover boy,” he said.

Part IV. Official Investigation

1. Initial Suspects

Delurna really couldn't have a place outside the walls with his position, and while his position was important, he could easily be resented and could not be allowed a place that was too ostentatious. Not that he would have wanted it. Some might even call his quarters austere. He was only three floors above the floor of a tiny atrium, a break area used by cooks from the apprentice sorcerer's dorms. Few still stayed in a dorm when pursuing studies that lofty, but there was still this atrium of three hundred rooms for those who did. This court attracted flocks of colorful wildlife, and it was one of the quietest places within the walls as the purple grey of dawn battled the chill of dark down among these mossy stones. In the stillness he could hear the voices of the cooks as they made breakfast for the dedicated wizards that lived in the wings of rooms around him.

A flock of earpipers landed and picked over the deck. He watched as he went thru his wake-up bathroom chores. He could see better from the small bedroom as he got dressed for the office. The earpipers were as eager to flash their hind-wings in mating displays as they were to find any crumbs that had fallen from the cook's clothes. His mind was trained to appreciate small things like that while still giving full concentration to the task at hand. The task at hand was a full day at the office where he was dedicated to the task of policing the honor of the Kassikan.

The case of Ava's body was the most interesting one he had open. The basic investigations were done and reviewed, a few peripheral people had been interviewed. He now had all the information that was available in data and paper.

All the paper he brought home was gone when he left, the bedclothes were tight, louvers closed over his closets. He ran up all his mats for the light of the week, the dawn light illuminated understated wall hangings of story-knots, replicas of 4th century Thulian work. The remainder of the apartment was styled in the stark and polished wood and stone of the the western outlanders who grew onions indoors far above air that those from Valindor could breath. There's was an austere culture and he admired it.

He always walked to the office, as outdoor as he could, even if it was in the freeze of mid Dawnsleep. He climbed the eight floors of stairs to his office from the sportswall passage behind the tower. He was privileged with a key to that door, though Heleem attended it at this hour. The stairs were his morning work-out, but today he felt all the leg work he'd been doing lately.

When he got to his desk behind the bookshelves first thing Morningday of week Fendeveermon, there was a committee summons staring at him like a malevolent eye. It was from none other than Medical Ethical Oversight and no doubt it was concerning his people's questioning of people in their Logistics Operations. Everyone who had actually seen Tdeshi's body from the crew who picked it up at Karteng's to the guy who left her unattended had been interviewed. Delurna had enough to do without having to report on why he

was investigating their people. No doubt they would be ready to defend theirs and accuse others. He saw the date of the summons wasn't until this Afternoonday so it wasn't urgent enough to take him off the case itself for today. Of course he wanted to take this Afternoonday off, so that was annoying.

One piece of advice he was given early in his career was still valid. That advice was, 'Follow the money.' He had done that and come up with several curious things. Of all the principals in the case, Kulai was the one who stood out the most with B'theen next and it was documented that they were good friends and B'theen, at least, was gay. Delurna looked up what they each earned at the Kassikan and in the last four days his paper chasers were able to find public records of a valid sample of Kulai's real estate and shipping transactions all the way back to that decade. B'theen seemed to have no other source of income other than cargo spotting, mainly for Kulai's business. Kulai had not been making a great deal of money at his outside interests and Delurna could not put together any financial explanation for his early purchases. After the third decade of the 100th, Kulai's finances made sense. Before the first decade of the 100th, Kulai seemed to have no finances. He didn't know every detail of course, but what he did know, made sense. But in the first and second decades of this century he kept buying bigger and more lavish properties. He sold them off, but all the records his team could find showed that he didn't sell them for much more than he paid. There was a serious input of money at the beginning, aluminum at least, maybe alloy. Kulai had no means to come across that money. He was the one to investigate.

Once he figured that out, he needed to choose an operative to go and look into the background of anything else that Kulai had going on. For instance, did he ever have any involvement with shonggot? Did he think bringing the person in for Ava's download would get him recognition? That wouldn't make much sense because even a promotion at the Kassikan would not source enough money to excuse what Kulai spent. Who were the major customers of his business? Was B'theen the source of the money?

Of course Delurna had already interviewed everyone on the boat crew in the past two weeks, he still felt all those stairs. Their stories were consistent, even after all this time. gZarvik admitted he thought it would be a good thing to bring the body for the Angel in. He heard enough of what went on in the Kassikan and knew how diligently one of the founders had been working on getting the Angel down from Narrulla's Tear. The remainder of them were aware also, not just from gZarvik. But none of them had anything out of place.

He'd found people to interview several of their friends, in most cases they were able to conduct the interview without anyone suspecting that they are being interviewed. Nothing was out of place there, none were considered dishonest or even sneaky.

If he didn't have that meeting tomorrow he would probably go talk to Kulai now. He knew how that would go, Kulai would be clean and cooperative at an official interview. He should have someone he might not suspect do it. He called another operative on his staff who didn't have an assignment at the moment, a bait-girl named Shaney. She was a tall,

classically beautiful blond, and as buxom as an Elf can be. No doubt her ancestral nymphs grew onions indoors. She was a bouncy, eager personality and playing the part of a bimbo came naturally to her. “Yeah?” she asked as he handed her a print of Kulai’s current case status.

“You don’t know him I’m sure, but he is a medical supervisor for the founders secret lab. He used to work down there when Ava’s body was brought in. What do you think of him?”

She spent more time looking at the picture than the facts and figures. “You mean could I get close to him?” Shaney enjoyed getting intimate with the people she investigated and Delurna was well aware of that. The hard truth was, she wouldn’t take a case if she couldn’t use her boobs.

“Yeah, could you work on him?”

“The full bait treatment?”

“It might take more than just bait, he’s a pretty sophisticated guy, look at where he lives.” He pointed to the address, “I think you know the area.” He knew that she liked working cases with rich people involved. He let her peruse his file for a time.

“Yeah, it could be interesting,” she said. “Anyone know where I can find him?”

“He hangs with B’theen from time to time and I’ve got bait with comm on him. I can have him post when he’s got a line. He may just have to do a button, but at least we’ll know where he is. If you want to take it I’ll message him now?”

“Sure, what do you want to know?”

Meanwhile Delurna keyed, ‘when you can talk -Dl,’ and

sent it, his man knew what that meant. “How well have you been following Ava’s case?”

“She thinks someone may have deliberately brought about the overdose that erased the girl who’s body she’s in, that’s about it. I know Althart’s under suspicion.”

“I think Althart knows he’s under suspicion by now so he’s being very cooperative. I have no belief that it is him, but I must amass fang-proof proof that it is not him. We will know what he said to anyone that whole year if we need to. The Kassikan must be able to prove that he is clean.”

“Seems to me the best way is to find out how it really went down,” Shaney said.

“You’ll be involved in that, rather than Althart research. We need you to find out just how this guy was involved. He’s involved officially, that’s all in his file...” his comm beeped, it was his man. ‘I need to know if he sees Kulai,’ he keyed. In a few seconds, ‘With him now,’ appeared in the eyepiece. ‘You’re at Ziadrake’s, or the warehouses below?’ ‘Ziadrakes mezzanine,’ soon appeared. ‘I’m sending Shaney to pick up Kulai, stall ‘em til she happens by.’ He turned to Shaney, “Go down to Ziadrake’s, in the Mezzanine, you’ve seen his picture. He’s there at a table with B’theen and Zhagin...”

“The gay guy that sits here when he’s in?” Shaney didn’t know him well because Zhagin was in high demand in the field and she liked guys who were all over her. Zhagin’s worktable was surrounded with folder racks, hundreds of papers taped all over them. The table was overflowing and there were bins stacked under it. His single stool was backless, sitting at the only corner of the table that was clear,

right in front of the desk eye.

“Yes, use him as your excuse if you have to, you work with him at Gel’s tackle, you’re cargo riggers, you’re a clerk in their dispatch office. His cover name’s Illick, yours is Bethai. Go make friends with Kulai and try to get a chance to read his file before you say anything stupid. Pay attention to the entry about the synapsase. Take some of those clothes off if you can...” she had a floor length soft wrap skirt and bulky flannel over a shapely but skimpy work dress, but Shaney was on her way with a ‘yeah right’ about saying something stupid. She could read some of it in the elevator and the remainder in the hall. He went back to his keys, ‘She’s on her way down there now, you’ll know her and can make introductions. She works as a dispatch clerk in the office, cover name, Bethai.’ ‘I better get back to the table, finished biological business,’ Zhagin replied and closed the channel.

So he turned and stared at the view Ava had admired. Thinking of her made him think of the fact that before she and the Brazilians got here, the quick setup he had just organized could not have happened. The Yingolian crystals were ephemeral, but they were portable. Before the starships, it would have probably taken a whole week to get this completely set up. At that time eyes were so precious that he was the only one in the department with one and it was connected by fiber directly to the New Orthanc hub. Shaney would have had to tail Zhagin next week and Delurna remembered she wasn’t as good at that. For now, having these devices gave him an advantage and he was glad to use it.

He strolled back around the partition. Lising was the only

one left. “So what do you want to work on today?” he asked her.

“I wonder why no one has investigated Tahlmute in all this. I would think Ava especially would nose around, he was her most serious pairing since Herndon.”

“She investigated him already, years ago, that was how they met. His only connection to the case was that he had recently sold a home near the place where Tdeshi boarded the boat. When she interviewed him about the neighborhood, they began a friendship, even though Ava was still with the Brazilian at the time.”

“I think she was too hung up on the fame,” Lising said about Ava, probably remembering back to when the gossip rags were full of her courtship with the Brazilian. “Ava is another you shouldn’t leave out of this investigation,” Lising said, “after all, when Tdeshi O.D.d, Ava was not governed by the Instinct. She was very eager for the transmission to take place, as least as eager as Althart was. And she is considered a rogue even among her own people.”

“So you’ve been following this case?” Delurna asked.

“Yeah, I’ve got nothing else to do. As long as I ain’t getting paid extra I’m not paying for the bait body. I like to eat and I like to sleep when I’m off duty.”

“While you’re on duty, I’d like you to find out what Tahlmute was up to at that time, do you think you can do that?” If anyone was to investigate Ava, he would like to do that personally.

“I’d be glad to, I have a contact in his inner circle.”

“So when were you assigned to Tahlmute anyway?”

“I assigned myself, I figured he’s our slimmest lead so I would be the one assigned, I’m here at my desk ready for duty, I’m keeping myself educated on the case and you just assigned me to look into him. I don’t understand why you’re questioning me like I did something wrong? I thought a contact in his inner circle could be useful any time, so I kept in touch with someone I met at random.”

“Lising, I’m sorry, I don’t mean to assign you the slimmest leads...”

“Someone has to, I expect the gung-ho types to get the good ones.”

“...and I don’t mean to sound like you did something wrong. I’m very pleasantly surprised that you’ve prepared so well in advance. By all means, put your plan into action, it’s a sound plan if pulled off well.”

“I will pull it off just fine. I will be exactly the scrap catcher I am and continue with the cover I always used.” She immediately started a message to set up a meeting.

This was a pleasant surprise, and once again, it couldn’t have happened without the Yingolian crystals because without them it is highly unlikely that she and her contact would ever correspond, Tahlmute’s current home is nearly an hour distant on needleboat and streetcar. The messenger costs would have been too high and few have the determination to correspond using a ‘for pickup’ box. He probably should have gotten the name of her source in Tahlmute’s organization, but she was testy enough already, so as long as the name and particulars were recorded it was fine. From the words, ‘scrap catcher’ it sounded to Delurna like her contact with someone

in Tahlmute's household might be a bit personal. He had long suspected Lising was a secret deviant of some kind. Why else would she let herself look that way?

Tahlmute was one of the Kassikan's most important hanger's on, always ready to provide services the Kassikan couldn't or wouldn't. Sometimes they were services the Kassikan wanted provided, like allowing the Brazilians some anonymity, sometimes they were not. Could that include supplying shonggot to students who experimented with it? In all cases he bore watching and his file took a whole rack. Delurna hadn't known that Lising had been getting to him. Maybe Lising wasn't so useless after all. He wondered if he only saw her rather flabby body and never looked beyond.

If he was really true to his heritage he wouldn't be so bound up with the female body. His life was solitary, but he sought women at least every week, often more. He wished he had more resistance to the allure of their flesh. Most other indulgences were easily controlled, used only as the social situation demanded. He knew he favored a woman's body over her mind when he picked them for his team. He knew he favored those who favored him. He worked hard at staying on the social scene and not relying on his own employees for too much of his sexual needs. As it was, all he was able to say was that he never asked, but he rarely told them no. Lising was one of the few who had been turned down.

Now that he had his people out on their shifts's assignments, he was left with this summons and figuring out what this meeting with the committee was about and how he

should prepare for it. Trying to guess their motives was the first step and that was his weakest skill. He could figure out the minds of the parasites on the Kassikan but not the minds of it's ancient bureaucrats.

He worried about what connection any of them could have had to the event. None of them seemed to gain any favor out of it. None had any financial gain, no prestige. Many on the committee had been entangled in various intrigues in the past, hoping to gain favor and win themselves a speakership or better quarters, so he shouldn't ignore the possibility that someone or a friend of someone on the committee was involved in Tdeshi's overdose. He looked at all their files and chased down all their friends files that were in the system, but he didn't find anyone who had gained anything by the overdose or the download of the ghost. He didn't move on until he was satisfied that the summons wasn't part of a cover-up.

He would have to treat it at face value, that it concerned the present investigation. He spent hours going over the transcripts, these things could sometimes get down to the picayune details of how the interviews were conducted. He really didn't find anything worthy of a squawk-up in any of the notes, but then he knew how fundamentally futile this was. All he could read was what his operatives wrote down. There was no proof that what they wrote down was what was actually said. One can only write a small fraction of what was actually said, even if they could remember every word and write fast enough to get it all down in a reasonable time, the cost of the paper would be prohibitive. There should be a way

to use Yingolian crystals for that too.

He reviewed all he could remember of the details of his interviews with the crew. Only gZarvik had really seemed defensive, that was because he was known to have predicted favor for those who brought in a body for the ghost. The others couldn't think of a reason they would be under suspicion and cooperated fully. But they could have met and compared notes before they decided to complain.

Of course, he was not the only one to interview them, Ava had also been to see each of them. Her tail had only been able to get close enough to overhear one of those interviews, but he reported it was cordial. Even so, it was possible that something she had said had actually prompted the complaint.

Delurna could not get a copy of the complaint that had caused this summons. He was pretty sure he could get access to all the data in the Kassikan's system. All that meant was that it was someone with personal access to one of the committeemen, and everyone on that crew could easily gain personal access to a member of that committee, many of them knew a member personally.

There was also the chance that a member of the committee had an interest in this personally so there would be no complaint to get this summons started. If he only knew what their interest was, he would know how to prepare for the meeting, but he had found no visible motive for any of them. If Tdeshi was taken to gain favor with Althart, the person seeking favor would have to be someone who knew Althart already and that was true of every member. He also had to consider the fact that anyone on this committee would

certainly have the means to make shonggot and the clout to leave no trail.

He spent some more time looking them up, trying to find anything he could that would link them in any way to shonggot, and found nothing. So he still knew no motive for this summons and had to plug away at any angle it might be for the remainder of the shift.

2. Before the Committee

The next day he made his way up to the meeting. The elevators took forever. The only good thing was he rode up with a charming girl who took his mind off it long enough to think about how nice it would be to have Nightday off and find her in one of the places she talked about. She was cuddly enough that he would have reported to the committee with an erection if he took all that was offered. But before they made arrangements to meet, he was at the top of that shaft and they parted. He made his way up three more floors on foot, it was faster than walking over to the point shaft.

They met well up in the pyramid, over the hundredth floor. This was one of the highest ranking committees with none of the founders on it as even an honorary member. The decor of the hallway was all crystals. Light broke into rainbows and spectra everywhere in the halls. Vistas of blue sky and puffy white clouds were at the end of every hallway although some were actually reflected. Most who came up here wore robes, he came as close as he could in wide white

bells and sleeves with mendelbrots in the black and orange of Internal Investigation trimming the openings. He hoped to be able to get out of even these and into his normal worker when he went to interview Kemberra, if he got out of here today.

All but two of the original members of Medical Ethical Oversight were still on it. There was nothing dynamic about this committee. They met on their courtyard this Afternoonday but it was getting toward halfway to lunch time by the time they actually got started. Their outdoor courtyard was a two story opening on the northeast face and the view of the rolling plots fifty miles away across the valley was nice. The speaker was finally at the rail, shaded by the big hornflower growing on this courtyard. Vilbarl was still the speaker, as he had been when Delurna's ancestors began to come down out of the High Westland's keeps in the late 32nd. "We won't keep you long," he said, after quite a few minutes oratory and introduction, "We'd just like an ongoing report on your investigations."

Delurna drew a breath, not expecting this opening gambit. They would probably 'why didn't you?' him to death if they were really interested in the progress of the case. "Just which investigations? I have seventeen cases open right now." He knew that was only stalling, but gave him a bit more time to compose his answer.

"The charges brought by Ava," Vilbarl said, "The ones against Althart that you interviewed several of our staff about."

Maybe it would be what he was expecting. "I did not take the charges as being directed specifically against Althart, I

took it as within my prerogative to investigate any who might have gained by the availability of the body Ava was put into. I have started investigations on several fronts.”

“Does Ava’s charge have any validity?” committeeman Gilbane asked.

“The timing is rather suspicious, statistically it should have taken at least a decade for someone looking like her to show up. It was fifteen weeks.”

“Ava was suspicious of the boat crew of that day,” Vilbarl said, “and I believe all the people you’ve talked to but Althart were on that crew.”

“Those seem to be the only ones you have been informed of. Those are the ones who have also been interviewed by people outside my department. None of the people my people have interviewed seem to have noticed that they were being interviewed. Like many others inside and outside your department, the crew of that day have been and are being investigated. I currently have no evidence to link that crew to any foul play. They were all cordial and cooperative, did they report that I interviewed them personally? I don’t want to give any other names now because I have nothing definite and suspicion can’t help but grow if a name is mentioned.”

“You may continue,” Vilbarl said.

“We are tracking down several angles, persons who may have been exposed to shonggot at the time, we have fliers up asking them to come in. We are tracking the flow of ingredients, due to marker analysis we have a probable supplier for one of the main ingredients of the shonggot that took Tdeshi and we will probably trace the source of others.

“We have followed the money also, to see if anyone seems to have gained or lost a great deal of money during that time. This has provided us with leads that we are pursuing, but again, there are no names I want to release at this time because this work is still preliminary.

“We are keeping an eye on Tdeshi’s old boyfriend as he stumbles around,” Delurna continued. “We think he’s contacted several of the same people we have and we think he is devoting a suspicious amount of energy to this after so much time. There are many avenues open, what level of detail are you interested in?”

Tassarini spoke up, “What do you expect to learn from people who were exposed to shonggot at the time?”

“Who had it, what the sellers were saying about it, that kind of background information. Mainly we want to know who was selling it at the time.”

“What could you possibly find out after all this time?” another asked.

“We think there may be a few people who would still remember something. There are many who experiment with shonggot and survive. We also have people investigating those who did not survive. We think very few would have died as anonymously as Ava’s host did so we might find potential sources that way.”

“Why would a known source be involved if she was taken against her will?” someone asked.

“Ava has already found out that her host was a known user at the time. She would have had a source already.”

Tassarini asked another, “Is Ava also continuing her

investigation?”

“Yes, she recently went to see someone from her body donor’s old neighborhood who is currently living in the city.”

“Keep your eye on her too, there was no one who had more to gain from Tdeshi’s demise than she did,” Emetta added.

“You’re right,” Delurna said, “but she is the one who started this investigation.”

“An old tactic, as you probably know,” Vilbarl said. “What is she up to now?”

“She caught sight of a tail someone else had on her yesterday and has been lying pretty low in her quarters since. She’s been seeing people and messaging people since then, we think she may be trying to get some old friends to do some legwork for her.”

“Just so she is not above suspicion,” Gilbane said, “No one can be above suspicion.”

Delurna stopped here and looked at them all before continuing. “That bad tail that she spotted has hampered my investigation more than any other event so far. The problems it causes me is not just that I learn less, it is that she is now suspicious. Until that untrained operative stepped on her heels she had no idea she was being watched.” He said not one more word, but let the lines of his face say that he hoped this committee had nothing to do with the hiring of that bum. He looked directly at Emetta, but did not see an admission of guilt on his face. Of course he’d hid his guilt well in the past.

Vilbarl asked if there were any more questions. There

were, it went on for two more hours. Thru it all they went over little new ground, they were only trying to work names out of him. He knew that if he said anything about Kulai now, they would demand he take action immediately and not wait for him to confess to a bait-girl. He refused to give him up, diverted their attention to other possible avenues and gave long lectures on investigative technique and the protocols under which his department operates. Finally, as lunch time approached and more people began to drum on their bellies, it began to slow down. Finally the speaker decided to wrap it up. “You do understand,” Vilbarl said, “That to find that this person had been duped into an overdose would be a terrible thing. But even worse than that, if that happened and the one who did it goes unfound...”

“I understand,” Delurna said, “That is why we investigate.”

“Spare no one,” Gilbane said, “Not even Althart. No one wanted that Angel to find a body more than he did.”

“Well, with the possible exception of Brancettrabble,” Dorius said. He got lots of looks and questions, they all knew who Brancettrabble was, the rogue wizard of Trenst. The one who’s labs created the contagious permanent anti-aging virus and created the Instinct. They would all love to find a way to blame it on him for sure.

“You mean LaunJu?” Someone sitting back between the darkleaves said.

“He hasn’t used that name in centuries,” someone else said. “LaunJu was his Nycoba name, Brancettrabble is the name he was born with.”

As they got into that stupid argument, Delurna thanked the speaker and left.

3. In the Deep Labs

He didn't share in their lunch, though it would have been sumptuous and well served. He also didn't get back to his quarters to change. Instead he let another of his cases take over and stopped at a cook stand and watched his supplies and suppliers for a few minutes while he ate. This was on an unrelated case, something more long-term. It required constant vigilance to keep sleazy people from targeting the cooks.

Kemberra was the foreman of the secret lab's enzyme store room. By diligent dredging of the Gnome's archives his people had found that Kulai had signed out a 600ml bottle of abHg synapsase only a couple years before Ava's host was brought in. This is an enzyme used in neurological research that was also the base ingredient in shonggot. This was charged to the department budget, but the eleven iron and ten charge was nothing, what it could be used for was key.

At the time this had happened all they knew was that the synapsase in the shonggot that took her was from that batch, but it could have been from any bottle in that batch and there was no way to narrow it down. Twenty decades later, that bottle had never been re-used, all others had come back into circulation in a reasonable time. That did not mean that it was used in the shonggot, but it was a detail that had to be

covered.

Even for Delurna it wasn't easy to get down here. He had to report to an office near Kulai's. He had to be blindfolded and lead to the elevator. He was already in it before they took the blindfold off. He went down a very long way, deep into the canyon. When he stopped, many shafts down, he was in a damp room dimly lit by swirly green panels. He had been given a map of the complex. Nothing on the map was labeled but enzyme stores. It was three more floors down from here.

He got into a stairway and was amazed by the uniformity. There were floors above and below, just as dimly lit, with identical landings. He was glad the map told him he had to go down three floors. He noticed little numbers on the stairpost. He was going from seventeen down to fourteen. He wondered when this part of the city had last been above ground. This was one of the first parts of the canyon to be filled in, probably back in the 34th or so. Back by Ninth Canal it was probably the 53rd when that area was filled in. Ninth Canal had crossed Canyon Lake on a bridge when he was young.

The place was so empty and dim. They couldn't afford much light because there were so few people down here it seemed. It seemed like this must be the middle of Dawnsleep when it was really mid Afternoonday.

Kemberra was not in the entry area of enzyme stores, he had an office a few rooms back that a pale and thin Goblin girl lead him to. The office was a small room on a mezzanine that was quite dark, the light from the main room was the only light. Kemberra was a short, wide-bodied Gnome/Troll mix with an enormous tangle of black curls over his head and

halfway down his back. “Yes, I’m Kemberra, what can I do for you?”

“I am Delurna of Internal Investigations. I’m here to ask you some questions from the remote past, twenty decades ago.”

“The time of the landing?” he asked in return. He was acting quite confident and didn’t seem at all nervous to be questioned by someone from I.I.

“A few years before that. You know about the transfer of the Yingolian ghost I imagine?”

“Oh yeah, that was one of the biggest things going on here before the landing.”

“Do you know Kulai?”

“A little, we’ve met. He works five floors up and over that way when he’s down here at all. I don’t see him much lately.”

“Do you remember him from then?”

“Yeah, I would guess so.”

“On Afternoonday of Imnotyn, ‘00,21, he signed out a six hundred milliliter bottle of abHg synapsase with your countersignature.”

“Oh? I don’t think I would remember anything that detailed.” There was a little more reaction to this, but it could be curiosity.

“I’ve looked it up,” Delurna told him.

“OK, what more can I do for you?”

“Do you know what he was using it for?”

“They use a lot of it down here.”

“Kulai does not normally sign it out however.”

“He usually sends one of his guys but I’m sure he was authorized at the time,” Kemberra said, “he is now and I would never sign anything out to anyone who is not on the list. I KNOW my record is clean.” He looked Delurna straight in the eye about it.

He wondered if Kemberra’s obvious defiance was hiding something. “I’m sure that is true. You are not the one under investigation here anyway, do not assume it is Kulai either. What we want to know is who he signed it out for, where it went after this.”

Kemberra started to get a little nervous, Delurna was sure of it now. “I wouldn’t really know. I imagine it was something going on up in the lab, usually they use it when they’re getting a new person on a helmet.”

“We have not found any record of that bottle being re-used inside the Kassikan.”

“Is each bottle’s use recorded?”

“No, but it is recorded when it is re-filled. All containers used for controlled substances are serialized and inventoried, I’m sure you know that.” Delurna knew those records were part of his duties, it had been Kemberra who wrote down the serial number when the bottle was signed out. “That bottle was never re-filled. It is either still sitting on a bench somewhere or it has left the Kassikan.”

“Oh I don’t believe our record keeping is that good,” he was still trying to act casual, but not completely succeeding.

“Maybe not always, but yours is. Now to me it seems a little strange that the one and only bottle of abHg synapsase Kulai ever signed out in the twenty one decades he’s been

authorized to do so, is one that has never returned.” Delurna believed Kemberra would speak much more freely if he thought someone else was being investigated.

“So? What if it did leave the Kassikan?”

“You know that abHg synapsase is one of the main enzymes needed in making shonggot don’t you?”

He startled, too broadly Delurna thought. “I don’t think I do. I’m not a chemist, just a glorified store-room clerk.”

“The Kassikan does not want it getting outside for that reason, the Kassikan doesn’t want to be associated with that drug,” Delurna said.

“Some feel there is a legitimate use for it,” Kemberra said. “I’m not that daring, but who’s to say how daring and desperate you have to be in this world?”

“I won’t debate the philosophy, I don’t write the canons of this institution, I merely try to find people who have violated them. That bottle was part of the batch of agHg synapsase who’s biotag signature was found in Tdeshi’s body.”

That brought a reaction from him, though he tried to fight it. Kemberra gritted his teeth and his muscles tensed for a fraction of a second before he composed his face into a very good approximation of a look of bewilderment and asked, “Who’s Teshi?”

Delurna tried to keep his own reaction concealed. He was sure from this that he knew Tdeshi before the OD. He was glad he remembered that using the name Teshi was one of the details Ava told him. “Tdeshi,” Delurna corrected him.

“Tdeshi, whatever, my ear’s a little clogged I guess.”

So he could certainly pronounce the northern name, that

wasn't why he slipped and said Teshi. He couldn't let him know he had sensed that he knew Tdeshi. He wondered how he could approach this to find out more. He could get a surreptitious mind reading out of him if he needed to. It might take one of the founders to authorize it, but if the case turned on that information, he would have it. "I take it you are friends with Tahlmute?" he said as a change of course, watching closely how he reacted.

"We were acquainted when he was living with Ava." Delurna was sure he was telling the truth about that, but wasn't sure it was the whole truth. "I used to see him around when I went up top," Kemberra rambled. "I haven't kept in touch since he's been living outside again. Hasn't Ava been living outside also lately?"

By this he was trying to imply he never went outside the walls? Kulai thought he did, but probably did it thru tunnels too deep for Delurna to volunteer to use. "Do you know if he is also friends with Kulai?"

"Not a clue. I would think they could have met sometime, but I never heard either mention the other's name except Kulai once made reference to Tahlmute living with Ava one of the last times I saw him."

"Do you know how he knew Tdeshi?" Delurna asked.

Kemberra hesitated just a fraction of a second, but did not stumble into the trap, "From when she was Ava I would imagine? But she was already O.D.d by then." Now he wondered if he had proved Tahlmute knew Tdeshi, or proved that Kemberra was too agile under questioning to be caught in a simple change-of-subject trap.

That was all he found out. He would have liked to have found that Kulai had waxed loquacious about what he was doing with the abHg synapsase. Strongly suspecting that Kemberra knew Tdeshi was interesting. The chance that Tahlmute knew Tdeshi was even more interesting. He would have to devote much more attention to Kemberra, and his paper trail would have to be read. He made notes to himself to have that done, but not til he was out of Kemberra's sight.

Actually he was glad to leave these dim and silent lower reaches and head back up to daylight. Then, of course, once he got out of the elevator he had to be blindfolded once again and lead on another circuitous but very different route back to the place where he was originally admitted.

4. On the Waterfront

It looked like Ava's tail had stayed on her this time and tracked her movements because the message he got by pocket-eye from his man on the waterfront was certainly correct. His driver got him to the docks in time for his binoculars to watch her strolling the waterfront like one who had time to kill before a departure. He had studied her a bit, knew she aspired to a certain level of culture and guessed where she would go to kill a few hours before her ship departed. He had the driver race up the harbor to beat her there. Jumping from the needleboat and breaking into a sprint behind a tall pile of thesh bales to stay out of her sight,

Delurna was able to get to Ishi's little second-level waterfront bakery before Ava walked in, and almost for sure without her seeing him.

He had been looking forward to meeting her personally again and used his rank to pull this assignment for himself. He should have worked her right from the beginning, but he was too politically savvy to make a move on someone a founder was interested in. It was getting on toward dusk as he hopped into the line at the counter. Kortrax was low over the lake and the place was just starting to get crowded for duskmeal. He was only seconds before her and had to control his breathing as she approached. She did a double-take on seeing him. "Delurna?" she wasn't quite sure it seemed, having only met him that once, four weeks ago. To his disappointment, she also didn't seem to be very happy to see him here.

"Ava!?" he said, keeping up the masquerade that he was only here for the seafood cakes. "What brings you here?"

"A bit of hunger," she answered.

"You're heading somewhere?" he asked. She wouldn't have been spotted on the waterfront otherwise.

She looked like she wasn't going to tell him, then said, "Your people probably have a copy of my ticket, don't they?"

Someone had probably warned her that she would also be under investigation. It was probably someone who was at the damn committee meeting. Ava had connections high enough that she would find out if any of them talked. Someone on that committee might know her directly for all he knew. "We have no way to get copies of tickets on every vessel that

crosses this port. We wouldn't have time to read the list of the names of the ships." It had probably only been luck that his operative on this waterfront had recognized her and followed her. He thanked her in his mind once again for making the pocket-eyes possible so he could be notified in time to get here before she boarded a ship and left town.

"Then how did you know I would be here?" Ava asked him.

'Because of your career,' he longed to tell her but couldn't. His cover was the seafood cakes. "How did you know I would?" Delurna asked.

"You were the one who came looking for me."

"I was already in line when you came thru the door," the key to his whole cover.

"So you are here completely at random? You didn't seem surprised to see me."

He had failed to convey sufficient surprise hadn't he? He tried to bluff out of it. "When you've been around here since the 52nd, surprise comes harder," he answered. He needed to get off that subject, "I am here for the seafood cakes, they are superb. Shall we split a large?" he asked.

"Can we have a cup with it or are you on duty?" Ava asked him.

He could tell she had an eye for him, in spite of the sarcasm, but he could tell she would not come easy. He was intrigued by the idea, in spite of the effort. "I drink little, on duty or off," he answered, "but I could sip from a cup of yours."

"I'm sleeping on a darkrunner, in case you need the

warning.”

“Thank you,” he said, wondering how much eye he had showed for her. Maybe there was a reason he seldom did bait work any more. “I regret that I can’t join you,” he said, “though the idea has merit.” He was at the counter by now, he bought a large cake, the maritime aroma made his stomach roar as he brought it to a table. Ava slipped out to the keg in the next stall and came back with a brimming mug of gold by the time he was settled at that table. She put the mug down between them.

“So where are you headed?” he asked, trying to sound like a tentative acquaintance trying to make small talk.

“Out on a darkrunner,” Ava answered, “How’s your investigation going?”

“The charter forbids...” he answered too automatically.

“Mine does too,” Ava said. “No doubt you’ll have me followed, even if I give you the slip.” He wouldn’t let her know she had been followed already.

She knew too much about the techniques of Internal Investigations. There was no point in debating that with her, he skipped ahead to the point of it all. This was pretty much the trump he held over her, the fact so powerful, it hardly mattered if it was true. “Did it ever cross your mind that you had a lot to gain by what happened to Tdeshi?”

“So you’re admitting that I am under suspicion?” She said it like she knew it all along and he was just making official note of it.

“Everyone is under suspicion,” he said. He wanted to know what she knew of Tahlmute’s and Kulai’s involvement

with shonggot, but knew better than to ask direct questions. Instead he would feed her a few tidbits and see how she reacted to them. “You might be interested to know that several of your lovers are high on the list of suspects as a source of the shonggot.”

Her mouth was full, so she took a minute to answer. She nodded her thanks for the titbit, said, “Yeah, I’ll tell you the next step, I’m pretty sure it was a friend of one of Tdeshi’s lovers, not one of her lovers himself.”

“One of your lovers, not one of Tdeshi’s. They all had something to gain.”

That got a reaction from her, she stopped with a handful halfway to her mouth. “One of mine?”

“Has anyone hinted at any of that? Recently or in the past?” Even saying whether it was a recent or past lover would tell him. Kulai was so recent that Shaney had to run Ava off. Shaney would not have Ava as a problem any more if Ava was leaving town. He hoped she wasn’t going far, she was lost if she got off at a dock where he couldn’t get a man.

“I don’t think I can remember anyone talking about it in any way except to express sympathy over what happened to Tdeshi.”

“Have any of your past lovers known Tdeshi?” This would help some veracity ratings if she answered yes.

“That guy I came down here with knew Tdeshi too well. I got to thinking he was trying to turn me back into Tdeshi.”

“Any others?”

She thought, “No one but Jorma, his friends where she was a child and a few people I met north of Chardovia have

ever known Tdeshi. Some of them may have been Tdeshi's lovers, I don't know that. I know none of them but Jorma were mine."

Delurna was not going to lead her with more questions. That answer leaves all veracity scores unchanged. Perhaps he should pay more attention to Jorma, the bumpkin from the north might have more to do with this. It was suspicious that he was devoting as much effort to this as he was.

"Did you sic that hottie on Kulai?" she asked him while he was making mental notes.

"What's a Kulai?" he smiled in return. "I can guess he might be a lost lover?" Shaney had given him a quick synopsis of how it was going when she blew thru the office the day before. It was going well except that she hadn't gotten Kulai to talk about the synapsase.

She didn't like that. That confirmed that Kulai had been into Ava before Shaney got between them. It also told him his people were leaving too many tracks, he would have to teach Shaney more about stealth. Ava's book should have given him a clue, a people devoted to intrigue and stealth. "You can't pretend you don't know Kulai," she said. "We went over him when I started this case."

"I don't have my notes with me," Delurna said.

"Oh come on."

She was too intelligent and knew too much of the Kassikan to play with like this wasn't she? "Ava, I can't discuss the case. I can ask questions, I can't answer them."

"Kulai's a decent guy, he's too kind-hearted."

"Everyone is under suspicion," Delurna said again.

“What about him?” She pointed out the window to a big Troll wheeling a hand-fork thru the crowds of the dock.

“He’s not being actively investigated at the moment,” Delurna answered.

“He’s probably one of your operatives,” she sneered.

Delurna laughed, “How many do you think I have?”

“I think there are 1,135 listed in your department, I’m sure there are an equal number unlisted, if not more.”

“In that case I think there are about a thousand listed who have never showed up for work,” he replied. He should interrogate her on where that number came from, it included even the scrounges used only occasionally. It certainly wasn’t what he called the listed number. Only Althart should be able to get that... Well of course. Women do have ways don’t they.

“You’ll find Kulai is innocent,” she said.

He wondered how she would explain the fact that he was almost certain that one of the ingredients in the drug that took Tdeshi passed thru Kulai’s hands and that that bottle could have produced enough shonggot to account for the money in Kulai’s past that couldn’t be explained. He would have liked to discuss that with her. In his own mind they would have learned more than they gave away. But that was not his decision to make. In his department, perhaps more than any other, rules must not be bent.

They went on to discuss the cooking, and the relative merits of traveling by dark. The only hint he got relating to the case was the feeling that this voyage would take most of the dark. She talked about the toils of transferring luggage and the pain of traveling light. If this related to her current

trip, and the odds are it did, she would be transferring to another ship or another mode.

She eluded him when she left the room, and he thought he was good. The cook's shouts told him she ducked thru the kitchen, but he knew he had no chance of catching her after that. It didn't matter, he was pretty sure he knew where she was headed.

Then he wondered if maybe she had bought her ticket on the eye. If she had, there would be a record of it. With his pocket eye he was able to get back to the department and put someone on it before he got back to his boat and driver. By the time he got back to the office, no ticket had been found. All he could do was guess that she might be headed back to Chardovia. He would have to put a man on alert for her there.

5. Interference

The boyfriend's tail had lost him last Nightday when he took off in his needleboat headed north and his man had never been able to catch him. In his report he complained about sending backup he didn't need and didn't want who'd blown the cover, but Delurna had sent no one. In his reply he said to investigate the other operative, follow him and find out who he was working for. He made note of it, he was going to look into it from this end. This was the second time this had happened on this case, and the rogue causing it fit the same description as the one who spooked Ava.

He had only one man in Chardovia and left him assigned

to Ava because he could meet every ship coming in from the hub and be sure to spot her. Catching Jorma coming in by needleboat was likely to fail. Jorma still seemed like a long shot to him at the time.

This past Morningday had also brought in all the reports on Kemberra. He was paired with a successful fashion designer and they were expecting a child. Because of that he was unapproachable via sex, being totally committed to his current partner who was the major financial partner in their household. He was opinionated and straight-laced but had no known relationship to shonggot, no financial inconsistencies and certainly nothing to gain from bringing in a body for Ava. There was no record of them ever having spoken or having even met. There was no other evidence that he knew Tdeshi, other than the reaction to her name.

His man did indeed meet Ava getting off the Argon's Racer this Morningday. He stayed on her and watched her take a public toward Tdeshi's old neighborhood, as he suspected she would. He had him stay on her.

He spent the second half of the day high in the pyramid talking to members of all the committees who had ever been caught doing their own investigations. Medical Ethical Oversight still denied any involvement. He glowered and grumbled at Emetta anyway, although he knew it would do no good. He apologized before he even left, "I know I shouldn't take it out on you when you were good enough to see me on short notice."

"I understand your frustration," he said, "but I'm quite

confident none of us had anything to do with it. No one, on the committee or off it has suggested any such thing in my presence.”

“There was the scaffolding case in ‘11,14,” Delurna reminded him.

“We were directly involved,” he replied. “We had to have our own investigation.”

The Financial Security Council was another group that had undertaken independent investigations. They weren’t naive enough to do outdoor work themselves, but they had hired some of the largest and best known investigators in the city in the past. One problem with that is that large firms often have new hires, ones who may have bluffed their way thru the vetting process. Consequently, not all their operatives were competent.

There was also the fact that speaker Laxgon has been at his post fourteen decades and was rumored to kiss up to Althart and Keithying. He couldn’t overlook the possibility that Laxgon had been involved in Tdeshi’s demise. He certainly had the money and the clout, even before he was promoted to speaker. It seemed a stretch because unless he told Althart of his involvement, Althart would never see a connection between Laxgon and the arrival of a body for Ava. It was also not lost on him that Emetta also sat on this council.

The council only offered an office girl at first, he had to use the name of someone on the Finance Supreme Council to get an actual committeeman down to the office. Chabbishid

was who they finally sent out, almost an hour after he first entered their chambers. He was a small-chested, pot-bellied Lorian Elf with a curly circlet of hair rimming three quarters of the well-tanned but shiny dome of his head. His nose was almost a Goblin's, his ears rose above his hair. His expression was that of a bait animal being pushed into a lek pit to see if it was home.

“You have the look of a sacrificial lenta. I know you guys have been following the money on this case, I can see your tracks all over the eyes, but it's the fieldwork that I'm here about.”

“What case? What fieldwork?”

“The Tdeshi case of course, you can't make believe you are this terrified of a few simple questions on anything else I might be working on.”

“One of the girls heard about what you were saying over at M.E.O.”

“So you know what fieldwork.”

“She just said there was anal reconstructive surgery in progress, she didn't give us any details.”

“So they pushed you in my path because you were quivering the most.”

“Something like that,” he said. Some color was returning to his cheeks and he had stopped quivering.

“Your operative cost us an important lead.”

“Sir, I am involved in all the deliberations of this committee and I am sure we have no field operatives in our employ. We like to pretend we live in a clean and wholesome institution that doesn't employ spies to follow people around

and perform surreptitious interrogations. We wish that dirty work didn't exist.”

Yet they had teams of experts that could intercept documents and data without being seen. People who could hide in briefcases for hours to get into vaults, Fat women who could waddle large amounts of documents past sharp-eyed guards, the world's foremost lockpicks and ventilator men including the famous Human Worm. Who were they to talk about dirty work? He was glad there was a Financial Security Council Oversight Committee that was required to have a Supreme Council member on it.

It disgusted him that they had sent Chabbishid out to talk to him, it was cowardly. It would be unfair if he laid into him. Instead he tried to remain mild. “Do you understand what you cost us?”

“We cost you nothing, we were not even following the Tdeshi case.”

“Then why was there an additional operative following our man and why were you so afraid of what I have to say?”

“What the girl said.”

“It took an hour to send you down.”

“There was an important subcommittee meeting going on, we had to finish up. I'm sorry, I know your time is valuable, we all do, but the subcommittee's time is valuable also and it was hard to reschedule.”

“Did they give you a script or did they just say grovel and make up your own excuses.”

“They thought I was the only one who might remain polite, they were angry at your accusations.”

“I am angry at their interference.”

“There was none.” He was trying to look defiant but he was sweaty and almost trembling.

“How old are you?” Delurna asked.

“Huh?”

“How old, were you born before the Instinct?”

“Just after, the 45,50’s.”

“It figures,” Delurna said.

“What?”

“You still put off tons of appeasement pheromones, that’s probably why they sent you.”

“I kept them from coming down and causing a scene.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Delurna said, and with a quick tight smile, got up to leave.

He underlined Laxgon’s name, he was going to have his paper read and if there was anything mentioning dark hair, tall and slender, scholarship, any ingredient in shonggot or any unexplained financial gain or loss, he was going to be interrogated when he showed up this coming Nightday. He should have brought his pocket eye with him, he could have got that started right now.

Mechanics Investment Research Steering Committee was his next stop. Photovoltaics was a very lucrative study in the Mechanics corner of the pyramid, they had a lot to gain from getting Ava down to work in their labs. They were also known for setting up independent field operations. It was mostly i.e. prevention, but they had been caught getting personal from

time to time. He was lucky to find Bentack in on a Morningday, he was not a committeeman, but the overseer of their field operations.

“What brings a fine young man like you to my office on a bright new week like this?” he asked as Delurna took a seat across from him at his worktable.

“I’ve come to regale you with a tale of woe.”

“Is one of my people in trouble?” he asked.

“I hope not. Let me tell you what my problem is, and you can decide if one of your people is in trouble.”

“You’re serious, so let’s hear it.”

“The Tdeshi case?”

“The girl who grew Ava’s body for her.”

“I’ve lost two important leads on that case because of cover blown by an unskilled operative who was not mine. In both cases the subject made the tail, though neither the subject nor the other tail ever made my tail. Luckily we have picked up one of the subjects again, the other is lost and now both of them know they are being watched.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that, if you need men...”

“I don’t need men, I need the extra men out of the way, they blew two of my leads already.”

“Surely you don’t think they were mine?” Bentack said.

“No one else claims them.”

“Have you asked all the hoods in town? It seems to me that whoever you’re tracking would have a lot to gain by blowing your leads.”

That was probably true. He had to keep in mind that the

person who supplied the shonggot could be someone rich and important, rich enough to hire detectives, but not rich enough to hire good ones. Unless it was as Bentack said and they were trying to scare Jorma and Ava off.

“Do you have an operative with a shock of hair that he likes to toss? Skinny, pale, tall?”

“There’s a couple that might fit that description.”

“Where are they stationed?”

“No, you tell me where the incidents occurred.”

“Ava made her tail at a food court in the pyramid,”

Bentack reacted to that, tried to hide it. Delurna tried to hide the fact that he noticed and kept right on with, “Jorma made his last Nightday at a dingy industrial canal off Fourth.” He did not seem to react to Jorma.

“We had no operations anywhere near Fourth and have never conducted an operation on campus.”

“But you know Ava?” Delurna asked.

“Certainly, she’s Yingolian after all.”

“Her body was born on the shores of North Lake.”

“We’re not supposed to know how it happened,” Bentack said, “she wants that to remain private.”

“You know her.” Delurna made it a statement.

“We’re acquainted, but not intimately.”

“I wasn’t...” It must have been his tone of voice when he confirmed that Bentack knew her.

Bentack just nodded, then said, “I think that you should try and track whoever blew your cover. I really don’t think he’s working for someone in the Kassikan. No one has ever

made one of my agents, not even Ava.”

“You’ve talked to Ava?” Delurna asked.

“Separate case, before she even got back here.”

Delurna wasn’t really satisfied, but he didn’t get anything more.

6. Field Reports

On Afternoonday Delurna got to look up Kemberra’s employment record and found that it was spotless. Nothing missing, nothing unauthorized, everything always correctly filled out and indexed. The people who worked for him knew him as strict but fair, a demanding taskmaster but unfailingly honest. The only thing they found lacking was that he was somewhat distant.

He should have left it right there, but maybe Delurna thought his profile was just a little too clean. He assigned someone to authenticate all the paper in his employment record, especially around the time of Tdeshi’s death and Ava’s transmission. And see if they could find out if Kemberra and Ava had ever corresponded.

Lising was still out investigating Tahlmute, but so far all she’d really reported on was a troubled relationship between him and his girlfriend. She was going to use that to her advantage, she said. He wanted to know if Tahlmute knew Tdeshi. He also wondered if Kulai did? If they found no friend of Kemberra who knew Tdeshi, Kemberra is initiating a diversion from personal guilt associated with knowing

Tdeshi. That would mean he had noticed when Delurna's face registered that information.

His man in Chardovia reported that Ava had visited with a man called Himla. She'd taken a coach back to Chardovia and there caught Tellin's Balloon back to the Yakhan. She was due back in the city this Nightday. Delurna replied to thank him and ask him to make a further investigation of Himla.

Yugor had replied during the day. Once he lost Jorma, he had followed the tail. He backtracked and loitered and did all the tricks used in cinema to shake a tail, but Yugor had stuck thru it til lunch time of Morningday. He followed him to the Music Manufacturing gate on the seventh floor, but a lecture let out at the time and many of them came out that gate looking for lunch. He charged up to the gate as soon as he lost sight of his quarry, but lost him in the crowd. Since then he had the Music Manufacturing lobby staked out, but so far he had not regained his quarry.

Delurna looked up all the committees associated with that end of the complex and what dealings they were involved in during that time. Music manufacturing was mainly about licensing the genes of each sonic block design. This wasn't one of the high volume product lines, but it was still enough business to cause people to bend rules. He found three guys, one of whom was on three committees, who were involved in cases that were open today, but none of them were even on campus during that time. There was no one on any committee in that area who had gained anything unusual during that time. It would have been nice to see where that operative

went, but without any more to go on all he could do is have someone watch the area and see if the guy turned up again.

He thought that would be it for the day and he might get most of Afternoonday off when Shaney came around his partition. “Seeing as we’re both in here today, do you have time to hear what I found out from Kulai?”

“I am eager to hear what you’ve found out from Kulai,” he said. He hadn’t planned anything for the day, so while time away from here was welcome, so was progress. Kulai was probably still the leading suspect, the money lead to him, he had the synapsase.

“Good, well, I have some notes. First of all his finances. He cries poverty but he’s getting by. He has too much property for his income but his staff actually takes care of a lot of his outside business. He’s not really very smart in finance but the guy who also answers his door actually does it. He’s able to keep them from getting swindled. B’theen does all his high-priced leg work and a lot of his spotting, he spends most Afternoondays pacing the docks. He’s invested in some cargoes that were out of our sight, some backer stuff, in which he’s done pretty good, but not enough to account for his initial investments. It’s like your current summary, since the third decade his finances make sense. That’s really all I’ve found about his finances. I didn’t get left alone in his place long enough to go over many of his books, his servant is as watchful as a hungry hyadune.”

“Did he say anything about the synapsase?”

“That he got it for use in the labs, he says they use it all

the time in the helmet room. That's all he would say, he was suspicious of me for asking. He claims he never does anything like that and takes his job too seriously. Still, that is actionable if it's relevant."

"It would have been more relevant if Kulai used it himself. Of course we don't know that he really passed it on, we need to find some corroboration."

"It is best if you have that done independently," Shaney reminded him.

"Yes, I'll just have to write it down."

"His outside interests are rather tame. He likes high culture and ethnic entertainment. I was able to get him to spend a few irons on me, but I wouldn't say he lives high and wide except for that palace. He likes good food but eats most of his meals at home. His servant can cook up some mighty fine dishes, and he uses quality ingredients but again, nothing I couldn't afford if I was trying to make an impression.

"His businesses seem to take up about one day a week, usually Morningday. He was busy both Morningdays since we met, he's busy today also. While he's at home he gets a fair number of interruptions from his businesses. There was even a case where I was able to sit in on a conversation with one. It was really about cargo, boring stuff like bulk shipments of soaproot, but that, at least, was legitimate. I believe he really does have these outside businesses and even though they aren't making him a lot of money right now, it keeps a few people employed.

"He is reasonably close with his staff, treats them with respect and is respected in return. He's conscientious of their

personal lives and is at ease enough with them to joke around. He lets a lot of them live in his warehouse space and they seem to appreciate it.

“He’s not a great stud, polite and considerate with great hands but no huge wow. His interest in sex is fairly casual. I found no evidence that he’s ever had a permanent partner. He treated me with consideration and kindness and a fair amount of humor. I actually like the guy, not a lot, but enough that this assignment has been fairly pleasant.

“Now, about the things you care about. He has complained that people have been wringing him out lately about the Ava incident. He says it’s a bunch of headaches for nothing. He ranted awhile about how he just can’t make it clear to anyone he never knew anything about Tdeshi until she was brought in. He pushed me away from any details claiming oaths of confidentiality to the Kassikan.

“He says he knows nothing about shonggot. I waxed curious about it last dusk but he said he knew nothing. He seemed like he did not know that abHg synapsase was a component of it. I did not tell him that I knew, but I did come right out and ask him if it was. He said he didn’t know, but once he thought about it, he said he wouldn’t be surprised to find out that it was. He didn’t like facing that, at least that was my impression.”

“So in other words, I would guess you are saying that Kulai probably didn’t cook it up after all.”

“No,” Shaney said, “We don’t know where it went after him, if that bottle really went into it. We’d have to lean on him harder if we’re going to find out.”

“You’re right,” Delurna said, “It may have to come to that.”

“That’s all I’ve got, what else have we got going?” she asked. “I think Kulai was starting to get suspicious of me.”

“Did Kulai know Tdeshi?” Delurna asked.

“He claims insistently that he did not, never saw her before she was brought in. Never thought about her til Ava questioned him about possible automation in his department. If it is him, it’s a lie he’s maintained long enough that he believes it himself.”

“I suspect it would be someone who also knows Ava,” Delurna mused.

“That brings Tahlmute to the list, there may be a few more, but Tahlmute’s not already suspicious of me.”

“But I’ve already sent someone out on him.” His eyes moved toward her desk.

She noticed, looked toward Lising’s desk and knew who it was. “And has she reported anything yet?”

“Nothing pertinent, he’s fighting with his girlfriend,” Delurna told her. “Does Kulai know if Tahlmute knew Tdeshi?”

“Kulai never mentioned Tahlmute.”

“Did you ask?” Delurna asked her.

“No, I never got to. I never thought of it. He got very suspicious of me I’m afraid, he said I was asking too many pointed questions about things the Kassikan considers confidential.”

Delurna inhaled, “There’s a lie in here somewhere, and I

think his face clearly indicated Kemberra lying when he told me he didn't know Tdeshi."

"I wonder if this is a case where we can make progress by assuming lie minimization?" Shaney asked.

"That may turn out to be a good point, too many people had something to gain here." What he couldn't figure out was what Kemberra had to gain.

Delurna took some time getting this information communicated thruout the grounds. When it was all weighed out it seemed to shift the focus a little bit. A week ago he was all but ready to turn in Kulai, but now he wasn't so sure. Ava wasn't a great judge of character, witness some of her lovers, but she could be right now and then, just by chance. There were other investigations going on in the Kassikan than his, some were more financially centered. They would be focusing on Kulai also he was sure, he better be sure they knew these new bits of information.

After all the centuries that he had been using an eye, he was still such a poor typist that he thought it would be easier for him to just walk around and tell people. Even so, he did get the messages typed and was able to take half a day away from the office that week. It turned out to be to his advantage to give Shaney the half-day off also.

7. Time to Take Action

The first thing Nightday, he heard from Yugor. He was

still unable to find the rouge operative. Delurna forgave him and asked him to be ready to help pick up Ava.

He heard more on Kemberra. His man had looked thru Gnome archives all Afternoonday and found the paper all agreed with what he found in the data. Nothing in all the notes linked him to Tdeshi in any way, in fact there wasn't any real evidence that he even knew Tahlmute or Kulai very well at all. Known to have met, was the status as he saw it. There was nothing in any record that linked Kemberra to either the North Chardovia plot where she lived last or the neighborhood where she was picked up. Kemberra rarely ventured outside the Kassikan but to go back and forth to his home a block and a half outside the walls on the seventh floor. That was an easy walk from a ninth floor gate into the Music Manufacturing Investment Oversight Building. Less than a quarter mile and two more short shafts from the southwest corner of the pyramid and that deep elevator.

A social connections analysis showed several ways Kemberra could have learned just recently that 'Tdeshi' was the former name of the body Ava was in. Delurna was disturbed by the fact that Kemberra had lied about the name, but the rules required that he take him off the shortening list of prime suspects, though it bothered him.

He also found a lot more on the guy Ava had come down with. They had been able to trace Tdeshi's father Leand, thru information Ava provided. He was in the deep north at this time, but responded to an inquiry over the eye.

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Yes, I do know a man named Jorma and once counted him as a friend. I'm not surprised that you are inquiring about him in regard to my daughter's death. He was the last guy she lived with, and as I just mentioned, I counted him a dear friend at the time.

Let me explain that I took Jorma in after a massive burn out. I set him up with a plot and a cabin and gave him time to heal. I tried to get him into a normal role in society after that, and believed he had done fairly well. As he settled down, he did drink again, but only a few cups at a tap and not the way he had been when he first arrived in Sinbara. We were good friends for many decades, and he had a couple good careers while I knew him.

Things were fine until I had my daughters. Jorma, as you may know, is a good looking man well favored by the ladies, and my daughters were no exception, they both professed true love for him. Tdeshi was the eldest, and a fine looking and lusty girl. Jorma was friendly with her, and she eventually talked me into letting her live with him once she turned three. I will admit that to the best of my knowledge he did refrain from bedding them without my permission.

However, it wasn't long after I gave my permission that trouble started. My daughter told a different tale of Jorma's involvement with drugs than his public face, and she began to complain to me that he was often tempting her with various substances. After just a year in his cabin, she felt she could no longer fit into the society of our town the way she wanted, and left for the Yakhan with the tragic results you've mentioned. I don't remember if shonggot was on the list Jorma introduced her to. I'd like to think it was not, but that might be my memory trying to preserve something of the good times we had before my children were born.

It was only a few more years after that when my second daughter left Sinbara, also citing Jorma. In this case his lack of serious interest in her was one of the causes. I know Jorma was hurt by what happened to Tdeshi also, so hurt that our friendship was pained from his side also and he spent a couple years in Zharvai, at least he said he did, I never followed him there, I was on my way here at the time.

Please let me know what you find about Jorma and any part he did or did not play in my daughter's demise. I will be retaining this mailbox for the foreseeable future, so please inform me at any time.

In all Sincerity - Leand

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This was interesting, Jorma might not be the clueless bumpkin he appeared. There was no new word on Jorma since he'd gone north during dark the week before. It would be tedious to find out if Jorma was in the city twenty one decades ago. He had been under as much suspicion as anyone else, just because of what he was saying.

Lising was just opening the outer door on her way in, "Well," she said, "I figured out Tahlmute's angle in all of this."

"I'd love to hear it," he said.

"First of all, he did know Tdeshi."

"So it is as I suspected from watching Kemberra."

"Yes," she said. Then she said something else interesting, "You know that Tdeshi was taken to Karteng's clinic when she was found comatose on the boat?" He nodded. The clinic had been thoroughly checked. "Well, the woman Kemberra is with worked there up until Tdeshi's demise. I know it doesn't seem to be connected, but it seems awfully coincidental."

"Kemberra never mentioned that." The connection with that clinic was interesting, Kemberra's partner was named Fenais, they would have to turn an eye on her and see if she showed up in connection with this in any other way.

She reported that there was nothing definite on Tahlmute

and shonggot back when Ava was born. Lising had pumped her contact to the point of paying her to rifle Tahlmute's records looking for shonggot and gotten nothing for it but a few irons of reduction in her pouch. What she did get was a report that Tahlmute was very nervous and touchy about the investigation, to the point where her contact had to back off. "If you want my opinion," Lising said, "I think he bears more looking into. We should go thru his finances from then, look at who he was doing business with. That was a shady time for him I think, I don't remember him doing many approved projects at the time."

"I'll pass that recommendation and second it," he said. He knew he didn't appreciate the work Lising did as much as he should. He saw her rather dumpy body and couldn't look past it could he? He would never want to take a half day off with her would he? He would have to make it up to her in her pay wouldn't he? Meanwhile he got some people started going over what was known of Tahlmute's finances of the time.

It was still relatively early in Nightday, before lunch, when Varn'm of the High Council of General Vendor Oversight came into his office with two Gnome assistants in goggles along with Althart, who was known as professor Mithrandir to everyone in this office but himself. "Delurna, I wish to congratulate you on a fine investigation," Varn'm said as he lead this entourage around his partition. He had some eyecopy with the department logo that he was waving. The logo was all Delurna could see for certain, but it looked like Lising's report.

This was another committee he should have looked into concerning the bad tail, they used operatives often and he wouldn't be surprised if they had contracted that bad tail. They didn't have any offices in the Music Manufacturing section, but they could easily get use of space there. Of course had hadn't wanted to appear to be picking on Varn'm since their little dust-up of the previous century. They were both trying to be polite and get past that. "Since the professor is here, I assume you are talking about the investigation of the charges Ava brought," Delurna replied.

"Yes, yes, of course. I've reviewed what you've done and I believe it has helped. Thank you for the recent update on Ava's position." He had a man meet her at the dock, he was following her deeper into the city.

"I thought she would get to the bottom of this anyway," the professor chuckled knowingly.

Varn'm continued, "I believe it is now time to go interview someone else who's name I'd rather not mention just yet, and maybe take some action." he said while looking around the office, from where he was standing he could see into six or eight work areas. There were quite a few at the worktables and while Delurna knew them all, he didn't expect Varn'm to. Everyone who worked with Delurna carried a device, updated every decade, and he could be sure that if one of them was a mole he/she could get a message out to whoever was mentioned. Delurna was pretty sure he didn't have any moles in his office, at least not ones for the one he thought they were going after.

"What will you do?" Delurna asked. There had been

meetings last Afternoon, some lasting into Dusksleep. He was pretty sure the financial committees had settled on a victim, though he was not quite sure himself. He thought he should have shouldered his way into some of those meetings rather than taking half a day off to romp with Shaney. He had to admit they were probably right, but didn't have the certainty he liked to have from a personal interview. Because they were from Financial, he was pretty sure they were going after Kulai. A field operative's impressions don't really have a high credibility rating, and Shaney's individual rating was only slightly above average, he had to admit, and Lising's wasn't any better.

“Oh I have a whole list of bills I can call due,” Varn'm said, “some of them are decades old. If we believe we have the source of the shonggot that took her, we feel within our rights to charge him for Tdeshi's care until she became Ava.”

“I see,” Delurna said, “When is this taking place?”

“We are leaving right now, I have a boat waiting downstairs. If your schedule is free, you might want to be in on the interview and discussion?”

“Yes, I think I would.” He got up. They were taking a boat? Kulai was in on Nightdays, he was probably in his public office right now. But Kulai's home was right above a deep harbor for fine yachts and floats, they could be raiding that while he was here. They would be waiting for him when he got home. And then why had they asked about Ava? He really should tell them what Tdeshi's father said about Jorma also shouldn't he?

Just then he got a device alert from Yugor. There was a

pregnant pause while they all stood in the doorway to his offices. “I guess I better take this,” he said, “It’s my man on Ava.”

“We’re pretty sure we know where she’s going,” Althart said.

Varn’m looked apologetic, “Message us if it’s pertinent,” he said. “I have a device,” he said and showed it, it was one of the new ones cased in a thick and polished hornseed shell with a slot to replace the chip every decade or so. They all slipped out of the room and down the stairs. He’d been left off the team because they didn’t want to be delayed with this message? Varn’m probably didn’t want him out there anyway. Ava and Althart had probably been working together on this without his knowledge all along, Althart might have received a message from her, she had recently purchased a pocket-eye.

He looked to his own pocket-eye, ‘By following Ava, I’ve picked up Jorma again,’ Yugor’s message said.

He wasn’t his best tail but he was dogged. ‘Congratulations,’ he typed. ‘Where are you?’

‘Off Seventh ~eleven miles north of Center Canyon. She just went inside, he parked his boat and now he’s going upstairs like he’s on Ava’s tail. He’s carrying a bottle, not a yaag bottle, laboratory bottle, ~ six hundred milliliter.’

Delurna knew he had better message the guys who left on that boat and attach the note from Tdeshi’s father. He certainly hoped they picked it up.

Part V. Further Investigation

1. Wandering the Yakhan

Jorma wandered the city for the third week, a Morningday as it happened, maybe Ekendosa. It was brisk but bright. No snow had fallen on the city the previous Dawnsleep, but there was a film of frost over everything that was now turning to dew, only where Kortrax was on it. He knew he was wandering aimlessly. He had not gotten anything done but futilely interrogating Enjteen.

Compared to the amount of actual investigating he'd done, he spent way too much time looping in thought on the horror that Ava really was. In the past he never saw a reason why a re-lighting of Tdeshi's candle, a re-sparking of her life, would have produced such a different personality. She still should have been energetic and lively, that was something she should have inherited. He remembered Ava telling him that if the brain never commanded the muscles to move, they would lie there as Ava had done. That was a clue, one of many he should have noticed in the last year.

Oh he agreed she would have been different in some ways because of how and where she was brought up. But then Venna was brought up in the same city, but outside the Kassikan. He could believe that Ava would have chosen the Yingolian crystals career instead of art because she was in the Kassikan, but she would have been just as determined at it. She might have been less social because of being 'born' in what she thought was a crypt and thinking she was coming

back from death, but Ava's social differences ran deeper, a need for secrecy or privacy being one of them. The need to interact with individuals or small groups at a time.

Now he knew why, a personality had been impressed from the outside. He had suspected as much, and once Himla had pointed them at the Kassikan, he thought he knew where this other personality came from. He wasn't even deep enough in darkness with those thoughts. The new personality came not the darkness of the catacombs, but the darkness of outer space. She was one of those souls who claimed to have once been human but had haunted silicon crystals for half a century while getting here.

Somewhere in the last three weeks he'd been to a reading room and read the life story of the electric ghost. Her flesh had died as a child and her mind had been recorded. There was no picture, and her name was listed as 'Consultant Bancour' but the data fit Ava perfectly. She was much older than Tdeshi, born in the early 55th. She had lived most of her life as an electric ghost haunting a starship on it's way from YingolNeerie to Kortrax but her childhood had been spent as flesh under the rays of a different sun. All thru her Angel life she thought she was living on a beach like the one she picked out on East Island. No doubt that was where she had really seen a place like that before. That was another clue wasn't it? If he had read this before he would certainly have figured it out from that. That mind had now been played back into Tdeshi. That was why Ava was so damn sure Tdeshi was gone, and why she accused him of trying to force her from the body and re-incarnate Tdeshi. Those were more hints

weren't they?

He could not imagine how foreign that must be, brought up in a culture from another star, especially one as savage as the one in her childhood. It must be almost as strange as being a kluboeb in Lumpral. But it wasn't the other star that bothered him, it was the electric ghost. A different star might look a little different in the sky, he knew YingolNeerie was fierce and bright yellow. Still, there would be land, water, air, men and women, canals, homes, pickup places. Maybe they would look a little different and her tales said there was violence there like in the Energy Age or Troubled Times. But that would be so normal compared to being an electric ghost in a solitary universe of unlimited magic. Only some ultra-experimental music he'd once heard gave him any clue as to what that must feel like. It just didn't fit with Ava.

He'd once known someone who grew up in Lumpral worshiping LaunJu sometime in the 41st. That guy was more different than Ava and he wasn't even Kluboeb. Ava was a smart, serious, but otherwise normal human, much more similar in life views than Narbla had been. She couldn't have been an electric ghost. He imagined something like a hologram recording the soul, but the ghost insisted she experienced that half century and spent a lot of time doing research in her field, learning more about it as a ghost than she could have as flesh.

There were hundreds of others who claimed to be the Yingolian also. Publicly the Kassikan tested those who volunteered but had not confirmed any as being the 'real' Yingolian. There had never been a public claim by the

Kassikan that Ava was the person they had transferred, they had started a rumor that the soul transferred had been lost and might have come up under any helmet within sight of Narrulla at the time. Since the public believed more than half the helmets were secret, this invited every crack pot in the Highlands to create a diversion for her, a diversion they nurtured with their 'testing' program.

He had also looked up Ava thru her career at the Kassikan. There was a wealth of data available on that. None of it publicly mentioned that she was the transferee, all of it focused on her theories of virtuality. We cannot prove we are real, and if we believe in the supernatural, we have an even harder time proving we are real. It was a very interesting theory. He thought it sounded a lot like what little he'd heard of nihilist philosophy. The interesting thing about the Angels was, they lived in a universe they knew was fake, not one they couldn't prove was real.

He refined his muddled thoughts to the point where he doubted that she was the Yingolian ghost for two reasons. The public one was that it seemed unlikely that a soul from YingolNeerie would actually be as normal as she was. She was certainly a different personality from Tdeshi, but she wasn't even a moderately abnormal personality. She was shyer than average and more detail oriented than average. She was physically lazier than average, but not as far from average as Tdeshi was in the other direction. She was interested in less sex than average, but he'd been with (but had not stayed with) girls who wanted even less.

The other reason he didn't want to believe it was that he

had made love to her. He had done it repeatedly, even believing the soul in the body was really not Tdeshi. He was willing to believe it was a different soul, even one imposed via RNAcid. Maybe he was getting ready to admit to himself he was just making love to Tdeshi's body after all, and didn't really care what soul was in it. But that body was alive, warm, sweet smelling, not something dead and jolted back to life with electricity. At least as far as he could tell, but then the wizardry in the Kassikan is often well beyond his comprehension.

He couldn't bear to think that the body he was making love to was animated by some electricity from a silicon crystal carrying the ghost of someone long dead at a far off star. Something from nothing more than a larger version of the personal mini-eyes that had been all the fad a few decades ago. It was like Tdeshi's corpse was still hooked up to ropes to animate it, just more advanced technology. Now the puppet master is in Narrula's Tear. They were using Tdeshi's zombied body the way they had used machines in attacking Zhindu.

He heard their story and thought it could be true, but he still entertained a different theory of where this new soul had come from. He had been about to investigate any important and semi-important individuals at the Kassikan who's bodies had failed them twenty decades ago. He would not restrict his investigations to female, since Ava was reluctant enough to couple that she might have been male in the past life. But she was not reluctant enough to couple that she might have been an electric crystal in her past life.

He suspected Ava made up the YingolNeerie story up right on the spot to protect the real source of the new soul and Kulai just went along with it because she was an expert on the technology and therefore the culture from which it had sprung. She knew how he hated that horror, and could have seen it as a good chance to get rid of him, now that they were getting too close to the truth.

Another thing that made him suspect that the soul had come from within the Kassikan was the fact that Ava had been reluctant to pursue the investigation into the Kassikan right from the start. Now maybe that was just because she didn't want him to know she was the Yingolian ghost, but more likely that she didn't want him to know what people in the Kassikan might do to survive. After all, there were many of them in the high councils that were older than the Instinct.

Now that the morn was warm enough to venture out, he was strolling the second level on Fourth Canal, actually half a block up from the canal, strolling the crystal-way on the sixth floor. He noticed that he was less than half a mile from the address he found for Kulai outside the Kassikan. He decided to walk over and take a look. It was toward the Kassikan, but closer to Third Canal. As he got closer he was impressed. It was a classy neighborhood. Kulai's place was on a mid level street that crossed Third Canal on a suspension bridge at the eleventh floor. He had the biggest yacht basin in the neighborhood just a hundred feet below his balconies. The place itself was lavish with lots of marble and laced-glass windows. A servant answered the door.

“Kulai is in, but has not yet risen.” he was told, “may I take a message?”

“Just tell him Jorma would like to speak with him today if there is a convenient time. If you could guess when you might confer with him, I’ll return after that to learn the time.”

“Is this a real estate matter or does it concern shipping?”

“Neither, it’s more of a personal thing, more related to Kassikan business than any other, but I would rather speak of it outside the Kassikan. I’m an old acquaintance of someone he knows. I would like some pointers on how to get around. Tell him I admire how well he’s done here.”

That brought a quick frown. “If you could return in two hours, I’m sure I will have seen him by then.” The man had the courtesy to write it down in front of him.

So now Jorma had two more hours to wander aimlessly as he had been doing for days. He knew the trail lay inside the Kassikan, but he also had no contacts within the Kassikan. Actually he had two, Kulai and Enjteen. With nothing else to do, he wandered in that direction, he could see how long it took to get there from here.

Third Canal ran straight at the pyramid for a couple miles and in the view from the suspension bridge it looked like the canal came right out of the pyramid. He had to go down to a second level street to continue toward the Kassikan but that was an upper level mid-block commercial street that paralleled Third Canal and kept him out of the way of draft animals. He paced right along on that, it gave every indication that it would continue.

If it didn’t take too long, maybe he could talk to Enjteen

again, ask him what he knows about Ava's soul. He had been reluctant to talk about anything but accusations leveled at Kulai. He was able to piece together that Enjteen had been demoted at his job. Something smelled around here and maybe if he just shook the trees enough, something rotten would fall out.

He found it took about an hour just to get to the Kassikan. He wondered why Kulai would have a place so far away? To make it back in time he had to just turn around and go back, he really couldn't afford transportation. He would not get to talk to Enjteen today, but on the other hand, he wouldn't have to delve into the dark levels of the Kassikan again either.

When he arrived back at Kulai's he was brought inside to a large room overlooking a major street that ran toward the canal along the yacht basin ten stories below. The windows were large but there was no balcony. He sat in a chair near the window and waited about twenty minutes before Kulai actually showed up.

"Sorry," he said as he entered, "Sometimes the staff can be quite obtuse." He sat across from Jorma. "So, I didn't recognize the name but I can place the face. Weren't you at my office with Ava three weeks ago?"

He went on to apologize for telling him that Ava was the Yingolian Ghost and seemed genuinely sympathetic. He didn't agree with Jorma's revulsion and the vision of Kulai and Ava grappling in love flashed thru his brain. He didn't want to find out if that was real for some reason. Maybe it was because of the worst of Enjteen's accusations. Kulai

made Jorma tell him the details of Enjteen's accusations and laughed it off. To be honest Jorma could imagine someone as smooth and well-groomed as Kulai humping a corpse, but he knew Enjteen was totally unreliable.

When he mentioned that Enjteen had kept a detective on Ava since she was 'born,' it made Jorma feel even worse about the Kassikan. The institution that had bred it's own race for generations in the darkness of it's filled-in canyon, of which Enjteen was a member. A race that was not as old as the individuals they worked for. Now he knew that one of that race was stalking Ava, no doubt using the technology that she helped invent or bring over from YingolNeerie. Jorma was glad they were now conversing where sky could be seen and not down in the dark reaches of the Kassikan. He was glad it was a day with light and a pretty view of boats and townhomes.

Jorma refused Kulai's offer of food until he got some for himself, but he wished he hadn't reminded him. Irons went quickly in the city, he would need to bring the boat back for the unused time soon. He did have a thin penny breakfast roll before those hour walks. Public fountains had become his drinking water for the last few days. He was sleeping in the boat under docks right in the city canals since he hadn't gone back to the room Ava rented and couldn't afford anything else.

"So I was told you came here for some advice on finding your way around," Kulai asked. "Finding your way to the truth about Tdeshi?"

"Yes."

“Ava looked into it from this end very seriously not even ten years after she got here, Enjteen knew about that and spared no effort in telling me everything she learned.”

“So what was that?”

“Nothing much, she was found...” Jorma had heard this story before, Kulai recited it as well as anyone. He seemed to want to help, but systematically blocked learning anything about Tdeshi while sounding sorry that he didn’t know. He did say that loading RNacid into a shonggot victim had been tried and did not revive them. He wondered if he should believe that. If that was so, he would have to accept that she had been taken over by an electric ghost. If he didn’t believe it, he could still think she had been taken over by someone from the Kassikan.

Kulai was glad to sit and speculate with him on shonggot and Kassikan politics, but when he got to his finances Kulai accused him of interrogation. Jorma wasn’t really interested in his financial problems unless they had to do with shonggot. “What involvement do you have with shonggot,” Jorma asked, cutting him off. He knew that this was turning into a more confrontational interview.

Kulai stayed calm. “I learned about it because of the patients I’ve had to care for, especially Ava and all Tdddeshi’s (his pronunciation of the northern name left something to be desired) predecessors as we researched the project. She’s really the only involvement I’ve ever had with it. I’ve never met anyone who even used it once or saw it once outside my job at the Kassikan. Other than that, I haven’t had any involvement.” He was totally at ease about that, shonggot was

not his problem, money was.

Jorma didn't begrudge him his money problem and changed his line of inquiry. Kulai knew nothing of her student records, not as much as Ava. He seemed to know nothing of the employment record they had found of Tdeshi. He did know that there was a picture of Ava sent out to all medical facilities with a description of the body they wanted. The publication of those pictures had made Tdeshi a target hadn't it? Kulai went on to tell him more about the investigation that had been made from their end, even offered him an RNAcid tab of Althart's original helmet probe of Tdeshi's brain. Jorma was shocked at that, more evidence of the ghoulishness rampant in the deep catacombs of the Kassikan. He imagined remembering their love affair from Tdeshi's side, for such is the power of the Kassikan's pills, but Kulai assured him her mind was big and powerful but already empty.

Kulai brought out a yaag-alcohol mix and they talked some more. He sensed the meeting was getting too confrontational, and Jorma couldn't help but agree. Kulai continued to insist he had to investigate from the Tdeshi side, and they talked of the leads they got up in Chardovia. Kulai kept telling him they were the only new information. He also mentioned that Ava was still investigating and involving the upper levels of the Kassikan.

“How high up does she go?” Jorma asked.

“To the top, she knows the founders.” That was something he was afraid of, but still it hit him. As a soul from another star, she would be of interest to the most important people of all in the Kassikan. Kulai continued, “She's known them by

helmet since the 55th.”

That meant since she was still a ghost. It was logical that the highest sorcerers in all the lands would be even more interested in electric ghosts didn't it? He tried not to let that throw him, “What fuss is she making?”

“Same one you are, but a little more polite about it.”

“What's she saying?” Jorma asked, ignoring his comment. Some of the questions are tough, he didn't like having to ask them either.

“That there are people, she mentioned you, who believe the Kassikan sent a team out to get her, that Tdeshi was dosed with shonggot and then collected because she looked like the picture Ava gave them.”

“And you think I'm accusing you of that?”

“Not me, it seemed more like you were going after the boat crew,” Kulai said.

“You don't think they might have done such a thing?”

“I think the whole idea is preposterous. There are hundreds of people more likely to have done it, if it was done, and I think it wasn't. I think you are more likely to have had something to do with her demise than any one of them.”

Jorma staggered back under that blow. What did Kulai know of his involvement with Tdeshi other than what Ava had told him? “There are some at the Kassikan who predate the Instinct,” Jorma said, trying to continue the polite conversation while he wondered what Ava had told him. Maybe Ava knew something he didn't, or at least a lot more that he thought she did. Maybe she had been in touch with Leand?

“They caught it the same time everyone else did. Do you think they don’t get around? Ava and Althart were an item for awhile.”

Althart was the name of a wizard suspected to be a founder of the Kassikan. Jorma knew him only from his legend picture where he looked many decades more ravaged with age than he would today. “No wonder she had influence,” Jorma said. He was beginning to learn how deep into the Kassikan the plot to take Tdeshi went. Kulai babbled about it being all innocent but Jorma wasn’t listening. “Do you know the boat crew?” Jorma asked.

“I know one of them well, B’theen,” Kulai responded, “but he will not be accused of such a thing in my presence because I count him as a friend.”

“But could he provide me with something about the neighborhood at that time?”

“The address where she was picked up would do you just as much good.”

“I’m trying to determine if it was an area where she might have gone to pick up the shonggot.”

“I would think that the fact that she was found wiped by it while she was there would be conclusive enough evidence.”

“I’d like to find out what the actual transaction was.”

“After twenty decades?” Kulai looked at him the way he would a talking klizhorn.

“Don’t be the five hundredth person who’s told me I should have come down on this investigation earlier.”

“Yes I will. You were in love with Tdeshi, she disappeared twenty decades ago. A slacker working for me

was supposed to be watching her when she awoke as Ava, that's how she entered my life, already Ava.

“Why didn't you come and investigate Tdeshi then?” Kulai continued, “If the Gods were cruel, you would have come down to investigate during the middle of the Brazilian landing just ten years later, things were way too hectic then and I was laid out with disease for weeks.”

As he left Kulai's he felt dazed. If he believed Kulai, he had to agree that Ava really was the Yingolian ghost and not an RNAcid recording of someone from the Kassikan. He knew that he and Ava was still on the same trail, and that he was a day behind. If he believed Kulai the only clues he had to follow were the ones they learned in Chardovia. Maybe he wanted to believe him because anything else would lead him back into the Kassikan.

2. In Search of Hyondahi

His funds were dwindling and he was going to need the two coppers he could still get back if he turned in the boat before the end of Lmonteira. Nightday he'd used up a bit of those dwindling funds and gone to an eye room and done a general search on Hyondahi and turned up over a hundred seventy individuals. How was he going to weed that down any? The pictures didn't do him any good, neither did thumb prints if available. He could weed out those born later than Tdeshi's death, that got it down into the one sixties. Weeding

out those with no reference newer than Tdeshi's death brought it down to twenty three.

Was there anything he could do to give him more hints, like any reference to Chardovia? That was potent and got it down to five. He copied down all there was on those five and got that list down to three. That was a small enough number to try and see. He was up early this Morningday, that would be the best time to find people home tending the garden. All three of them lived in the inner plots east of the city. He should get this done while he still had the boat.

He hadn't seen or heard from Ava since the revelation, hadn't heard about her since the visit to Kulai's. He hadn't been back inside the Kassikan since he talked with Enjteen. Ava might not have been out of it since that day. If he went to an eye inside the Kassikan he might have been able to find news of her and find out just how much trouble she was causing in the upper pyramid, but he didn't really care.

The nearest of the three Hyondahi's was out 5-4 Canal about six miles outside the high rise boundary, only four miles from where he'd parked for Nightday. He was there before it was really warm enough to be out gardening, though most of the wet snow was already gone. He found the guy at his breakfast table with an attractive companion still wrapped snugly in her quilt, a quilt supple enough to reveal her shape. Even more beautiful were her deep blue eyes and her tumbling curls of thesh-yellow shining hair.

"Nah," he said, "Couldn't have been me, how long have we been together?" he asked his beautiful companion.

"Oh I would think it has to be longer than that, since the

40-something decade of the 55th wasn't it? I remember we had some lumpy times getting adjusted but we've been pretty much OK since the start of the 100th I think."

"That's how I remember it," the man named Hyondahi said, "Once I found a woman as wonderful as Tiseer I wasn't about to let go."

"I had to chase you for ages," she said. "I changed my looks twice for you."

"Your hair-style, and it was your green thumb that I finally noticed," he said.

"You've been together all that time so you could not have lived with Tdeshi outside Chardovia?" Jorma asked.

"No," Tiseer answered, "we were together the whole time we were in Chardovia, as far as living went. We're social now and then, I guess we average one or two a year each wouldn't you say?" she paused and Hyondahi nodded, "but we've lived together since a bit before then. We met on the packet up the Mindendao. We lived on the downstream side of the city wall just above its Second Canal."

A pleasant enough couple, a very pretty girl. No relation to the Hyondahi Tdeshi lived with. The next was much closer to the city off Ninth. It made little sense to do anything but go into the edge of the city and take city locks down to the ninth major canal and go out a few miles along the canyon top on that. It took a bit more than an hour all told.

This one lived back in the small fields well behind the busy street that was along the canal. It was a densely populated area but he had every inch cultivated at least one

level deep including the greenhouse atop his house where he kept tender lowland crops. He was quick to answer a call. “Yeah, I lived up Chardovia way for awhile about that time, but it was out on main canal south. I had more room there but that just seemed more work. I’m happier doing it this way. The exotic cooks pay anything for the lowland stuff. I earned an iron off of one leshin bush this year.”

“Did you live with anyone named Tdeshi?”

“A woman I take it?” Hyondahi asked.

“Yes, tall, dark hair, understated figure, nice ass.”

“No, I never lived with a woman the whole time I was out that way, that’s one of the reasons I came back down this way, I heard there was a surplus of women here.”

“Were there?”

“Not really a surplus, but a few have graced my chambers since I’ve been here.”

Now he had the dilemma of the third one who was only four miles away, but most of those four miles were made up with Canyon Lake, seven hundred and something feet lower in altitude. This meant he had to go all the way back into downtown, around all the canyons and back out this way, thirty one miles altogether. He would need another fuel bag to get there, and there would be traffic all the way. Inspecting the details of his map he found he could take two locks to get him to a tiny canal that ran near the canyon rim that put him within three miles, going by way of the canyon foot bridges.

When he got there he found the canal was a one way, more for irrigation than transportation and he had to pull the

heavy little needleboat to park. The first mile was all downhill on residential paths. The area was full of commercial larorie growers with some climbing beans and prickly-berry as companions. The third of the land that was nearest the canals was urban in these parts, just barely urban. The path went out to a rugged outcropping and down a stairway almost two hundred feet to a little valley where a fertile pond sat. There was another half mile thru hilly little plots to canyon bridge.

This bridge connects the two sides with the pinnacle in the middle where the South and combined North Canyons come together. The shore of Canyon Lake itself is a wall of cliff, three hundred to six hundred feet high, but the cliff is all balconies with Canyon Lake docks and beaches at the base, Ninth Canal at the tops of the elevators. Few knew that Canyon Lake docks are actually the busiest in the city.

The bridge toll is two pennies and it's foot traffic only. The north span is 4175 feet, the south span is 4988 feet. The bridge is over three hundred feet above the water, well above the tallest masts on Canyon Lake, at the level of the highest streets in the canyonwall. The great bridge towers are also elevator towers for the same transportation company, using the same gate men. Canyon Lake was over a mile wide as it went up each of these canyons before they end. Out in the middle was like flying, it swayed and the wind whistled. From here he could see seven miles to the end of North Canyon where there was a wall of balconies seven hundred feet high a few miles east of the Kassikan. New North Canyon was off to the side and South Canyon curved too much for him to see the end.

Once off the bridge, the third Hyondahi was less than a mile away up a relatively steep slope. It seemed like at least half of that mile was steps and the path was crowded. This Hyondahi lived urban, in a big ebonoid with over six floors inhabited. His place was on the second floor above a little breakfast shop.

There was a speaking plug on the door. His call brought a waifish woman, no more than ninety pounds, barely five feet with her hair messed, cute but thin, even her hair was a bit wispy, but with plenty of curl. She was bright-eyed and lively. “I’m Hyondahi, but I don’t believe I know you?”

“Jorma,” he answered. “No I don’t think you would, and I’m sorry to disturb you, I already know you’re not the person I’m looking for.” Nothing in the data he looked up had mentioned that this Hyondahi was female. The other four of the five were male, he assumed this one would be too though that fact wasn’t actually listed. He should have taken the time to try and look up a picture. Even though he didn’t have any idea what the person looked like, he was pretty sure that Tdeshi’s lover would be male. If he’d called up pictures he could have saved himself all this hiking. He could have had the picture for much less than the toll of the bridge, much less the time he wasted getting here.

“How do you know that?” she asked.

“I’m about ninety nine percent sure the person I’m looking for is male.”

“I see.” She had nothing more to say.

“I’m sorry, I’ve just walked over three miles to get here, I don’t mean to be rude but I could use a refill of my water

skins?”

“Sure, the water’s pretty good here, but take a taste first.” She was leading him into the house as she said that. It had a pretty view out the back. You couldn’t see down into the canyon itself, but you could see the plot-covered hills on the far side miles away and see that the land was sloping down. “So what made you come here if you didn’t know I was female?”

“All the other Hyondahi’s had been male, I was too cheap to look up a picture.”

“I don’t expose a picture anyway,” she said. “But why are you looking for Hyondahis?” she asked while he took a taste of the water.

He knew people only warned one to taste it if someone had complained. It just had a bit of soda, just a trace, he wasn’t allergic to the minerals however and started to fill the skins. “A woman I used to know was living with one when she disappeared.”

“Ah. Should have messaged me if you hiked three miles, I would have answered a message about this. Why not put your feet up for awhile, they must be barking? And what reference did you find to me?”

“You registered your home purchase with a previous address in Chardovia and you do store signs. Tdeshi took sign painting jobs, you would have been a good one for her to hook up with.”

“If I were male, but I haven’t even done business with anyone named Tdeshi, at least not recently.”

“This was twenty decades ago.”

“I’m fourteen decades old, I guess that didn’t show up in my records?”

“No, that didn’t either, your company’s been around since the mid 55th.”

“I never thought of it as a new company, I bought the house, the brushes, the saws, the wood he had built up.” She pointed to the shed behind the breakfast place that must be her shop. The vine on her porch railing was pretty worn, like that was how she commuted to work. “You must be pretty determined to find this guy,” she asked, “what did he do to her?”

“I don’t think he did anything to her. He was distraught when she disappeared, even sold the house they were living in.”

“Sounds like he might have something to do with it. Do you have any idea what happened to her?”

“I heard a rumor a long time ago that she O.D.d on shonggot, but I discounted that. She wasn’t very attached to anyone. She was very popular and made friends easily wherever she went so it was no problem for her to just pick up and leave. I figured she did it to Hyondahi the way she had to me.”

“That sounds like the reason you didn’t investigate this back then, what changed your mind?”

“The story as best I know it so far is that her comatose body, limp from shonggot, was brought to the Kassikan and re-animated using an electric ghost from YingolNeerie.”

The girls eyes got bigger and jaw got lower as she listened to that sentence. “Good grief what’s that? I know

what a ghost is, but I don't believe in regular ghosts, much less electric ones. What do you mean by re-animated and where in the world is YingolNeerie?"

"Re-animated is like 'brought back to life' but not the same life, and YingolNeerie is not in the world, it's the fourth brightest star in the constellation Yingol. It's the star the starships came from. There was an earlier starship that was unmanned except for some kind of technological recording of a human mind that is best described as an electric ghost. The wizards of the Kassikan 'played back' that recording into Tdeshi's body."

The woman shuddered. Her sink overlooked the balcony overlooking her shed. In the sun it was now warm enough to sit and she went out there shaking her head and clutching her shoulders. It was still close enough to easily converse and her kitchen hose ran slow enough that it was going to take minutes to fill these skins. The hike back would be a lot more uphill and the temperature would continue to climb. She looked at him closely, "You're not making this up?" Jorma just shook his head. "How horrible!" the girl said. "I thought the starship was friendly?"

"The one everyone heard so much about was. They were live humans made of meat."

"So now you know your friend did O.D.?"

"Not really, did she O.D. or was it given to her? We know they needed a compatible body for this ghost and Tdeshi was that body. They already had a picture of her. I'm not sure they didn't just come get her."

He finished filling the second water skin but only turned

when he heard Hyondahi inhale sharply. “That would be prevented by the Instinct I would think.”

“The wizards that run the Kassikan are much older than the Instinct.” She had no answer for that, and their conversation lapsed. He wondered if she really hoped he would stay and visit or be on his way. Since the news he brought was distressing, and he wasn’t strongly attracted to her, he decided not to dally. “I shouldn’t take up any more of your time with my tales of woe,” he said and started for the door.

She watched him, but didn’t come following after him. She didn’t give him the feeling she was devastated to see him leave, her sadness was probably more from his mission. “I sure hope you’re wrong about that, she said. “If you find out and there’s any way you can let me know, it would ease my mind.”

“We could both use our mind eased about the Kassikan it seems,” he said as he slung the skins again. “Let me have your eye address, I’ll make a note on it to drop you a message with what I find out.” After doing that, he began the long hike back.

The next day was Afternoon, the heat built as he worked his way south across downtown on Fourth Canal. Everyone was out in their kayak clogging up the waterways. The motor hissed and farted at having to go so slow, so he eventually shut it off and paddled. It was so small for a needleboat, but big and heavy to paddle. He figured he’d be down to paddling anyway when the lease ran out. He had

nothing better to do today than try the fourth of the Hyondahis with a reference to Chardovia.

It was an hour and a half til he got there, delighted to do the last twenty minutes under motor on a less built-up side canal, one with actual crop land along the shore here and there, a thin line of well-kept town homes lining the remaining bank. There was a dock and a few side quays at the little commercial center he was near. There wasn't much of a center, the dockman, a vegetable dealer's storage barn, a little news and snack stand and a religious mission of Universal Life. The dock sign promised a safe harbor for a penny a week or tenner a year. The dock-man pointed at a side quay while Jorma pulled up.

It wasn't til Jorma walked up to his hut that he said, "Big barge coming for a load from Lorry's," he pointed to the barn. "Be along any minute."

"Would you know where this address is?" he asked.

He held it up and chewed at it awhile. "Yeah, it's down that road on the other side of Lorry's barn about two and a half miles. You better ask again when you get closer, I don't know just what house it will be. It should be before the Koocheera place though, maybe a quarter mile before."

"What's the Koocheera place?" Jorma asked.

"It's where old man Koocheera and all his folk live. It's a big stone castle-looking place with turrets and ramps."

"So I'll know I'm too far if I see that?"

"Well, you can't exactly see it from the road..."

"Let me see if I can ask around." Jorma said, leaving the chip. He wondered if this guy had done too much shonggot

also.

The news and snack dealer was much better. Of course he'd spread two pennies his way already for some of the tasty-smelling, grilled, stuffed, yellow tails and thought it well worth it. "Yeah, I can figure this out, it's up the road right behind this barn, it's way up, beyond a mile of grain land with nothing but sickle men's thickets along the road. This Gilleria here, must be the crossroads where Gill'ry has his Raunchy Roping Room. It's starting into small holds again by then. That would put this a few houses out the seventh path after that crossroads I would think. You're getting closer to 4/1/7 Canal by then."

"How close is it to Koocheera's place?"

"Oh Koocheera's are back up in the woods behind there another half mile or more. You know any Koocheera's?"

"No, first heard the name from the guy on the dock."

"Dead Lester, yeah, he knows the Koocheeras all too well."

"That was an interesting name."

"The Koocheeras have a few chemists in the family, they've been known to brew some potent hallucinogens. Lester's been way too good a customer of theirs."

"I thought... But is my boat safe there? It's not really mine, I couldn't afford to replace it."

"It's as safe as anywhere, I know who owns it, I'm close enough to see if anyone else disagrees."

"There's a tall, slender, dark-haired woman, rather aloof, who has a claim on it. Her name is Ava, she'll be glad to tell you and she'll know that I am Jorma."

“What are the odds that she will show up?”

“Less than the odds of someone trying to pull a fast one on Dead Lester if they say they have any business with that boat.”

Once Jorma had finished eating and filled his water skins, he set off on the hike. It was miles, maybe more than either of them said. It was at least a mile before he got to the grain lands, and they were certainly more than a mile across. He didn't think there would be any this wide within a week of the city, this was much closer to the center of the Yakhan than the center of Chardovia was. Gill'ry's saloon was impossible to miss. He wished he had the courage to just walk in the door and yell out 'Hey Hyondahi!' in a hearty voice and see if anyone answered. He could see that this was the pairing place for the randier of the neighborhood singles. Tdeshi would have enjoyed this place. He would have gone in with her or Venna, but maybe not with Ava. By himself it was worth it to step inside for something to drink besides water.

The game inside was girls would dance on the tables while undressing and guys would try to lasso them. It was entertaining to watch while he filled the water skin he had emptied on the hike with a sparkling yellow. The girls would resist roping by some and try to entice others. There was even a table where the sides changed and men undressed and performed for women to rope them, again fending off the ropes of those they did not desire, lunging into the ropes of those they did.

He did ask a few people about the address, and got more detailed descriptions that agreed with the snack seller's. As it

was, there was not a straight across here, but the left across in the original address made sense now. It was the larger road anyway, and the one the locals said the address meant.

He easily found the seventh path to the left a few houses down. Once he was there, it was just find someone out. It was Afternoon, there would be few in the gardens today. As he was wandering around looking for someone, a woman came up the path.

“I’m looking for Hyondahi, I have this address which should be near here.”

She looked at it, said it was the property diagonally across the street.

That house was unoccupied at present. There was no one outside in the garden, no answer to a call. He found a neighbor. “Yeah, Pinkam will surely be back next week, he borrowed cart and keda to go get a woman friend’s stuff down to the canal, he needs to get them back by dusk.”

Jorma couldn’t help but sigh. “I’m looking for someone named Hyondahi at this address,” Jorma got out the notes he’d copied from the terminal and showed him.

“Yeah, that’s the right house but it’s Pinkam’s. He bought it about ten years ago off this burnt-out dude that used to live there. I’m sure Pinkam would know his name.”

“You don’t? You haven’t been here more than ten years?”

“No, almost twelve. The dude kept to himself. He was introduced when I bought this place, but I never talked to him again and forgot his name. Could have been Hyondahi. Nobody much talked about him either. He never introduced Pinkam to anyone when he sold the house, he just packed a

big pushcart and left.

“I’ve known Pinkam since long before that, I was the one that told him there was a faded old ‘for sale’ sign on the house and we could be neighbors if the dude actually meant it. I really figured he just never bothered taking it down when he moved in. I thought it was better Pinkam ask after spotting the sign rather than letting on I knew him.”

“Look’s like I’ll come back next week and talk to Pinkam,” Jorma said, “But could I trouble you for water?”

“You could trouble me for a skin of home-brew if you’d like, water’s nearly free in this neighborhood.”

“It’s a bit warm for yaag right now, for me while I’m hiking I mean. If I was taking it easy I’d be right with you.”

After the long, hot hike back to the boat, he had a few locks and switchbacks to get up to Third Canal and the fifth of the Hyondahi’s that had a connection to Chardovia. On Third he had a long run over twenty miles out onto the south plains. It was late Afternoonday by the time he got there and he had to forgo lunch to have enough money for the fuel to get him back to town because there wasn’t enough left in this bag. He might have to mooch a duskmeal.

This guy was the one he would have picked as Tdeshi’s lover from the photo. He looked very different now than he did in the news article from over a century ago when he won a middleweight stone-heave competition. He lost most of his shoulders and his chest had sunk to his belly. His hair was much thinner. He led Jorma into a home that was surely more abloom with gadgetry than any laboratory Ava ever worked in

including the ones at YingolNeerie. His walls were festooned with screens and he had a brook driving an escapement driving a big tracking mirror on a suntower collecting light that was conducted thru thick fiber bundles to his components with outlets all over the room, most of them in use.

“You ever know anyone named Tdeshi?” he asked.

“Let me see.” he pulled a device from his clout and drew in the name. It displayed a man’s picture and address. There was a ‘next’ character which lead to business cards of a financial planner and a gardener.

“None of them are her. She looks like this today,” Jorma handed him the marble of Tdeshi’s picture. It was close enough so he could rightfully say, “she hasn’t changed much in the last twenty decades, which is how long it’s been since you knew her.” This was about the closest thing to a gadget he had on him.

“Never knew her,” he said. “Let’s see what’s public on her though,” and turned his chair to one of his screens. He padded his keys for awhile, then read and poked, read and poked. “There are 4,631 individuals known to have used the name Tdeshi in the Highlands, 3991 of whom are not known to be dead. I have 441 of the pictures on file, let me see that marble again, I’ll compare it. I developed this algorithm myself.” He took the marble and put it in a device. “This takes awhile, but not as long as looking at all the pictures by hand.” A second later he said, “It didn’t find a very good match on any of the Tdeshi’s, but I’ll let it keep running across all my pictures for awhile.”

“What’s running where?” Jorma didn’t hear anything. He

would expect something like a very fast slide projector or even a movie projector would be flipping them thru on an optical device, instead it seemed like nothing was running anything.

“The program, the virtual machine. It is ‘running’ within this hardware here,” There was nothing to see but the back of a plastic optical reflector keeping in the light brought down from the suntower. “Oh look, it’s detected a match,” he brought another picture to a screen. “This picture is AvaBancour, better known as just Ava. She’s a moderately well-known Sorceress at the Kassikan.”

“Yes, some say she’s the Yingolian ghost...”

Before Jorma could say it, Hyondahi could key it as a query. “There are three hundred seventy one claimants to that title,” Hyondahi said, “maybe more depending on which journals you believe in. I do not list Ava as one of them.”

“Have you ever met her?”

“No, I’ve read her papers, very enlightening, very profound. She is THE founder of virtual thought. I actually should have recognized the photo but she did most of her best work decades ago. But why does Ava look like Tdeshi?”

“Ava is THE one of those claimants. Tdeshi was lost to shonggot at that time.”

“So were five other claimants in that year. Over the fourteen decades from the 55,42's to the 100,00's there were thirty one people brought to the Kassikan comatose from shonggot. Anyone who can get a good enough thumb print match with any of them can claim to be THE ghost.”

“She admitted it in front of me.”

“So would the other three hundred seventy claimants.”

This made Jorma wonder once again if Kulai was just someone Ava knew who set the whole thing up and lied about RNacid. If that was so, what could he believe? Maybe Ava is Tdeshi all along, playing an elaborate hoax on him, pretending not to remember anything, laying a guilt trip on him for not investigating what happened to her? Maybe all she did when she said she O.D.d was go to the Kassikan and study Yingolian crystals for a career? After finding that she could master the technology of gas piping, she might have been drawn deeper into science. She was fascinated by the approaching starship, she might have been drawn to it because of that also. There was evidence that she was changing in important ways before the shonggot overdose.

Enjteen didn't seem very solid with Kulai or the Kassikan hierarchy. He wondered if he should go talk to him again? He thought about going back within those walls, especially down to his area, the second-creepiest walk he had ever been on. He was repelled. “I'm trying to find the last few things that happened to her before she was picked up on that needleboat.”

“What needleboat? I don't see that in her file.”

“She was still Tdeshi then, they hadn't let the Yingolian ghost possess her yet.”

“Then it wouldn't show up I guess.”

“Do you have anything on the people who were brought in?”

“There are dossiers on all of them, she must have been one of the unnamed ones.” He was padding his keys some

more as he said that. Jorma came around where he could see the screen. Unlike the old eyes which could be watched from many angles like a marble of a photograph, many screens of Yingolian design were flat and could only be seen if you were in front of them. Each time he padded a key, another sleeping woman appeared on the screen. A picture of Tdeshi appeared, she looked more dead than comatose. She was thinner than before or after, her eyes were in much darker sockets. Her mouth hung open and her head lolled to the side. It was hard to believe this picture was taken within a decade of her departure from Sinbara. She couldn't have had many hearty meals since she left his place.

“Ah yes, this one of the unnamed,” Hyondahi said. I see why I didn't get a match on this picture. I'll enter the name, Tdeshi.”

Jorma dictated, “Tdeshi, daughter of Leand and a colandro named Jaseem. From Sinbara out of Zharvai on North Lake. Age just under four decades. Fond of art, clothing design, poetry. Studied methane distribution at a practical institution.”

“I don't think we need to put her history here, do you have a link?”

“When I last saw her she had never seen an eye or a keyboard.”

“If I hack in too much data they might get on to me.”

“Can you find out if Tdeshi was duped or poisoned with the shonggot by a plot at the Kassikan?”

“Probably not. They took the old crystal off the public network, there is no hardware fiber that can get any control

connected to it now, so there's no way to get at it. Anyone who is anyone in the Kassikan does their work on the old server. It's not as precise as the new ones, but a lot easier to use and has a lot richer detail. If there was a plot like that, the only data would be on the old crystal and they would have never copied that out to the new ones."

"Somebody went over all the data?" Jorma asked. He hadn't known there were old and new crystals until now, he thought the Yingolian technology had only provided more and cheaper eyes and keyboards.

"Oh I would think so, there's nothing in any of it that gives any evidence that anything at the Kassikan could possibly have an odor."

"And you have examined it from that perspective?"

This Hyondahi leaned back in his swivel chair and held up the back of his head with his palms. "I have been at this since before the first Yingolian starship, the ghost ship. I had that photo printer over there and the keyboard up there on the top shelf. Pre-starship data technology, but not ancient technology."

Jorma was interested enough in that to get up and examine the keyboard. Other than the style, the connectors and the quality of the woodwork, it was the same. The old one was beautifully sculpted and lustrously finished. He put it back up. The new ones were just drilled into plain lumber with grooves cut in the bottom for the fibers.

"I have devoted much of my time to investigating the Kassikan. Sort of like an oversight committee of one."

"And what have you found out?"

“They’re not without stain, but cleaner than most schools. They are mindful of their enormous influence. Yet there is something amoral in an organization that can collect shonggot victims to experiment on. I don’t deny that they feel in their hearts that they are being noble in trying to revive the victims...”

“They weren’t, they were trying to copy a Yingolian ghost into them. I don’t think of that as reviving them, I think it is killing the soul that owned the body for sure if she wasn’t dead already.”

“That did turn out to be the case didn’t it. They saw it as a way to use Yingolian technology to help them revive the body.”

“All I really want to know,” Jorma said, “Is whether Tdeshi took that shonggot knowingly of her own free will.”

“I’d like to know that also, I’ll give you my address so you can tell me if you find out.”

“That’s how I got here,” Jorma said.

“No, optical.” Hyondahi took his notesheet and carefully drew the eight dyads.

Jorma knew it might be profitable to stay here awhile, but he dreaded the thought of trying to pilot the boat back after dark. This guy could find out more with an eye in a minute than Jorma could in a day and spending an iron. “Listen, I’d like to come back when I can stay a little longer and take notes on the details of what you know about the Kassikan, but I want to get back to the city for duskmeal.”

“I think you mean downtown, the miles of crystal froth?”

“Yeah, or at least near enough. I’ve got to find some temp

labor for some handy cash this Nightday or my meals will run out.”

“There’s scarcely any business along here except a bit of excess from the garden to sell toward the city. I make an iron a year spending money running a single public seat out on the front porch and that’s empty five sixths of the time. I could still put you up and feed you thru the dark without depriving myself a bit.”

“I need to take work, I appreciate the offer and I can see it would be interesting, but I would still be broke and I still need to find that other Hyondahi. I’d like to get back to the city for the dark, traffic can be choking once you get there.”

“If I hear anything of your interest I’ll let you know if I can have your address, optical.”

“Any public terminal in Sinbara is my home address, same since I’ve been in the city. For public pickup, Jorma of Sinbara, question ‘who’s trail are you on?’ answer, ‘Tdeshi.’” Jorma was getting up now.

“I see. Well, let me know if you get a dedicated optical box, you have my address.”

“If I remember to take my notes,” he reached over to where Hyondahi had put the sheet.

Jorma spent Nightday in a gloomy factory cleaning and greasing grimy ceramic bearings with plastic rollers, replacing parts if they needed it using chipped chisels and smelly glue. He made an iron and a half, enough to fill his stomach with plain diddle and the fuel to go see Pinkam to see if he could get the address of the remaining Hyondahi.

The trip out there was easier on Morningday, he made much better time in the brisk air. There was at least an inch of powdered snow this week that was just beginning to fall off the white fairy wonderland dawn had been in the trees. The leaves were completely unfurled by now, with the sun on them they were well above freezing but the ground in the shade was not. This would take halfway til lunch to melt in the shade today. He was glad of his jacket as he cruised thru the dewy air and he put up and buttoned the collar. Sleeping in the boat had left him numb, in spite of all the cloth he had. Pinkam was not out when he got there, but it was still pretty cool, though it was halfway to lunch by now. He did answer a call however.

“Come right on in,” a voice called. Jorma entered to find a man buried in such curly red mounds of hair and beard that little more than his eyes and nose poked thru. He was sitting at his table paring shums, enough to put up for sale.

“Hi, my name is Jorma and your neighbor tells me you may know if you bought this place from someone named Hyondahi?” He had stepped inside by now. It was a place with one main room, basically round, of the new frost-hardy archwood trunks, with alcoves in some of the arches. The ceiling was high and pointed where the trunks came back together into one tree again twenty or thirty feet above. It was cluttered with shelves, tables, cushions and racks. The layer of dust was thin even though the clutter was high. Best of all, the fire was crackling and there was sun coming thru the window to the table.

“Yeah, I think that was his name,” Pinkam answered. “He

was a skinny old burn-out of a guy. Thought he was some kind of artist but never could get anything done. He never introduced me to anyone when I bought the place, he just left. How was anyone to know I bought the place fair?”

“Do you know where he went?”

“Just back to Chardovia is all I know. He said I could look him up at Raingley’s if I needed to find him.”

“That’s a registry?”

“I guess, I’ve had no reason to look him up, no one ever doubted me. Everyone knew there was no fight, no one was really sorry to see him go. What would you want with him anyway?”

“He was living with someone I knew. A friend of mine, daughter of a very good friend of mine.”

“He didn’t mention anyone much, what was the name?”

“Tdeshi.”

“Not familiar.”

“It was twenty decades ago,” Jorma admitted.

“I wouldn’t expect him to remember much from that far back. That would have been before he got here.”

“When he was up toward Chardovia.”

“Well, that’s where he’s from, so he could be your man.”

“I was hoping I wouldn’t have to chase this back up to Chardovia again.”

“There’s still enough gadgetry around these days so you might be able to look him up from here. At least look up Raingley, you should be able to find something on that.”

“Yeah.” He would need to take more temp work to afford

it however. This guy, like almost everyone, didn't have any gadgets. He would have to earn another iron or turn in the boat and take a public ride to Chardovia.

“Want a cup before you go?” Pinkam asked, “I got just the thing for Morningday right here in this jug.”

“It was a couple hours getting out here.”

“Then set yourself down and rest a spell. I was thinking I'll wait til after lunch to putter around outside, thick as this week's snow was.” He had pulled down a couple cups from a shelf as quick as he could say that.

“If you've got another blade I could lend a hand with those.”

“Not one like you'd want to get thru those tough things.” He laid Jorma's mug in front of him and started filling his own. “You just take it easy, I'm just whittling these now for lack of anything better to do.”

“Looks like you're going to market.”

“I sell a bit to a few of the local cooks, they like getting 'em done up like this, makes it easier for them.”

“Sure.”

They talked like that while they had a cup. Trying to learn more about Hyondahi produced little more than anecdotes about how forgetful he was when he packed or how he obsessed about getting his scrappy, dirty, unfinished canvasses protected. He didn't learn much more, but parted happily and enjoyed the ride back to town.

3. The Stalker

He found more day work. He stayed at the same shop and got to use much better tools on Afternoonday. He was in early and worked long and hard and earned three irons. By the time he left it was well into the dusk, but the proprietor was quite cordial with him now and asked if he had plans for the dusk.

“Actually I’ve got to get to an eye room before it gets too dark if I’m not going to waste another week.”

“Take mine, I’ve got one in the office. It’s just a little desk-ball, but if you lean close you can see just about as well on it.”

“I really appreciate that, I’m worried about the time.” Kortax was already gone from this neighborhood on south Second. He dashed up the stairs to his office, it was an open floor above the tool crib. He could just about see to look Hyondahi up at Raingley’s. He found an address, but it was already dark enough that several of the letters were flickering. The new eyes have the ability to do some local operations for a few minutes after the message appears that says the local data service is shutting down for the dark. That happened before he was able to learn anything more than the address. He would have to stop at a room in Chardovia next week to get a map of it.

“Find what you need?” Henta asked. He had made it up those few steps by the time Jorma started to copy down the address. He was easily twice the weight he should be for that height, not a full inch over five feet. He was a full blooded Dwarf but wore his hair like a Gnome. He wore overalls and

a harness.

“Enough to let me get going.”

“You said you were living out of your boat,” Henta said, “So where you going?”

“A cheap cook and an early sleep,” Jorma answered.

“I’ll buy,” he said, “Right around the corner. He’s cheap and he serves a nice portion.”

“Probably more than I can eat.”

“I love to eat, but you can see that.”

Jorma tried to chuckle politely, didn’t know what was polite in this situation, but knew he couldn’t afford to turn down the meal. If he could find a bulk fuel distributor he might get five bags for two irons, leaving him enough for some trail mix and fruit for the ride. “I can’t refuse that, but you hardly need to do that for me.”

“You do good work, you good with machinery?”

“Some,” Jorma answered, and listened to a description of a machine used to make coach wheels, something called a rotary laminater. By the time they had walked out of the alley his shop was on and then a block along this industrial level street to a stairway, he was asked if he would ever consider a career repairing such machinery. “I wasn’t planning on remaining in the city long term,” he answered.

“Too bad, the apprenticeship pays two irons every half-shift, there are experienced guys that get a copper a call for machinery like that.” With that he turned and began to ascend the stairway. He was puffing half a flight into it. “This is how I test myself, to see if I can treat myself. If I can’t make it up these stairs, I don’t deserve it.”

“You’re going up to a place on the commercial level?” Jorma asked. That looked to be about the sixth floor in this neighborhood.

“Bothome,” Henta puffed. “He’s five levels up from here. Think I can do it?”

“You’ve got a look in your eye that says the first heart attack won’t stop you.”

He gasped, complained not to make him laugh on a climb like this, and struggled to the top of the first flight. He didn’t speak from then on, hung mightily from the rails, and cut his lip on the fourth floor. He was really shaking as he hauled himself up the last few steps, his face was the reddest he had ever seen on a living human being, but the wide, wide grin on his face when he made it was worth the featured spot in a tear-jerker. He hung on the wall gasping for long minutes, people stared as they walked by.

When he finally regained his breath, without throwing up, the first thing he got out of his mouth was, “You, gasp, know, gasp, that, gasp, guy?” He was able to bring his hand up and point with shaking finger. He seemed to be pointing at someone who was loitering at the railing on the floor above. He was holding a map, but looking past it at them until Henta pointed. He was a thin guy in a big mountain shirt and a floppy beret hairdo.

“No,” Jorma answered.

“He followed you Nightday, I noticed because I noticed him loitering around the rate sign an awfully long time. He stayed until you left. He left watching every step you took. Now he’s here tonight. You in some kind of trouble?”

What could this be? Most likely it was someone from the Kassikan and something to do with Tdeshi. It could be someone following him because of the needleboat, thinking he must be big-time at something in spite of the fact that it had the rental brand burned almost thru the cowl wood. If someone had followed him and watched his spending habits they would know he didn't have much. But then he'd been buying a lot of fuel and a lot of eye time. He was going thru irons like they were pennies down here in the big city and that worried him too. "I'm trying to figure out what this could be about?" Jorma said.

"You said you were looking into what happened to your friend's kid, could he have been into some kind of trouble?"

"She; Tdeshi was a girl, a tall, elegant, fair-skinned, shiny-haired fire-girl."

"Was she into some trouble?" he asked. He was beginning to get some color back and wasn't gasping between each word any more.

"It was twenty decades ago," Jorma said.

"Some trouble forgets hard," Henta panted out. The guy who they spoke of was still there, pretending he was just leaning on the rail consulting his map. Jorma was bothered by this. Henta had breath for a few more words, "What trouble was she in?" he asked.

"I know she O.D.d on shonggot, but I don't know if she took it knowingly, or if she was duped into it to get her body for use by the ghost from Narrulla's Tear."

Henta choked and gasped and turned purple, "I told you not to make me laugh when I'm already out of breath."

“I know how psycho that sounds, but if you knew how true it was, you wouldn’t be laughing. There’s missing records, altered records, her scholarship certificate was used.”

“What are you saying?”

Jorma had to tell him the whole thing. Maybe it was time he had more witnesses. By the time he had the outline, Henta was able to walk to the eatery, a very swanky place where Henta spent two irons before the evening was over. They talked each other into believing the guy was working for the Kassikan. For Henta the fact that he was being followed was direct proof that there had been foul play. That wasn’t enough for Jorma, maybe he was still pursuing it only because he was still making progress, maybe it was because he still didn’t know enough to actually do anything about it. But now he knew where to find Hyondahi and he was going to chase that lead down.

It was full dark by the time they were done eating. He was grateful for the meal and told him so, but chose not to remain with him. Henta was anxious to watch a sex show for entertainment, but Jorma wanted to get going early in Nightday, and he’d never been able to go to a sex show and just watch. They looked around for the guy who had been following him on their way out, but didn’t spot him.

Jorma did not take the most direct route to the side canal and the dock where his boat was hidden. Instead he walked nonchalantly along this commercial street for a ways, looking like he was checking out the action at a few taps on his way by. What he was doing is using the occasional piece of glass

to let him look at the crowd behind him. The view he had was not definitive, but there was someone a few doors down on the opposite side who could be the same guy. He continued to wander aimlessly until he came to a public house that had a stairway to the rooms just inside the door and out of sight. He walked boldly into that portal, but when he was out of the lantern light he jumped back into the stairway, almost falling onto a woman he would have been delighted to be on top of.

He put a finger to his lips and whispered, “please continue like there was no one here.”

She looked a bit cross but said nothing and went on into the room, without looking back but with her back very straight. He backed up two steps into the stairway. From here he could see both entries to the place. It was at least two minutes, but that guy did enter cautiously via the other door. He looked around carefully and did see Jorma. He pretended he was looking for something or someone else. Meanwhile a houseman was approaching Jorma. If this was still going to look like normal human interaction, he had to act now, “I was just waiting for someone, he’s right there looking for me.” Jorma pointed at the guy who had been following him and began walking that way. The best thing to do now would probably be to have it out with him right here with witnesses. He raised his hand and said, “Hi!” but there was no one there. While he glanced at the houseman, the tail had ducked out.

Jorma jumped to the street as fast as he could, but there was no sign of him. He looked up the walls, people had done things like that before. He saw no sign. If he had split at a dead run, he was gone. The houseman pursued him, “What’s

going on here?” he asked.

“I think I’ve uncovered something shady at the Kassikan and they’re trying to keep tabs on me.”

He scowled like he believed none of that, “Well don’t bring it in here,” he said.

It was sort of a snooty place. “Wouldn’t want to anyway,” Jorma told him and walked away.

He kept his eyes open the remainder of the walk. The dock was at a small print shop that wasn’t doing too well. There was a garden float on one side that was stalled in a restoration process, a battered old barge on the other. Nothing had been pruned in years and the garden float couldn’t be moved without doing some. No one stayed with the shop for Dusksleep and this industrial byway was far from the crowds of evening. The shop was pretty open, just the machinery was enclosed in a locked room, the street and canal loading docks connected. He could tell this was used as production space during the day, but with the grilles down it was just a pass thru, meaning they had sold right-of-way to this dock.

He pulled the boat out from under, it looked undisturbed. He had been more careful about that, ever since he suspected that their bags had been disturbed when they were parked in Eleknane Canal. Now he was thinking that wasn’t just someone looking for valuables. He got in and wrapped up, eased his way under the dock for the Dusksleep. He figured the shop would open for Nightday, but the dust said that it may have been weeks since this place had work.

Sleep eluded him. As he lay here over the seats of this

needleboat, his body was comfortable enough, but his mind was not. Yes he was learning things, but this was costing him more than money. If that guy was from the Kassikan, what could they do to him? He's not a student so they couldn't expel him, he has no career with them so they could not fire him. He does not live on Kassikan property, or even visit it much. If they barred every door to him, he would not be impacted.

With all their business and merchants council connections, they could make life hard for him even in Sinbara. Even if they did that, he could buy a little place in the plots of Bhangyon and be essentially invisible to them if they didn't have someone personally following him. He didn't think he could be worth enough to them to do any more than give him a hard time in the city, he couldn't imagine he could do anything to them that would make them want to chase him all the way to Sinbara. Of course they would only chase him by eye-message, that would be all it would take. But what could he have done that would be worth the bother?

Then he thought, he had told many people with eye connections that he suspected someone at the Kassikan of arranging Tdeshi's overdose. To himself idle speculation, but in the starship age, speculation that can reach millions in minutes. If there actually was someone in the Kassikan who set that up, there was a very good chance that person knew about him and what he had been saying. Good grief, Ava knew, a woman who knows Founders, intimately. Everyone in the upper corridors of the Kassikan knew, if there was someone in there who arranged it, there was almost no chance

that he didn't know what Jorma had been saying was there?

He suddenly felt much colder here in this little rented needleboat hiding from dock fees under a run-down private dock. He was very small and very alone in a city it took a week in this needleboat to cross. A city he barely knew, the home city of the organization he was pitted against, the largest and most powerful human organization in all the lands.

As he was contemplating the hopelessness of those odds, he noticed that the fact that Tdeshi was taken, meant that as he feared, those who predated the Instinct could be free of it and set up deeds like that. That meant that something could happen to him. A drop of shonggot could be put into his water skin. How many agents could an organization with a million members send against him? How could he ever be safe? He couldn't.

4. A Visit With Hyondahi

Nightday he stayed in the city only a few hours. He slid out from under the dock as soon as he heard voices inside. He didn't think he was noticed. Before he even got to the main canal he bought and packed his supplies, along with five bags of fuel for just over two irons, a very good deal. When he set out for the address the air was very still, but cold, there was frost on the pavement but no ice on the water. He pulled away from that dock and thought he saw that beret hair in the shadows of this backwater bargeman's stop. He slumped at

the tiller and pressed forward faster than he should in this dark. There was no lantern on this needleboat and he wouldn't have lit it now if there was. He hoped there was no floating debris in the black water between barges as he sliced between them by the light of a few random lanterns on the nearby docks.

The main canal was much more brightly lit and there was less traffic than in the light days of the week, so he made good time on there too. He was soon up the locks to lake level. He watched carefully for anyone following him. It would have to be another needleboat, there was nothing else on these canals that would keep up, there wasn't even a path a keda and rider could take.

The weather was with him this time, the stars above were reflected in the stars below. He flew across the water faster than he had ever moved before on any conveyance for he had never ridden a bolting keda. The cold was numbing with the wind while he had his darkmeal of dried fruit stuffed with vedn kernels. He sliced directly across the lake. The air of deep dark was so clear it was like a telescope so he could see the entry to Shipping Cut by its navigation lanterns, thirty miles away, and aimed straight for it. It was deep into Dawnsleep when he finally got there, but he cruised by Ebmemboz far off shore, thru Shipping Cut and henarDee while the small traffic slept. It was almost as restful as sleep, except for the cold. The sky was just beginning to lighten when he flashed thru the entry to the Grand Canal.

The only things in the world that could move this fast were some floaters and eye-messages. He was getting well

away from whoever was following him. True, someone at this end could be alerted, but they might not know where he was going. Of course, since he looked up the address on the eye, and the eyes are all run from the Kassikan, there is a good chance that they knew the address he was looking for as soon as he did. They wouldn't need to wait til dawn to look up a map of it.

He made it to Chardovia just after Morningday lunch. He had made the whole trip to one of the more distant centers of the Yakhan's urban universe, in just over one day. He felt much safer from the Kassikan's eyes up here, forty eight miles by ray from the point of the pyramid. By the time he got to the first news stand to look up a map, he was thawed from his ordeal during darkness and had packed his nightwear back in his duffle.

The map lead him to an urban spot high in the Chardovia wall. From up here you could almost see thru the city. From the last bridge on his way to Hyondahi's he was able to look out across both lakes. It wasn't obvious which is actually higher from here, just one is further away and gets wider at the far end. He was two hundred feet above the water on one side and two hundred forty above on the other. He was actually only two hundred twelve feet above the nearest canal on the downstream side, but he couldn't see down to that from here. It had cost him three pennies in elevator to get up here, but he could get one back on the ride down.

The street this Hyondahi currently lived on was pretty drab for one so high in the growth. It had the air of a service

connector. There weren't any views from here, it was an indoor residential hallway since the bridge. He found the address, it was a decently nice door on a corner between two others. He called, and got a "Yeah? Come on in, my hands are full."

Jorma entered to find a smallish space wedged in between two others but with a sliver of view of the lower lake in the northeast and the green expanse of the plots between. There was a small spiral staircase leading up right inside the door. Hyondahi seemed to be alone in here. He was thin with long dark hair, but did not seem to be the burn-out Pinkam described. He had a microscope strapped to one eye and was pulling at a bit of thread, a fishing lure it looked like.

"Since you're here, could you hold that just a second." he handed over the clamps he was tugging the thread with. "Purists call this cheating," he said as he dabbed on a pinprick of glue, "but I'm after fish, not artisan awards, and this makes glue dots so small the fish can't smell 'em." He took the clamp back and detached it, then took off the microscope. "There, now, what can I do for you?"

"Do you remember Tdeshi? About twenty..."

He clearly did, he looked like he had just been beamed with a rock. A play of emotions crossed his face too rapidly for Jorma to follow. His eyes darted like Ava's did. He was afraid they were going to roll up out of sight at one point in the collision of his emotions.

"I guess you do," Jorma finished with.

"And who are you?" Hyondahi asked with his head cocked.

“Jorma, a good friend of her father’s. So far I have found out that Tdeshi was living with you at the house near Eleknane Canal about three blocks from the high road when she disappeared. I’ve talked to some of the people back there but have not been able to find out where Tdeshi got the shonggot and if she took it willingly.”

“You haven’t talked to Himla in that case,” Hyondahi said.

“He was one of the first we talked to, he said he never suspected until after she disappeared.”

“Ppppp. Slime-mouthed liar! He was her source!” Hyondahi spat. “It was the biggest thing we ever fought about, me and Tdeshi, me and Himla. He killed Tdeshi with that shit! He took the love of my life and our friendship. He made that neighborhood uninhabitable for me.”

“Everyone thinks you were really in love with her.”

“I kept it no secret. It is no secret from you, as it is no secret from me that you loved her also.”

“Yes,” Jorma confessed.

His voice went wistful, “She burned so hot and so bright. She leaned so far into life that she could not stop accelerating or she would have fallen over.”

“That is true, but you said Himla was her source?”

“I was often in the room when the transactions were made. She was starting to take it for every class. She had moved from caffeine to amphetamines only four years before and she got them from him too. She had only been sleeping once a week for the past year, she announced to me that she was not going to sleep at all for her Kassikan year and I went

ballistic on her but it did no good. She was completely unsteerable at times, she just tuned me out and packed.”

“How well I know how unsteerable she could be. I thought her whole trip to the Yakhan was a mistake. I knew she was too young to go off like she did. I tried to talk her out of it.” He had to face the fact that his pleas had helped send her hadn’t they? Maybe what he really had to face was the fact that she felt she might have to do that to escape him. She had lived in his house for a year, but she was clearly tired of it wasn’t she? He hurt from a memory that came to the surface, her screaming at him that he was acting like a stepfather on a still enough Dusksleep that her father could certainly hear it up in the main house.

Hyondahi watched him get lost in his memories, allowed it and maybe got lost in his own for a few seconds. “She was unsteerable,” he said to get the conversation going again. “She said her father was around when she left, couldn’t he do anything about it?” Hyondahi asked.

“Not without coming up against the Instinct.” Jorma had to face the painful arguments, even one in public at Heindrarg’s tap, about losing her by trying too hard to act like a parent. He remembered the curse still, ‘she went to you as a gesture of compromise,’ Leand had yelled, ‘and you acted more like a parent than I did’. “Nothing short of force was going to stop her,” he tried to continue the conversation with Hyondahi when he really wanted to continue the conversation with Leand. A conversation he had interrupted by giving up his tenancy and spending those years in Zharvai. A conversation he could not continue because when Jorma

returned to Sinbara, Leand was gone.

“And that’s how it was with me also,” Hyondahi said, “I could do nothing. I’ve never been thru such a heartbreak in my life. When I heard what had happened to her, I wasn’t surprised. I was expecting it in fact. When it happened, that opened the wound all over again.”

“It must have been Himla who sent me the note I once got. He said it was suspected she O.D.d on shonggot. I get the impression you know for sure?” Jorma asked.

“She was picked up by a medic. Someone who knew her was working there and messaged. I couldn’t get down there right away. I was going to, but I didn’t have the money for a lake runner and it would have taken days on foot so I tried to get the money together. By the time I got the note she had already been picked up by the Kassikan anyway. I was very sure it was Teshi.”

“You have my utmost sympathy,” Jorma said.

“You too,” Hyondahi told him, “And to her father.”

“You seem to be doing better now. Pinkam said you were in a pretty bad way.”

“I did get over it. It took a while, it’s not easy watching a life get destroyed.”

“Were you around when she painted the picture with the eyes?” Jorma asked.

“I was, it was disturbing wasn’t it? It is so powerful I thought about saving it, I was tempted to even claim it, but in the end I left it with Yorthops. I take it that you have seen it?”

“Yes. Do you know what she meant by it?”

“She said it was her impression of Zhindu. She thought it was very dark. It doesn’t say that to me at all.”

“No,” Jorma said, “Zhindu’s a rowdy party city from what I hear. What shape was she in when she did it?”

“She was already addicted to boost and knew it. She wasn’t regular on shonggot yet, but she had done it. It was the beginning of the year she only slept Dawnsleeps. She worked on that painting instead of Dusksleep. She hadn’t done a Noonsleep since I met her.” When he said that, the memories returned of how they had seldom slept much during Noonsleep, and how Tdeshi used so much caffeine on Afternoondays.

They reminisced some more, Hyondahi admitted that Tdeshi never cared for him anywhere near as much as he cared for her and he knew it. In fact he knew she was just using him for support and casual sex. He knew that she was doing others at school also. Jorma asked him about being a pro. Hyondahi admitted that he had been in the past but his clients were women who could not win sex socially. He hadn’t done that since decades before he met Tdeshi.

They went over Hyondahi’s paintings, he had recovered some of his talent and finished all but one. That one was too damaged. It was painting that had brought he and Tdeshi together, they had met almost her first day at North Chardovia Trades Academy when she was shown thru the art rooms. She had moved into the house by the end of her first week and never moved out. Jorma knew that she never had a place to live until someone took her in, so she would have been looking for someone she could catch the fastest. He didn’t

make that point at this time. No doubt Hyondahi had his equivalent of those arguments with Leand to listen to in his head also.

Jorma didn't stay much longer. When he finally left there, he knew what he had to do next. He knew he had to go confront Himla. His lies had cost them time and money and who knows what else. But what could he do other than call him a liar? It was nearly another two hours getting to Himla's, giving him plenty of time to think. He could certainly tell his whole neighborhood. He might put up signs around the area too. Whatever it was, he would do what he could to make his life miserable.

He had an early Noonmeal of more trail rations while on his way to Himla's. That ride gave him plenty of time to rehearse what he would say in his mind. It gave him plenty of time to imagine Himla's answers and how he would rebut them all. It was starting to get to be a long day.

What about the Kassikan in this case? If Himla was her dealer, she had probably O.D. of her own free will, unless Himla had changed the dose? If he had, his mouth and vocal cords would have become paralyzed by the Instinct when he tried to sell it to her. What if Himla's supplier had changed the dose? If Himla claimed something like that, should he believe him? No doubt he would get embroiled in a circular web of contradictory lies. What if the Kassikan had changed the dose?

But when he got there, he found that Ava was just leaving. What did this mean? It probably meant that there was a plot

to harvest Tdeshi's body for Ava, and no doubt Ava was in on it. That ghoul from outer space was probably planning it when she was still made of electricity, she wasn't subject to the Instinct then was she? Now he wanted to go after her and have that out with her, but he didn't dare. In fact he kept out of sight, or at least tried to. Maybe he didn't get behind the hedge in time?

If Ava saw him, she did not turn and come to talk about it. What more could they have to talk about anyway? If anything she picked up her pace. Maybe she knew he was going to come after her. Maybe he should see what she was up to and save Himla for later? Maybe he should find out what she and Himla talked about first? Where could Ava go but to pick up a public or a coach at Eleknane? He let her go and burst into Himla's. "I know you are the one who sold the shonggot to Tdeshi."

"Wha?" Himla was just lighting a bong of rord.

"Hyondahi told me you were her shonggot source."

"Not the one that took her, I knew what I was doing. She took mine all the time and was fine, but when it came time for her trip, I was out, my source had stopped selling to me. Like I told you before, she got it in the city because I sent her to my source in the Hub. She knew him, she muled some up here from him before. In fact, I still got the bottle," he said.

"Who?"

"I guess it's only fair to tell you who he was, seeing as I just told the ghost that took her over."

5. Chasing the Lake Runner

The lake runner was well ahead of him now. He knew he wasn't taking on enough water to go down, he wasn't even wet enough to run the bilge pump yet, but his craft made so little headway against this chop, especially when the pump jetted water into the air between the waves. It went into runaway when that happened and he was afraid he would shatter the rotor when the nozzle got back down below water, especially running with the throttle wide open like he was.

It was the seventh ticket agent on the Chardovia passenger docks who claimed he sold a ticket to a woman answering Ava's description. She was on Tellin's Balloon, scheduled into the north docks of downtown Yakhan for Nightday breakfast of week Chezhervizhod. This Nightday. It was getting into Noonsleep already and he was not making it across the Chardovia waterfront fast enough to keep that lakerunner in sight much longer.

The lake runner was designed for this, the one to two foot chop that often covered the surface of the lakes here at the end of the Dromedian arm. Its sharp but deep dual hulls sliced thru the water of Chardovia Lake, its spinnaker in full bloom as it flew before the wind.

He hadn't stayed at Himla's long, just long enough to get him to tell the same thing he'd told Ava. He confessed to supplying Tdeshi, as Hyondahi had told him, but said he had none when she left for the city. He sent Tdeshi on to his supplier, in a fine home near Seventh Canal in the central city where both he and Ava were headed now. He had taken the

bottle that Himla showed him, the one that he claimed Tdeshi brought. He screamed and threatened, but Jorma didn't care, it might be evidence, it had a serial number etched into the glass so something of importance must have been in it. There was a long chemical name penciled in on the textured spot.

There was no sense trying to race the lake runner in this. Jorma took the boat down the next lock he came to, still well within Chardovia. He was soon on the back canal, that was at twenty two feet below lake level here. He had to fight some urban traffic along the back side of the city, but he kept to the middle and kept the petcock as wide as he dared, slicing between barges and canal ferries, running under tow ropes and making sharp turns in front of terrified stares. He passed the First Canal, it would be way too long going that way, and waited an eternity for the big city-wall lock to cycle so he could get up to the next higher back canal. While he looked up at those eroded and mossy gates leaking a little trickle of water from twelve feet above, he thought of that lake runner just scudding along before a fair wind up there on Chardovia Lake. It might be beyond there by now and into the Grand Canal.

It took over an hour in all, including two more small locks, just to get out of Chardovia, but once he was on the Grand Canal, the chop was only six inches high. He rarely got splashed by that and better yet, the jet stayed under water and generated thrust all the time instead of half the time so he could cut thru it instead of wallowing in it.

It is nearly a mile from there to the first turn, but once

around that he could see at least three miles down the waterway. There were eight or ten lake runners in view, and making reasonable time since there was enough wind to bulge a light canvas. But he was running faster than the wind and one by one he overtook them. There were two Balloon Line sails in sight, but neither of them were Tellin's. That was a new ship from the 55th, a big wide bi-hull sitting high above the water, one of the three sleekest of the Balloon Line's vessels.

He was overtaking mainly transforming tri-hulls, notoriously sluggish in the canals. He overtook many cargo ships and rafts also, but they moved more like islands than needleboats or lake runners of any configuration. In this canal he overtook only Neerhofer's of the Balloon Line's cats.

He was glad it was Noonsleep but sorry he wasn't in an area where he could take a back canal. With everyone asleep they would be smooth as glass and open right now. But to take canals thru Thasarus would take days with more lock than canal. As it was, it took him less than an hour to get to the southern end of Thasarus on Grand Canal where he turned into a six mile straightaway that was almost directly into the wind. The wind was gentle enough not to worry him, he was moving faster than it was blowing already. Once around the point and seen from the end, it was a spectacle of ships tacking up the Grand Canal. It looked like everyone was going across but he and the other needleboats and a couple garden floats that were going pretty much straight up the canal.

Now he really opened the petcock wide. He lay down in

the boat to keep himself out of the wind as much as possible. He began to pass another ship every few minutes. Still he didn't find Tellin's Balloon among them. There were some he didn't get that close to, but he would know that stance if he saw it. Tellin's Balloon and the SkySkater were said to be the fastest boats on the lake, sail or power. He would probably steer out of his way to make sure if he passed a Balloon Line sail.

He had two more major cities to get thru before reaching the Yakhan itself, henarDee and Ebmemboz. He was going for it in Shipping Cut across to Ebmemboz, if the north end of the arm was too rough, he would lose, that would be the end of that. If it was smooth, he would make it. He got off five miles before henarDee and took some back canals to henarDee's First Canal. This was what he was looking for, a little open still water out between the plots in the middle of a hot Noonsleep. It might not have actually been any faster, but because he was only a few feet from the bank it looked like he was going faster than any bird ever flew.

It was well into Noonsleep now, this canal was empty, or just about, for a little of the journey at least. He shot down the smooth water of the canal with everything this rental would do. There was a time when a keda and trap paralleled their course and he pulled ahead of it at the speed of a walk. Of course the keda could run a lot faster and bolt even faster than that, but still, he was carving water. Of course there was no way to see where that lake runner was from here, but he felt he was definitely passing Tellin's Balloon by now.

The canal ended and he had to go down, two locks as it

happened, slow auto-cycles, both of them. Then he was on First Canal outside the very edge of urban henarDee. It was still Noonsleep. There was the usual commercial traffic out, but he didn't have fifteen yaks to deal with between each one of those. He just left the petcock open and steered. By the time he started really getting into the central city it was starting to look and feel a little like Afternoonday breakfast. He didn't stop for breakfast until he came to a cook right next to an eye-room where he could look up a map of the address where he was going. All that while gulping that take-out zhindu roll. He drew a map on the back of a cheap news rag because there were too many small canals for him to remember.

He knew he needed something stronger than yet another slap to keep going and heard a guy peddling speed on the dock beside the cook where he bought this roll. He had to break his last ten to buy a couple black beauties, he dropped one right there with a big swallow off that guy's jug of green to take the edge off it, then jumped back in the boat with his mouth full of the last two bites of that roll.

After breakfast there was a lot of cargo out and he had to cut back somewhat. But still he was motoring thru the canal much faster than any lake runner could possibly be moving against the wind. But they could be getting into henarDee now also, and they would be on the lake. They would dock in henarDee for at least an hour he thought. He knew from riding them, he remembered being impatient to be back on the lake, impatient that so fast a vessel could be laying idle so long, every three minutes was another mile if the wind was

fair.

He could see from the sky that he should stick to the canals, the wind was still blowing and the lake would be covered with chop. The canals here were a mess however and it took him over two hours to get thru henarDee. He was sure Tellin's Balloon had passed him while he labored thru the city.

Shipping Cut is at henarDee's south end. He took the last canal up and braved another quarter mile of lake chop getting into the cut. It was worse here. It would be worse yet at the other end on the big lake itself, he knew that, but he was committed now. If he went around to Ebmemboz, he might as well go back to Sinbara, it was too many miles out of the way.

Once into the cut, he flew again. Once around this bend, the lake runners had to tack for a four mile stretch, and it was a deep cut where the wind was blocked. Now he was in his glory again. He put the second fuel bag on, glad he thought to buy enough for the whole run when he set out. He hoped it would be enough, he was burning quite a lot. Fatigue was beginning to get to him now. They were hours into Afternoonday and he'd been without anything but that breakfast roll.

Lean down and steer, try to cut air resistance, try to stay just awake enough to steer but asleep enough to rest. Try to stay cool in the Afternoonday heat. He splashed water over himself. At least there was plenty to drink during a boat race. He was pretty sure he did fall asleep a couple times and was

awakened by shouts from cargo vessels he nearly collided with. Another time he woke up when he found himself running thru brush at an all-out sprint. It was overhanging branches near the bank, he would have gone aground without them.

He'd turned the last corner in Shipping Cut when he saw a sail he was sure was that of Tellin's Balloon. This was more reach than tack now, but it wasn't a very fair reach and the Balloon should be making about half his speed. It was over a mile ahead of him, halfway to the mouth of Shipping Cut.

It was just a race now, and for over half an hour Jorma slowly gained on the lake runner. There was almost half a mile of Shipping Cut to go when Jorma finally passed them. Already he could feel the chop coming in here. The lake was not stormy, he knew it wasn't that bad, but it was rough. He would have to get to the mouth of the cut to decide whether he was chancing it or not.

He was still at least a thousand feet ahead of Tellin's Balloon when he was at the lake, but it was going on a foot high. He might make it. He thought about how daring Tdeshi had been in her life and thought he needed to show at least a fraction of that in this situation. He threw the bilge pump on and went out onto the lake, a thousand feet ahead of the lake runner with three miles to go to the first lock of Ebmemboz.

The lake is open water from here, all the way out of the Dromedian arm and onto the main body itself, thousands of miles of open water. Considering how big the waves could be even all the way down here in the pinkie finger of the Dromedian arm, this was nothing. But he could see almost

fifty miles across open water from here, the thousand foot pyramid was a tiny dot, still over thirty miles away.

He plunged into the chop of that lake like a diver doing a belly flop from a high branch of a tree. His speed went away. He could barely plow ahead and curls of water flowed into his cockpit from each side. In just a few minutes he was down to the level of the floatation foam in this boat. The cockpit was completely full of water. Of course the lake was deep enough that it was well away from the bottom. The air intakes to the motor were on the top of the deck behind him and trapped, so the motor kept running and the craft kept moving but more as a submarine at conning tower depth than a boat. He shut the bilge pump off because it was a waste of power at this point, the bilge was going to stay full but the ship would not sink any lower. It was foamed enough to stay afloat about an inch above the cockpit, and that was full to the rim.

But it did plow ahead. Only a few minutes after he had passed it, Tellin's Balloon skittered by, its sharp twin hulls biting deep into the chop, its main fat once again on an easy reach down the end of the Dromedian arm. Now the lakerunner was in its element, the lake. Now his needleboat was in lifeboat mode.

It took him three hours to get to the swamped pit at Ebmemboz and three more hours to get thru that city. At least he got some lunch while he was waiting for his boat to drain. He would get to his destination zero broke it seemed, for he still had many miles to go. He wondered if it would even be worth getting there. Should he just tell the company he rented this from to come get their boat and keep his other coppers

with his apologies?

Once he got underway from Ebmemboz he felt better. Dark overtook him on the North Sentinel Heights Canal. It would be Nightday when he made it to his destination. He stopped very briefly for a late Duskmeal at a little bigger concentration of urban structure along the canal in the Sentinels. It was a noisy place full of clattering gambling machines. While he was sitting there, he nearly fell asleep even in this noise, he was just too weary to go on. If he kept going, it would be the third sleep in a row he'd missed. Then he thought once again of Tdeshi and how hard she drove herself, intending to go the whole year. Was her death, the death that had ended his friendship with Leand worth this suffering? How had she suffered with it?

He bought two big black slaps, leaving him only one penny to his name. He pushed the last black capsule down, knowing he was going to pay a horrible price for this. In a short time he was awake again, but his guts were vibrating and he felt like he was trussed for the grille. His teeth began to hurt and he noticed he was clenching his jaw. He tried to relax and found it wasn't easy. He felt really bad about Tdeshi, she had been living her life like this.

The dark was calm after that. He couldn't lay back and cruise wide open, but he found he saved fuel, his third bag took him all the way into the city long before Nightday began. He still had miles of canals and locks to go, but he would still get where he was going well before Nightday lunch.

As he rode back into the central city however, he began to find the spot between his shoulders itching more than it had since he left the week before. When he was within a couple hours by needleboat of the Kassikan, he felt a lot more vulnerable. He didn't want to go near there where he was more likely to be seen. It might not make sense, he knew his mind was mangled from the drugs that kept him going, drugs that would be wearing off again in a few more hours.

He went down locks early and took commodity canals well away from the center down to Fifth, then went out to the Olian-Barrak drop to Sixth, then cut down to Seventh at the Sixthandahalf junction and came in on that address from the near-country miles up Seventh. It was only a few miles longer than going to the central city and coming back out, but he thought he was a lot less likely to be expected this way.

6. At the Source

Even in the depth of Nightday he could see the house well. It was grown above four floors of once trendy retail space just off the canal, all in airy stone block and feather ferns. It was eleven miles out the canal from the very center, and getting there had taken an hour since breakfast, a penny sweet bread he picked up when he finally got down to Seventh. He could see that the house was more imposing in appearance than the room it really contained, the tall and detailed arches faced with reliefs in a thulitlanth motif graced the end panes, but they were used only to make high ceilings

in most rooms. He could see only one expansive suite on the second floor of the dwelling. The materials and style were impeccable thruout and the original quality showed thru some years of neglect.

He saw someone who could very well be Ava already climbing the steps as he looked for a place to tie the needlboat, the light was dim and he was very definitely feeling the missing two sleeps by now. He saw no one watching, but he was so foggy by now he knew he could miss just about anything. There were few people out but they were all intent in their own lives and paid little attention to the tall man scanning the area as he walked to that the door, clutching the laboratory bottle that he would use to confront him.

The pedestrian walk here was well appointed in ancient carved stone, incised in long-forgotten glyphs. Maybe even brought all the way from the old lands. Once up the stairs he noticed only one of the lanterns by the door was lit and that was turned all the way down. He noticed that the vines had not been pruned in the last few years and the picture glass in the heavy front door was clouded. The door frame repeated the miniature stacked gargoyles of the Thulitlanth period, it was a style revived when those ruins had been discovered in the 52nd.

He called at the speaking tube and was greeted by a woman's voice that was oddly familiar, but definitely not Ava's. As he waited he rehearsed what he was going to say and remembered how he had to get invited in before he made the first accusation. He had no idea what Ava's ex-lover was like, but he steeled himself for someone as imposing as his

home. If he was like this home, his look would be his strongest feature, the man within maybe less. If he had been a long-term lover of Ava, he might not be much. Ava needed to be in charge of the relationship didn't she? Wasn't that why they didn't get along? He was the same way, even if quieter about it. Wasn't that why he and Tdeshi didn't get along? Wasn't that why Tdeshi and Hyondahi did?

He heard the door. It opened and a cute, lightly-freckled face, framed in orange curls exclaimed, "Jorma!?" as he instantly went into shock when his addled brain finally recognized her as Venna. Definitely the same Venna he had spent all those weeks with on the Brother's Formidable. At first he thought she had to be a hallucination brought on by the speed and lack of sleep. He certainly would have loved to see Venna now and collapse into her arms and crash for a week. She was as cute as he remembered and her smile was just as impish. He stumbled backward and pulled his hand over his face. The railing saved him from the four-story drop. "Hi," she said, while he stood there wide-eyed.

"What the???" was all he could gasp. There was no plan for this.

"You seem even more surprised to see me than Ava was," she said.

"Ava's here?" It had been her climbing the stairs minutes ago. He felt too faint and blurry to make sense of this, he had to be hallucinating.

He could hear shouting down the hall, Ava's voice. While his brain spun she barked, "... You lied about knowing her."

"What did you expect?" a man replied, not as loudly, but

shouting none-the-less.

“We lived together, I told you about those years I spent investigating,” Ava screeched. “It was how we met, our whole first meeting was a lie!”

Meanwhile Venna asked, “Would you like to come in?”

“Ava’s here,” he stuttered, mind-erased, but allowed her to lead him inside. There was a long two-story entry hall in dark polished stone, the thulitlanth motif replaced by a nordic gentlemen’s club. Ornate racks with aging nightcoats stood by the door. The doors entering this hallway had wide frames and lintels, tough thonga-fur throw rugs lined the floors, dark portraits behind glass lined the walls. A wide arch flickered with pleasantly scented firelight from a room a few feet down the hall and an enormous weight-clock stood just before it, ticking slowly.

Meanwhile, “You must have talked to Himla,” the man complained, “he would be the one to tell you.” Jorma was pretty sure the voice would have to be Tahlmute, Himla’s supposed source and one of Ava’s ex lovers.

“He had some respect for Tdeshi,” Ava said, “and maybe even a little respect for Ava also.”

Meanwhile Venna said, “Yeah, and I don’t think she’s any happier with him than I am right now.”

“And I didn’t?” Tahlmute asked Ava, whining.

“Not enough to tell me the truth,” Ava yelled. Jorma and Venna could hear every word as they walked up the hallway.

Venna leaned on him and said, “I’m glad to see you again,” she said, “even under trying circumstances.”

Meanwhile the guy with Ava yelled, “When we got

together do you seriously think there was any way I was going to deliberately screw up the attraction we had for each other by saying, oh by the way, the girl who's body you're in, I made the shonggot that emptied it for you. Do you seriously think our life together would have gone on if I had been honest about that?"

While that harangue went on, Jorma finally got to ask Venna, "What are you doing here?"

"I live here," Venna told him.

"What?" he asked. The buzzing in his brain got louder.

"I couldn't have..." Ava said, but after that they lowered their voices.

"You should have told us," Jorma told Venna, quietly enough so the others could not hear them.

"It was shipboard, I didn't think I'd want to make it complicated at that time."

"But you and Ava could have had a lot more to talk about."

"Too much," Venna said and looked away for a second, "I was already away because things were not all I would like between Tahlmute and me. I liked the time you and I had together. I'd already heard all about that breakup."

"I did too," he said, and they embraced right there in the front hallway near the room where Ava and Tahlmute were still arguing in a lower register. While they were using their mouths for something other than speech, he found he could hear them once again.

"...you think is there?" Tahlmute asked.

“Jorma,” she said, He’s a good friend of Tdeshi’s father and another of Tdeshi’s former lovers. I take it Tdeshi never spoke to you about him?”

“Why would he come here?” Tahlmute asked.

“Because I saw him going in to talk to Himla just as I was leaving.”

“Himla?” Venna whispered, parting their lips.

“Tdeshi’s shonggot connection, except for one time,” Jorma told her. “According to Himla he had none when Tdeshi left for the Kassikan and he sent her to his source, Tahlmute. The same Tahlmute who sent him a bulk shipment in this bottle, carried by Tdeshi.”

Venna’s hands left his buns and went to her mouth.

Meanwhile Ava was saying, “Now I suspect Tdeshi may have been harvested by the Kassikan.”

“No she wasn’t,” Tahlmute said. “There was no foul play involved. She died because she didn’t listen to me.” Wrapped around each other, Jorma and Venna tiptoed up the hall til they were against the wall at the doorway and could hear clearly.

“What I got from Himla was that he had none so he sent Tdeshi to you,” Ava accused. “He said you were his supplier and he had none because you stopped selling to him.”

“I was,” he admitted, “But he knew what had to be done.”

“Which Tdeshi didn’t?” Ava asked.

“I sold her a drop in an ampule, but it was concentrate.”

“But why would you have done that to her?” Ava asked.

“If you had any idea how she pleaded, how she begged,

how she said she would be responsible. If you could remember any of how I pleaded with her, how I told her it had to go thru another dilution. I taught her the whole procedure, I tried to do it for her. She had no way to carry a gallon, she said, and no time or money to come up to my place for doses, she had to get settled first. She kept telling me how pressed she was for time, her class started in an hour by the time she left. I was very careful to explain how she couldn't even begin to think about even the tiniest drop at that dilution, there was no way to make it safe."

"I don't think Tdeshi heard you." Ava said.

"I know she didn't," Tahlmute said, "That's why I've never messed with the stuff since."

"That didn't help Tdeshi."

"How well I know," he said. "The main reason I wooed you is what I owed Tdeshi. I should have never let her have it."

"We all know that now, but I would never be here if it wasn't for that mistake."

"Ava, in all ways but sex you are a hundred times Tdeshi," Tahlmute told her, "and as you know, I found your sex enjoyable enough to share your home for decades."

"I'm surprised you never called me 'Tdeshi' in bed."

"No one who has ever been with Tdeshi in bed would ever call you 'Tdeshi' in bed."

Jorma and Venna both had to strain to keep from laughing over that.

"Thanks a lot," Ava said in response, "You probably only stayed with me because my home was inside the boundary of

the Kassikan.”

“No, I stayed with you in spite of the fact that your home was inside the Kassikan’s walls. I always thought the Kassikan was something to escape from. The place I lived when Tdeshi found me, and this one, show how close I want to be to the Kassikan.”

“Then why have you always been around it?” Ava asked.

“It’s fear and longing. It’s the center of the world. It’s been my livelihood for at least a century. I’ve always tried to provide services to students.”

“You sure didn’t provide very good service to Tdeshi.”

“I know,” he said, “I know. I tried to tell Tdeshi, Ava you are so much more than Tdeshi, face it, Tdeshi was too in-a-hurry to get it all done yesterday, you are able to let it happen at it’s own pace. Thank you for that. I am very sorry to Tdeshi that I sold her immature soul more drug than she could handle. I knew I shouldn’t have done it as it was happening, but I was helpless in her hands. Her face has haunted my nightmares until your face came into my daylight. The decades you and I spent together were some of my best. The fact that your soul was from YingolNeerie was one of the most exciting things I’ve ever had in my life. That was one of the farthest places I’d ever gone, and only in story, told by the woman who re-animated the vacated body of a shonggot victim.”

“But still, a life, isn’t that sacred to you?”

“More than you can know. Only it’s sacredness allowed me to carry on when I knew what I had done.”

“You did warn her?” Ava asked.

“As hard as I was able. Himla was out because I cut him off to try and save Tdehsi.”

“How can I believe you on that, after you made our whole life together a lie?”

“There was no lie in anything I said or felt about you,” he was nearly shouting again. “My love and admiration was a hundred percent genuine. Yes, my guilt about Tdeshi brought us together, but it was not what kept us together. Had someone like Tdeshi been restored I would have said, ‘Glad to see you came across OK’ and bid you farewell, believe me when I say that.”

“So what does that mean to Tdeshi?” Ava asked.

“It means that I couldn’t resist her intensity.”

“Jorma said she was headstrong.”

“If you only knew,” Tahlmute said. “You are so much more reasonable, though you’re stubborn enough to be called convinced of your convictions.”

“I don’t mean to seem stubborn,” Ava said.

“I’m not calling you stubborn, but I’m not calling you wishy-washy either.”

“It’s taken her a long time to answer that door,” Ava said.

“No doubt she’s prejudicing him to her side of our discussion,” Tahlmute said.

“If he’s not sticking her a quickie,” Ava said. Jorma did caress her where she liked it at the suggestion, but she indicated they had better make the introductions instead of making good on that accusation.

“I wouldn’t put it past her,” Tahlmute said. “She is the

biggest slut I've ever..." he stopped when he heard their feet in the hall.

"Notice how I can still silence a room," Venna said to Jorma as they entered.

"We're anxious to meet the newcomer," Tahlmute said. He was a tall man, but with a face as Wood Elf as Highland, with dark blond braids and a high forehead on a fairly narrow face with thick pale lips. He was dressed in a subtly patterned satin nightcoat with nothing under it, but it was belted shut.

"You and Jorma are the only one's who haven't met," Venna said.

"I'm just here about the shonggot," Jorma said, "Venna never told me she lived with you." He wouldn't complain that she had outright lied about knowing him, but he would ask her privately if he could.

"She didn't tell me much about her trip north either. I think I understand a lot more of the past few years now. You were just keeping your belongings stored here," he said to Venna. "So now you know it all," Tahlmute sighed to Ava, "all but actually watching her try to take a microdot with a pin or some similar stupid move."

Jorma made him formally repeat what had happened to pretend they weren't listening.

How do you know that's as far as it goes?" Jorma asked Ava.

"Yeah," Venna said, "And whatever happened to that ampule?"

"Her scholarship was used," Ava said, "If she had to be there in an hour, she must have had her certificate on her."

“She showed it to me,” Tahlmute said.

“Are there any residents at home?” the speaking tube interrupted in a voice that seemed to be unfamiliar to everyone there. Tahlmute got up to answer it, using a disguised voice. “Yes, there are residents home, whom may I say is calling?”

“Varn’m of Medical Accounting Central Oversight Council for Vendor Reliability of the All Of Knowledge.”

Everyone shrugged their shoulders but Tahlmute, who turned white and dejectedly went to get it. The room was quiet while he was gone. They heard voices down the hall, there was more than one person there, maybe the whole committee? Jorma could see down the hall and knew none of the newcomers. The first to enter was a fair but rather broad shouldered Highlander, followed by two pale grey gnomes in black goggles. Ava nodded to the professor who followed them all. He noticed her immediately. “Ava,” he said as he strode into the room in a swirl of long-skirted robes, “it was good to hear from you, I think we have come to the same conclusion.”

“Let’s see,” Ava said.

The professor held up a short scroll and began to read, “We have a total serum analysis from before as a baseline, it was taken in Chardovia from Tdeshi before she became a heavy shonggot user. We have another on the victim brought in. We were able to trace the biomarker profiles of what was found in Tdeshi’s blood. The abHg synapsase came from our own labs, we believe Kulai was duped into getting it for you,” he said to Tahlmute. “Yesterday we found that two of the

businesses that supplied the more common ingredients have people who remember doing business with someone of your name and/or appearance in that time frame. One of them has records from that time with your signature on them.”

Jorma held up the bottle, “I was told this bottle was used for shonggot. I was told that this bottle was carried from Tahlmute to Tdeshi’s every-day supplier, by Tdeshi in 100,00,22.”

Varn’m reached for it, but the professor grabbed it first. “I don’t doubt that this is the missing bottle,” he said. “It’s too bad Delurna isn’t here, he might know the serial number.”

Tahlmute’s eyes focused on the bottle, “There will be no usable identifying evidence on that bottle after all this time.”

“Our labs will take a look at it anyway,” he said. “Just in case, we want to be sure we are doing the right thing.” He looked at the committeeman when he said that.

Varn’m held up a few notes, witnesses to the sale of Tahlmute’s property in North Treeland just twelve weeks after Tdeshi went missing, just five weeks after going on the market. “I don’t think there is any doubt that you felt and acted guilty at that time.”

Tahlmute went thru his confession again.

“But that does not change the fact that a life was ended,” the professor said when Tahlmute was done. “As much as I care for you Ava, I would not end a life for you.”

Tahlmute still had his head in his hands. “I was barely able to carry on when I found out. I had to leave there, and I liked that neighborhood but I couldn’t face anybody. The neighbors heard me pleading with her. They saw her leave,

they heard the news that my pleas were in vain.”

“Contrition is all well and good,” Varn’m said, “But because the All of Knowledge of All of Lands does not permit shonggot to me made or sold by it’s vendors and purveyors, your business with the Kassikan and all its subsidiaries is hereby terminated and all accounts must be settled within one year. The current account balance is 1,44,33 beads of iron or equivalent in other precious metals payable to designated committeeman of the Kassikan, that would be me, no later than one year from this date, that would be Nightday of Chezhervizhod 100,21,23.”

“An aluminum, forty four coppers and thirty three irons, that’s my balance with you?”

“Correct.” Varn’m said, “All further business arrangements with the Kassikan are terminated.” Varn’m and his Gnomes did an about face and marched toward the door.

“But...” Tahlmute said.

“What will he do now?” Ava asked.

“Go find a day job,” was Varn’m’s advice as he shut the door behind him.

“Ava,” the professor asked. “For all we’ve ever been to each other, in all the different ways, do you understand how this could never have been my doing?”

“I never suspected you for a moment. Your people had to suspect you to get sufficient proof that you had no part in it but the saving of one body and one soul. It is a shame you could not have saved both souls, but for all your ageless wisdom, you are still only a mortal man.”

“Yes, my dear,” he said and held out his arm. She took his

hand. “Your starship reminded me how mortal I am. But we are both still stuck here on this ground til you can call the next starship down to rescue us.”

“This is where starships rescue you to,” Ava said as they went out the door. “Though I still think you should try and find the Fenais who took Tdeshi’s scholarship.”

They left and there were then only the three of them remaining in the house. Tahlmute stared into his fire unresponsive, and left Jorma and Venna to their own devices.

7. Heading North

There was nothing around them now but bright blue water and sky. The Deep Runner VII had rounded South Dromedia point and was on the outer Dromedian arm before they even came on deck. The mast was turned over to them when the ship was just reaching out into the open lake. Lightly rippled water, a few bright white puffballs scattered here and there in the sky with the sails. This would be Venna’s first exposure to sail. He could scarcely have asked for a better start. “We just hold steady here along the Inner Dromedian coast for at least thirty miles, then fifty miles of open water til we round the outer point. We won’t be doing anything very active for awhile, a little adjustment this way and that. If this ship moves for our crew like it did for the last we’ll give them back a ship on Center Lake itself, beyond outer point.”

“What does that mean to me?” she asked.

“Come watch how to sail, or you can go as passenger

again. I earn the whole cabin by standing this mast one shift a day, if you learn to take a day now and then, that's fine, or an hour or two now and then. It's not strenuous, you just have to be here."

"If I'm sharing the cabin I think I should share in earning it."

"So far you are, you're out here on deck with me. And have shared equally in the work so far."

"We haven't done any," she said.

"We've come over to the rail next to the winch, I've made eye contact with the deck marshal and he knows that this winch, and therefore mast, is manned. He sees there are two of us here, he has no idea you have never been topside before, and wouldn't be particularly concerned if he did. The worst that would happen is he would say something like, 'translate for me if you have to' to me."

"So what do we do?"

"I'll just sit here by the main winch til I hear Lorthax say otherwise."

"That's him right?" Venna asked.

"Yep, that's him up there on top of the cargo so we can all see and hear him. He's deck marshal of wake shift." The ship was laden mainly with crates under tarps, most of them were small, Lorthrax had climbed the tallest near the front center of the deck.

She looked toward Lorthax. It was Morningday and cool enough so she was in a shoulder lace body sweater and was a better view than Lorthax, who was in a lightly quilted cape and leggings.

“So wait til you see the cute house you just bought.” Jorma said, since there was no sailing to talk about at the moment. “It’s high on a hill looking north, out across the biggest blue water there is.”

“On this planet anyway,” Venna said, “not on others if you believe Ava.”

There was nothing for him to say to that, they were quiet for a time, both looking across the water. It was good of Ava to be civil enough to her to sell her the house. Thirty one coppers was a lot less than Ava paid, but it was all Venna had. Ava knew she was a city girl now and had no need to go north again. That and Venna wrapping up some other business had taken a few more weeks than he wanted, but with the copper and forty he got back from the boat they could afford a comfortable inn with a cute balcony in an eleventh floor dormer only a couple blocks back of First. They even got a chance to spend a blissfully wasted Afternoon on the beach during that time.

She sat close to him, pulled him close. “I should have thanked Tahlmute for sending me north that time we met.”

“He sent you?”

“Well, not really, he just made our home such that I wanted to leave it. I’ve often gone north, I have friends in Zharvai.”

“Why did you use that other name? Raicha I think.”

“I did? That was my father’s name.”

“Why did you do that?” Jorma asked.

“I don’t know, I was pissed at him, Tahlmute I mean. Also, I didn’t want to get a bad-mouth Tahlmute vicious

circle going between me and Ava. I don't even know why I even bothered to go back there. I hope you don't need someone who is always completely rational." In truth he didn't, that was yet one more way she was like Tdeshi. She was able to lean on him here at the rail, like Tdeshi would and let him wrap his arm around her the way she would. "So tell me once again what we have to do for our passage?"

"We need to adjust these cranks as the deck marshal directs."

"How do you adjust them?" she asked.

"I'll show you as the after-lunch wears on. Listen to what Lorthax bellows and I'll show you what it means on these cranks."

Just as he finished saying that, Lorthax bellowed out, "Three out and twoooo."

"That means let out three winds more sail on the bottom or main line and two winds on the top line," Jorma said.

"So anyway, I've been inside on a ship before as we were on the way down. I've never worked on a ship before. So teach me this bobbin belay," she asked.

"This pedal coming out here is the bobbin release on this winch. It lets more or less of the force thru to the handle depending on how hard you step on it. When I get up it's locked. Here, sit down."

"Am I strong enough?"

"I've got it on four but here, put it on eight to one reduction if you want," he showed her the smaller lever that did that, "you could handle a tugboat in a storm on eight to one."

“This isn’t either of those, I’ll leave it on four.” She sat down in his place and started pressing slowly on the pedal. She soon had the whole sail in her hand on the winch crank, thru the four to one reduction it was set at. She let it out the three turns.

“If I was going to hold it for an hour I might want to switch to eight to one, but for a few minutes it’s more fun this way.”

“You only hold it when you’re changing it, when we’re steady like we are now, you just take your foot off the pedal and it’s locked in place.” Jorma talked while letting out the two winds on the topwinch that hung in the rigging beside them. “There’s no belaying and unbelaying with this rig, you just step and crank.”

They talked of ships and sailing for awhile. She seemed pretty interested and seemed to understand. Jorma had worked offshore and could see he was one of the more experienced hands aboard. “Have you ever had a boat?” Jorma asked her.

“Nah, I always found plenty of people to give me rides. When I was little my dad had his own kayak and gave me rides, I remember that from my childhood. He just kept at me not to stand up.”

“You grew up with your father?”

“Yeah, the way he told it my mom took off as soon as I was off the tit. Left one day while he was away with me. I was too little to remember that happening, but I’m young enough to remember him telling me about it.”

“That was so similar to Tdeshi, her mother was colandro.”

“What’s that?”

“A hired child giver. It is a custom of the old north. I heard it began among the Black Elves.”

“Something I’d never want to be. Most women say having a baby is difficult, that they would never do it again.”

“Most people don’t do it at all.”

“It’s easy for guys.”

“Y’ever read the translation of human evolution?”

“No, that was at YingolNeerie, right? I think I heard that.”

“Yeah, but when humans were primitive the male had to hunt and bring home food. More than twenty centuries ago people only used to live twenty decades. They lived such a short time it was a race to get the next generation raised in time. Hunting and gathering food was the male’s part in it. He had to gather enough to feed four or more people because they had to have multiple children or the population would soon thin out.”

“It doesn’t do that here, or at least back in the city,” Venna said.

“You’re going to see the population thin out on this trip. When we get up to Sinbara I can take you a day’s walk from the nearest human any time you want to go.”

“No, that’s not where I want to go, I want to go where you come from. I want to see the town where my soul was born.”

It sounded like she really did think of herself as some kind of kindred spirit with Tdeshi. “I was going to say this,” Jorma said, “but I never really got a chance to.”

“So, say it now,” Venna said.

“You seem much more like Tdeshi than Ava ever did, in spite of having all of Tdeshi’s genes.”

“I was born very soon after Tdeshi died. In my religion, I have a large share of Tdeshi’s soul. I think when you die your soul goes to the nearest baby to need one.”

“Reincarnation; but do you think God has to obey the laws of time and distance?” Jorma asked. “I think God sees all of times and places at once.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right, that does seem more God-like.”

“I guess,” Jorma was lost at this point. “I’m no expert on God.”

“Me neither,” Venna said. “I consider myself fair to middling at sex...”

“I would call you ninety eighth percentile at sex in my limited experience.”

“Yeah?” she said, “Thanks.” Then there was a another small adjustment that Lorthax bellowed out. She wanted to do it by herself, the way Tdeshi would have.

“So do you really believe you are Tdeshi reincarnated?” he asked.

“The more I hear, the more I believe it, I’m not scientific, if I want to believe something I will, it’s all about how it feels in my heart, not how many equations someone can write about it.

“I think of it,” she paused for a breath, “like a candle. A candle who’s flame was blown out by the shonggot. But if a new candle is close at the time, the flame may leap to it and spark it. This candle may be a different size and shape, but it’s

lit by the same flame.”

Part VI. Investigation's End

1. Bad Tail

“J'tom is here,” he heard Fenais call from the front room. Their home was a rather long collection of rooms peeking out into the deep shade of an atrium just a few blocks from the Kassikan's wall.

“What's he doing here?” he said to himself, then, “send him back,” loud enough so she could hear.

He could barely hear their voices, he heard steps approach. He put down the magazine he was puzzling thru. It was the publication of the Facilities Central Committee and was meant for insiders. He was trying to guess what a lot of the projects they talked about were. J'tom marched right in and flopped onto the far end of the cushion.

“Fenais must be in her last year,” J'tom said as he came into the room.

“About that, we don't know just when, she's known she was pregnant for almost three years now. But you're not supposed to come here.”

“I've got little more to report. I saw Jorma for awhile...”

“J'tom, what in seventh hell are you doing here?”

He flicked back his lopsided hair, something he did to get his mind onto a new subject. “I have a bit more news...”

“I haven't asked you for it,”

“Jorma got away man,” he blurted, “took the boat out from under that dock. I did what I could in that piss-pan you

gave me but lost him in minutes. I caught up with him at the Bilge-Mart. I could have grabbed his boat, you should let me. I know I can get a copper at least for that boat...”

“It’s etched you dummy...”

“I’ll change the cowl, I can do that.”

“...and you would be dumb enough to bring it here. I’ve told you a hundred times not to come here. We’re going to have a baby next year, you know how groups of mothers can be when they get together around their babies. That’s going to be here. I’d like to meet you at a quiet tap somewhere out of this neighborhood. The Kassikan has guys that are a hell of a lot better at keeping an eye on someone than you are. You lost Ava, and not only that, she got a make on you. Now you lost a simple plot-boy. Now you stroll in here, no doubt with your head spinning like a tourist, thinking you’re being so alert. If someone Ava knows is watching my door, they know who you’re doing business with.”

“No one saw me, there’s just a couple neighbors out chewing on a porch walkway toward the end of this alley.” He waved his arm at the atrium.

“And this is the starship age remember, they could have an eye on their kitchen table.”

“You’re paranoid,” J’tom said.

“No, I work for the Kassikan, I see this going on day in and day out. You never know who talks to who in there. Most departments report to more than one Study, including mine where I report to nine committees. I know the founders have agents who communicate with them only by coded mailbox, you can’t be paranoid enough around the Kassikan.”

“You’re paranoid,” he bleeped like a wind-up device.

Kemberra gave up. J’tom was probably half as smart as that lavender mindune that hunted the cracks around this atrium floor. It was not going to do much good to try and discuss security philosophy with him. It was like trying to train a klizhorn. He couldn’t even learn ‘Don’t come here.’ Three stinking words. “So you saw Jorma leave, which way?”

“Left at the Bilge-Mart by the Reccamin Lock.”

Out into the world instead of back into a long dead end in that neighborhood before getting anywhere near garden space. “So you lost him?”

“Yeah.”

“And what do you know about what he’s learned so far, other than some of where he’s been?”

“He’s split up with Ava, Ava’s been holed up since she made me that time, except when she went over to Kulai’s?”

“You don’t even know that,” he said.

“She went that way, she went inside the building, but she didn’t go up to a residential level, I had that covered.”

“I believe Kulai also has two business offices in that building.”

“You should have shared that with me.”

“I gave you a thick file...” now he understood. “You can’t read can you?” Kemberra asked.

J’tom looked at him awhile, took a couple deep breaths, then spoke without looking up, “Not that well.”

“As in, wouldn’t know if the page was right side up?”

“I can tell how many syllables are in a line of writing and

if it's hard or soft.”

“Take some reading lessons, it's really not that hard. Or at least tell someone who goes to the expense of putting something on paper for you that it isn't doing any good.”

“Oh it all went to good use,” J'tom admitted.

Starting his ma's cook fire no doubt, Kemberra wasn't going to wallow in it. “So you're here to tell me Jorma's gone, you haven't been able to pick him up again, he's lost.”

“If I had a needle boat also...”

“I gave you fare for publics, you need to guess where he's going...”

“I got pretty hungry with all this footwork.”

“So you ate a good meal...”

“He was already gone, it was nearly Nightday lunch. I had no Afternooday lunch, no duskmeal, no Nightday breakfast, and now it's lunch. Jorma is off somewhere far, because he bought five bags of fuel and trail food. I would guess, based on what you told me, that he went back to Chardovia, and you did NOT give me coin to book passage on a darkrunner to TRY and keep up with him. And it's really still outside today, have you been out? He can slice that lake in that needleboat today while that darkrunner will limp along the coast and maybe send a boat ashore to pick up a band for entertainment because they aren't moving.”

“So you lost him.”

“Yeah.” he sighed. “If I'd had...”

“I don't have the money for a needleboat...”

“I know you've got money,” J'tom said, “I know from

your dropper days.”

“Will you keep your voice down and will you quit blackmailing me with that? Besides, we’ve been out of that shit for twenty decades. It was a one-time windfall and it was long in the past, I doubt that anyone would have interest in that any more.”

“Then why did you pay me to follow them? There is something I need to ask you about that also.”

No doubt he was going to make the plea for higher rates that he did at every meeting. “You’re rates are cut from here on, you lost him.”

“I think I’ll cash out,” J’tom said.

“I think you already have. The only new information you’ve brought is that you’ve lost him.”

“I have expenses.”

“You already ate them.”

“You’re a cheat.”

“And you’re a bumbling fool. You lost them both and Ava got a make on you. I wouldn’t be surprised if that backwoods dirt-scratcher did too but was too suave to let you notice.” The red in J’tom’s face told him that Jorma had indeed picked him up but was not too suave to let J’tom notice. “I should demand back what I’ve already paid you,” Kemberra said, “You never really found out anything but where they are.”

“That’s all you’re paying me is worth. You expect me to be equal to the Kassikan in resources and you’ve paid me a nickel so far.”

“Far more than you’re worth.”

“I’d need to invest aluminum, I’d need to own a needlboat and a pocket eye.”

“If you want to advertise yourself as a detective, you’ll have to make that investment. I was just giving you a way to make a few irons with your time. You said you needed some day work.”

The argument deteriorated from there. Kemberra realized he’d been totally had and this ‘day work’ was nothing more than laying on him about the shonggot sale. He was really getting ready to call him on it. It was just one drop of last dilute, only a few thousand doses, they made little over an aluminum off it and didn’t dare spend it now because their finances would be watched. Being the slacker that he was, he didn’t think J’tom’s witnessing the shonggot had enough credibility to damage him at the Kassikan after all these decades. He would be questioned, he would deny everything. If they read him, he was done, but if they were not suspicious enough to have that done, he would be fine. He eventually put J’tom out of his house with nothing and decided to take his chances.

2. Old Friends

Kemberra walked into the little pub at Lisingale, just back of Thirteenth Canal in the middle of the clothing machine shops that clustered in that area on the bedrock of long point. This was one of the places he often used for meetings that he didn’t want others at the office to know about. It was eleven

miles and nine and a half million people away across the Yaghan's core. There might be some students that pass thru here, one or two a year. He never associated with students, they never knew him. Of course he had come from his home and not the Kassikan by a round-about route and would return to his home by a different round-about route. Both those routes lay thru deep Gnome tunnels other races shied away from.

It had been a long time since he'd seen his old friend, but after all that had happened the week before, it was really time to get in touch again just to see how he was taking it. No doubt this hadn't turned out like either of them had planned, but at least it was now about over. The direct involvement had all come out and there was nothing more that could happen.

The pub is a small and rather dirty place in the base of a hillside neighborhood that had been in the textile trade since the lash was grown here. It was now grimy stone and concrete factories where textile machinery was made and maintained. The sewing rooms were many stories up in these buildings. On the peak of the point of bedrock there was a ring of cargo canal with a bridge to Eleventh where the clothing barges had an easier access to the market.

In this old back street pub down in the industrial levels, the walls were stained from centuries of rord and norrot smoke. The floor stone had deep grooves from centuries of scraping chair legs. They had never modernized the grill even though there was a gas pipeline in the area since the Dromedian Arm was the lake. The place was noisy and the pall of smoke from the grill and the pipes hung thick beneath

the low ceiling.

He saw Tahlmute at a table near the back window overlooking the dark waters of Thirteenth Canal near where it passed under the bridge to Eleventh. Back there the smoke was a little less thick. He could see that his cup was empty, so he picked up two more on his way past the taps. Tahlmute was carrying his own cup but Kemberra just borrowed another house cup rather than walking both ways.

Tahlmute was damaged by all this, there was no doubt about that. His face hung and his greeting was listless. “You haven’t changed a bit,” he said to Kemberra, trying to smile, as he sat and set down the mugs. Tahlmute poured the house mug into his own and Kemberra reached back and slid the empty down the bar.

“And you have. Where’s the old Tahlmute?” Kemberra had mixed feelings about him taking it so hard. He hated to see him hurt, but he was more open to suggestion when he was like this, and it would be best if he went thru a change of life. It wasn’t often that he had been like this, but he had been before and if he was suggestible this one more time, every last bit of this would be over.

“You know what happened. I’m out of business,” Tahlmute said.

“You’ll find more.”

“Not here,” Tahlmute moped.

“So? There’s a whole wide world out there, go see some more of it.” This was exactly what he needed, Kemberra thought, and it would be better for his piece of mind besides.

“I’ve also earned Ava’s hatred.”

“You’ve been over Ava for decades I thought.”

“Of course, but she is still an amazing person with a lot of influence.” Tahlmute took a deep gulp. “I was drinking lantern fuel,” he said, “but maybe this will help.”

Kemberra lifted his cup also. He didn’t drink deep, he wanted to be the straight one in the conversation.

“I never got over Ava,” he said. “And I’ll always feel responsible for Tdeshi.” Tahlmute took another pull of yaag and continued. “I wonder if I hadn’t stopped supplying Himla, she would have got the stuff that killed her from him and I might not be going thru all this now.”

He was glad he said it that way and hadn’t thought she might still be alive. He didn’t want to think of that. Not that there was ever much chance that Tdeshi might still be alive. “That could be, but in that case you could blame it on me because I was the one who told you to stop supplying him.” Let Tahlmute blame Kemberra for being the one who got him stuck with the guilt instead of Himla. That plea was nowhere on paper, it has existed only in words in the air at that time.

“You were right though,” Tahlmute said, “she was killing herself with it. She might have been a nice girl if it hadn’t been for that shit, well; that and the boost. She might not have even gone into the shonggot if it hadn’t been for the speed. When I made that stuff up I was just trying to get a few coins together, not hurt someone like that.”

“But those are the people who take it, people who don’t know any better.”

“So now I know. I know one thing, I’ll never make any hard drugs again.”

“No, I would think not. It was a mistake, but they happen. But hey, look at the bright side, at least you got a few nice decades with Ava out of it. You wouldn’t have that without this happening.”

“No, you’re right and Ava is an outstanding woman in just about every way, but she was never the bed partner that Tdeshi was.”

“Do you miss Tdeshi? I thought Venna was everything Tdeshi was.”

“Venna was gone when I woke up the Morningday after. She left a note saying she’s going north to stay.”

“Was that because of this?”

“Not entirely, but I’m sure this didn’t help. We’d been having a rough time since she got back from the north the last time.”

“Times change,” Kemberra said.

“Yes they do. It was barely eleven decades ago I was a hero for being able to make the Brazilians disappear. Now I’m unwelcome.”

“Maybe it’s time you got away for awhile,” Kemberra suggested, “You’ve been here in and around the Kassikan for so long.”

“I know, this would be the best time to do that, but I’m not going north.”

“There are seven other points on the compass, why not head toward a southern point? You could go tour the areas of Dos or Zhlindu or even Lumpral for that matter. Not enough people ever go to Lumpral.”

“I’m not interested in Lumpral. When the sun’s blurry, I’m down too deep. I guess I could wander down toward Dos, they have a major university there also.”

“Do you think that would be different enough for you?”

“I hope it is the same enough for me, and it has careers in what I know how to do, service student needs.”

“But not with shonggot,” Kemberra reminded him.

“Never. I’m going to be very careful that no one ever comes to harm from anything I do.”

“Yeah, but I feel almost as bad about it as you do, after all, the main enzyme came from my storeroom.”

“But are you out because of it?”

“There was a guy from Internal that talked to me like he wanted me out. He accused me for dispensing it to Kulai even though Kulai had every right to pick it up and a position where it was used. That’s why I chose him for you in the first place.”

“How did they ever track him down?”

“Us Gnomes record everything, it’s the Kassikan way. An institution based on knowledge wants everything recorded and cross referenced. They even knew that the bottle hadn’t come back into circulation.”

“I know.” Tahlmute left it at that, remained totally subdued.

“So what is keeping you here?” Kemberra asked him, trying to keep the conversation on travel.

“I’m destitute. I couldn’t travel but on foot working my way.”

“I can help. You need a fresh start, I can help with that.”

“I can’t accept that.”

“Really, I’ve got an aluminum just sitting in a jar.”

“That’s way too much, what have I done to deserve that?”

“You’ve been a friend for what, a century now? I know what happened, I know how it hurts. I want to help. I’d even come with you if I could get away right now. Wouldn’t it be great to have a good ship under us, to follow a fat white sail to distant shores where the wind blows free and we could get away from all this?”

“What’s keeping you here?” Tahlmute asked.

“I guess I haven’t told you, Fenais is pregnant, we’re going to have a real mutt, got some of every race ever seen hereabouts in him.”

“I didn’t know.”

“You and I haven’t been seeing that much of each other lately and we only found out three years ago.”

“Good for you,” Tahlmute said and laced fingers in a firm grip, “but that means you have even more need for that aluminum.”

“We have another, this one is spare,” he lied. It would be tight but it would be worth it to have him away from repeated interrogation. He knew it could be trouble if they came up with unexplained money right now. “We were going to invest it.”

“Then use it for that.”

“Invest it in an old friend who needs a fresh start in a new land. I know you’ll do well. Stay in touch, I may need a fresh

start myself some day.”

“I really can’t take it.”

“Tahlmute, please, you need a new start right now, in a few years you’ll have pouches full of aluminum again.”

“Then you’ll get it back. I’m sure there are intercity commerce banks in Dos that will let me send it to you.”

“I understand Dos is as modern and up to date as we are in almost every way. It’s a polite and cultured place, Kulai would like it too.” He wouldn’t try talking Kulai into it, that would be too obvious. But if Tahlmute was to talk him into it, Kemberra wouldn’t cry to see Kulai head for distant shores also.

“I don’t know, I guess it’s something I’ll have to think about. I just feel bad about taking charity.”

“It’s not charity, it’s an investment. Or just saying I’m paying you back for all the yaag you bought in the 55th.”

He actually let out a tired little chuckle over that. They went on to other subjects, finding a new start closer to home, finding another to take Venna’s place. He tried to hint that the media would find him, he tried to talk about shipboard romance. The evening ended with Tahlmute unconvinced.

3. A Conversation in a Cook’s Court

When he was in the public parts of the Yakahn he often had his lunch at Eiten’s court just outside the wall on Third. It was a quiet little place frequented more by service people

than bigwigs. It was a good place to people watch and a couple of the cooks were quite tasty for the price.

A pretty red-headed girl came up to him as he was leaning back against the rail and said, “Hi.” She also had a bowl of diddle that she was well into and took a scoop from it as she leaned against the rail next to him.

He recognized her immediately as Venna, the bitch that had left Tahlmute the week before. They had been acquainted for decades but he didn’t know her well. “Yeah hi!” he said with a wide smile. Fenais was very pregnant, as in too pregnant, and this girl was cute. She had a better shape than Fenais ever had and wore thin jersey short and low in the Afternoonday heat. Tahlmute had bragged long and often of her sexual prowess, so he was worried that he wouldn’t be able to resist her.

She took another bite of her diddle and pressed her ass against his on the rail. He wished Fenais wasn’t so pregnant. “You’re with a gal named Fenais most of the time aren’t you?”

He wondered how she knew that. He had never been to Tahlmute’s with Fenais, few people knew they were together. “How’d you hear that?”

“Tahlmute and I sometimes talk. I asked about you when I saw you.”

“Asked what?”

“Your who’s and where’s,” she said, leaning back on him. “She’s pregnant right?”

“Why you’re asking?”

“Besides the obvious?” she asked. She was powering thru

the bowl as they talked. The bowls were a bit on the small side anyway, but very tasty for penny diddle.

“Just to confirm that I really need a fuck?” Tahlmute had told him this girl was also a hopeless slut.

“Yeah,” she finished another bite, “but besides that I think I know her, didn’t she work at Karteng’s Bandage Shop?”

“Yeah, but it was over twenty decades ago?” Kemberra was more concerned about the questioning than the come-on by now. Yeah his body could really use a ride on hers, but she was tossing bombs awfully close to places Fenais was especially nervous about.

“About the time Tdeshi died.” He knew he hadn’t kept his reaction to the name secret. He saw her smile. “Tahlmute knew Tdeshi left his place with an ampule of shonggot and a scholarship certificate to a year’s course in fashion art. It’s in the Kassikan files that Fenais does that, and Ava knew that a Fenais used a scholarship in the class Tdeshi was slated for.”

“And why does that bring you here?”

“Because the Kassikan could take action on either one of those things, stealing the scholarship certificate, an actionable infraction but about all they would do for that is charge her for the course.” She stopped and took another bite. She chewed slowly and waved that off. “But I’m guessing if they looked hard enough they would find someone you sold shonggot to.”

He wanted to be defiant on that but knew it would be fruitless. It was fifteen decades since they unloaded the last of it, but even now, if a thousand operatives fanned out across the urban universe, they would find someone in a year. “So

what do you want?” he asked resignedly. Without Tahlmute to support her she’d be greedy, Tahlmute had complained that she wasn’t a cheap girl.

“No, there is no favor you could do for me to make up for what you have done.”

“Selling shonggot?” This chick was no squeaky clean thing herself. Besides her penchant for wild public sex, she was a user and a cheat. She’d done drugs almost as hard as shonggot and beat them, Tahlmute talked out the other side of his face also.

“Taking life for your own gain,” she said.

“What?” Kemberra’s heart was racing now.

“It’s all because of something Tahlmute once mentioned,” she said. “That you nagged him to shut Himla off.”

“What are you getting at? What are you doing here!?”

“Just clearing up a few things,” she said. But he could see from her face that she had already found out all she wanted to know.

“What’s it to you anyway?” Kemberra asked.

“Nothing really to me,” she chuckled, “except I consider myself Tdeshi’s reincarnation, so for me it’s just revenge, but I have a mailbox number for someone who’s really interested.”

“Who’s that?” he asked, but she turned and handed her bowl back to the cook and her sweet shape and billow of copper curls danced off down the path.

4. On The Dock

It was a year later when Kemberra and Fenais, with little Kemmer in her arms, stood on the dock watching the Flying SouthWind's sails get small. They had their arms around each other. Fenais was still a new mother and the trip down here had been tiring. It was remarkable how quickly things could change in life.

“So he finally did it,” Kemberra said about Tahlmute as they watched his ship shrink on the horizon that seemed to go on forever into the sunset down the Dromeidian arm.

“It's about time.”

“I wonder what finally changed his mind?”

“It was an eye-note he got,” Fenais told him as she struggled with the gurgling infant. “He says it's from Ava.”

“Is he still pining for her?”

“I guess so,” she said. “Three decades...” she had to get her hair out of his hands again. “They were made for each other, ages and light years apart. I don't think I've ever seen a better match.”

“Except for us,” he said, and leaned to kiss her.

They watched the sails a bit more as they inched along.

“You know,” she said, “If Tdeshi would have signed in that scholarship certificate, I wouldn't have had the chance to use it.”

“And if you hadn't snagged that drop of concentrate we wouldn't have had that aluminum to send him off with.”

“We put in a lot of years for that aluminum,” she said,

grimacing with the memories of the hassle it had been to sell it far from the Kassikan. “Just forget all of that like I’m going to. We have a child and a new life. Tdeshi didn’t die, she changed into another person like she would have anyway. We really were trying to save her when we convinced Tahlmute to cut Himla off. Nobody will ever know more.”

The fact that she was able to convince herself of that was what let her get away with it wasn’t it? Get away with it until now. Twenty decades, twenty one actually, since they’d helped Tdeshi kill herself, he had to admit that. She had been stupid enough to try the pin thing she’d seen Hyondahi do for years with his lures, but they’d certainly helped. He never thought Fenais pushed for altruistic reasons, but he’d never questioned her had he?

It didn’t matter what they knew about that anyway, the shonggot sales alone were actionable. For a few weeks he thought they were going to get away with it, that Venna was just teasing. But once that bitch reported them, the wheels were set in motion. In five weeks, his job was gone, then her business dried up and they had no choice but to sell out and leave the city. Their crummy apartment had fetched forty three coppers, hardly a stake anywhere. Now that aluminum Tahlmute owed them was mighty important. At the very least they would share it.

“I just wish we could have gotten here a few hours earlier,” she said.

“Of course.” Now it would take them years to catch him at what they could afford, but they had no future but to claim payback of that aluminum.

It was grueling trundling a newborn on a ship like this. It was tight getting them all into a cabin he could earn on his own. He could only get bathroom duty on this lugger, but it was a start on their quest to catch up with Tahlmute in the Gengee.

“If the Instinct was as good as it should have been,” he said as they worked forward a little more on their way up the lugger’s ramp, “you wouldn’t have been able to hand Tdeshi that pin and we wouldn’t be here.”

Little Kemmer squirmed and she had to re-cradle him. “I did get the paralysis,” Fenais said. “It did hit me when I tried to hand her the pin.”

“But what happened then?” He had the huge pack of everything they had salvaged on his shoulders and had to balance it. Traffic was moving slowly up the ramp.

“I stood there frozen, it dropped to the dock.”

“Yeah? Then what?”

“Tdeshi picked it up, thanked me, and got on that needleboat.”

A Letter From Ava

To: Jorma and Venna, last left on Top Hill Road
North Island, Sinbara Town 18.169N
4.716W

On: Iyosaign 1002123

Hi,

Sorry it's been so long since you've heard from me, the business has been keeping us busy, as has the social life. I find it hard to believe over a year has flown by, you've spent a whole winter in that house by now. It was a lovely life up there on that lake, I'm sure you're enjoying it. I did too, the year I was there.

Kulai has given up his position at the Kassikan to devote full time to the shipping business. He handles all the details but the math, that's all I have to bother with. We go inspect his cargos together now, I tell him totals and margins, he tells me what he thinks he'll get per pound in the areas where he sends it.

I saw a report that a woman named Fenais was recently blacklisted by the Kassikan. I wonder if she's the one we talked about? I told Althart he

should look into her. If that did happen, I'm glad, I'd like to think my words to Althart did some good.

I hope you two are still together. You really do belong together, in my opinion. If not, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt.

Jorma, I'm really sorry you could not stand the truth about me. If you could only understand how we are still the same, I've been flesh and Angel and flesh again and I'm still me, the girl from the parking garage in the ruins of Reston who really did love you. Take care of yourself, as I am taking care of myself.

If you ever see Leand, thank him for me, and give him my condolences. Tell him I will revere his daughter's body as if it is my own.

Venna, please have the joy in that home that I would have if I hadn't come back here and assured myself I really am a city person. I was getting enthusiastic about plants while I traveled North, but once I got back here, I was over that. I hope you have enthusiasm and that it is sustained. If either of you come back this way, I would love to know about it and see you again. If I come back that way I'll write well in advance. I'm thinking of getting my own account on the

eyes again, if I do I'll let you know the address.

Love,
Ava