



Binary

A Science Fiction Novel

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One

Leannis Men Darnak shifted uneasily on his padder. The beast snorted, sensing the repositioning of the Principal's weight and took a step forward. He pulled back gently on the reins, stilling the animal and reached down, almost automatically, to check the spear haft slotted into its leather case at his right. Behind him, Sandon Yl Aris sat astride his own padder. The man would take no part in the hunt, but Men Darnak liked him around. He never knew when his aide and advisor might pop up with something useful. Another beast snorted and stamped. Men Darnak gave a quick glance toward the offending animal, eyes narrowed, then turned back to scanning the grassland below.

The suns were beating down upon the plain, the weather warm, and the Clear Season grasses riffled in a gentle breeze. There was no movement apart from the soft waves prompted by the stirring of the air. Somewhere down there lay their quarry, hidden. The chuckah, a fleet-footed quadruped, bristle coated, liked to root around in the grasslands, digging through the dry earth in search of insects and other tasty morsels with its nasty curved tusks, tusks that could rip the belly out of a padder or man just as easily. He reached for his

spear again, tracing the shaft softly with the tips of his fingers. On foot, once they'd chased the beast down, nothing stood between the man and those tusks than the tempered hardwood length of his spear. There lay the challenge.

Men Darnak had brought the boys along for this hunt. It would do them good to see the test, to learn the ways of the chuckah; their time would come soon enough. Roge and Tarlain, though Tarlain was barely old enough to ride his animal, would learn from this. He glanced back to his left, checking on the boys. Roge, as usual, was trying to emulate his father's seat upon the padder, his back straight, his gaze fixed upon the grassland below. Tarlain fiddled with his reins and fidgeted. He made to say something to Roge, but Roge stilled him with a grimace, and the boy settled back. Back at home, on the estate, their sister waited. There was no place for a girl on the hunt, but sometimes Men Darnak wished that their characters had been reversed. If Karin had been here, there would have been no fidgeting or complaining. He nodded to himself grimacing as he pushed the unwelcome thought away, and turned back to watch for signs of movement.

The ground in front of them rose to a low hill, and beyond that, forest, tall and sturdy *ajura* trees spaced across the rise. If a chuckah broke, it would race for the trees and Men Darnak was already plotting a path in his mind's eye. It was more dangerous chasing through the trees, the spiny branches whipping out in front of a racing padder, hard and sharp enough to impale a man if he didn't take care.

There, down below, a hint of something stirring in the grasses. Back behind them, came the noise of a vehicle. Groundcar or groundbike, he didn't care. It was something to disturb the stillness of the moment and he pressed his teeth together tightly, losing his concentration for a moment. There! A flash of movement. A brindled back cutting through the grasses. With a cry, Men Darnak spurred his padder into action, one hand looped in the reins, the other holding his spear aloft. The padders weren't the fastest of animals, and the chuckah was fleet of foot. He had to move if he was going to cut it off before it reached the tree line.

Men Darnak kept his eyes on the beast, not even glancing back to check the boys were okay. He could hear their own animals pounding down the slope behind him. He urged his padder faster, whipping through the grasses, the smell of freshly crushed vegetation and damp earth around him, marking the track of the racing chuckah. The beast knew they were after it now. For an instant, he lost sight of the low back, but then, a flash of movement. The chuckah was breaking for the right, heading straight for the trees. He leaned forward, seeking more speed where there was none. And then, the chuckah was out. It tore up the slope and darted between two massive shiny trunks and was lost from view. Men Darnak growled, pulled at his reins and swung his padder toward the tree line, kicking its flanks to urge it faster.

Leaning low on the animal's back, Men Darnak followed into the trees, swerving and leaning out of the way of threatening spines. There, up ahead. The sound of something moving through the dim light off to the left. He slowed his wild charge. Pulling the beast back to a gentle walk. Behind him, came the sound of other animals, the boys, a couple of the men. There was nothing for it now. They would have to stalk the chuckah. Dotted through the damp gloom lay clearings, broad grassed spaces. Men Darnak only hoped he would have the fortune to come across the beast in such a space. By the Twins, he was not going to return empty handed. He slowed his animal even more, then drew it to complete halt, listening. A slight breeze stirred through the trees, bringing with it the scent of old earth and the tang of *ajura*. Flexing his fingers around the haft of his spear, he waited.

A shout off to the left, somewhere through the trees, then a cry. It was one of the boys. The shiny trunks reflected sound, distorted it deep in the forest, and it was hard to tell which of his sons had cried out. His teeth bared, he kicked his padder, and wheeled it toward where he thought the sound had come from.

"Back!" yelled someone. It was clear enough--Sandon's voice.

He urged his animal forward, faster, heedless of the sharp spines threatening to knock him from the animal's

back.

"No, Roge, stay where you are!" Sandon's voice again.

The light grew as he reached the source of the sound, and then he was out, into a clearing to be confronted with

Tarlain, his youngest, sat pressed back against a tree trunk, his knees drawn up in front of him, a look of wild panic on his face. In front of him stood Sandon Yl Aris, his hands stretched wide. Yl Aris had no weapon. He was merely along as advisor and aide, not expected to take any part in the hunt. Off to one side stood Roge, watching on, without even a spear in his hands. His weapon sat sheathed, still up on his animal and across the other side from him. And in the center stood the chuckah, its flat, bony head swiveling from one to the other. At Men Darnak's emergence, it turned, pawing at the ground, seemingly confused by the array of targets.

Men Darnak was off his padder's back in an instant, his spear held high. The chuckah turned its dark gaze on him for a moment, then thinking better of it, swiveled its attention back to the immobile Roge.

"No, Principal, stay back!" said Sandon.

The chuckah took a step toward Roge, stopped, clawed at the ground. Men Darnak knew if he moved too quickly, the beast would charge, and Roge was exposed, naked, completely unprotected. He hefted his spear, thoughts racing. It was too far from where he was. Besides, the animal's bony hide left few places for an accurate strike.

The chuckah took another step.

"Here!" yelled Sandon. "Here!" He waved his arms.

The beast turned.

"Arghhhh!" shouted Sandon through bared teeth.

And the chuckah charged.

Sandon Yl Aris kept his arms wide, shielding the boy behind him looking on in terror. The chuckah pounded across the intervening space and launched itself straight at the man. Knocking him from his feet, clawing at him and whipping its tusks back and forth. Tarlain scrambled around the tree, away, out of sight. Yl Aris held the animal as it tore into his shoulder and he cried out.

Men Darnak needed no further prompt. He charged across the clearing as Sandon wrestled on the ground. Lifting his spear high, he saw the spot, plunged it down and deep, slipping between the armored plates. The beast screamed, high, piercing and Men Darnak twisted. It screamed again and fell back off the man beneath it, raking one clawed paw across Yl Aris's chest. Men Darnak pushed his full weight against the spear, driving it down and deeper, pushing the chuckah, writhing back onto the ground. It groaned, deep, shuddered, twitched once, and was still.

Men Darnak stood slowly, glancing over at Roge. The boy hadn't even moved. He just stood there, a blank expression on his face.

Quickly, he turned to Yl Aris who lay on the ground, an arm pressed against his wounded chest, a grimace of pain on his face.

"Thank you, Yl Aris," said the Principal. He stooped, looking at the man who had just saved his boys. The shoulder wound was deep and nasty. "Thank you," he said again.

"There was nothing else to do," said Yl Aris through gritted teeth.

Men Darnak shot a glance at his eldest son as he helped Yl Aris to his feet.

"Oh, there was much else that could have been done," he said quietly. "Let us get those injuries seen to."

Two

Guildmaster Aron Ka Vail turned from the window, tearing his gaze from the cityscape below with a deep sigh. The shadowed orange light spilled from behind him setting the polished tiles of his audience hall awash with bloody reflections. The Minor Twin was now in ascendancy. Dark spots crawled across its surface, marring the even yellow-orange glow. The Major Twin had started slipping slowly from view a mere four days past, its welcome lighter-hued visage fading with each passing day. The time of storms would be upon them soon.

"Communications will start to get patchy soon," said Sandon Yl Aris, starting the conversation with something he thought might not be too contentious.

"So they will," said Guildmaster Vail, glancing back out the window. "I'm not too fond of returning to the old ways, nor of riding again for that matter. I'm getting too old to feel comfortable on the back of an animal. Give me a groundcar above a saddle any day, eh? The Return is too much like barbarism to me, don't you think, Yl Aris? I often wonder what the First Families would have thought, seeing us riding around like bloody primitives. There are limits to what I'm prepared to give up, choice or not. Before you know it, we'll be living like the Kallathik or, dread the thought, the damned Atavists."

"Yes," said Sandon. "Hardly the vision I think the First Families would have had for their future generations. For that matter, it's hardly a vision I particularly want for myself." His voice lacked any trace of humor.

Guildmaster Ka Vail gave a wry chuckle and crossed to the wide table where the Guild meetings were customarily held. The table's dark mottled *ajura* wood was polished to a brilliant sheen. Sixteen high-backed chairs sat around it. A small stone sculpture rested at the table's center. The work was a representation of Aldaban's twin suns, the Major and Minor Twins. Sandon looked it over, recognizing it as the work of one Kalon Ky Maron, worth a small fortune on its own. Impressive trappings indeed. Guildmaster Vail pulled out his chair at the table's head and adjusted his clothing around him as he sat.

"Come, sit. Join me won't you, Yl Aris? Tell me what you think Principal Men Darnak is up to. That has to be a more fitting matter for discussion, something we have a little control over at least. I'll make no secret that I'm concerned, and the other Guilds must have their concerns as well. You're probably close enough to have some idea of what's really going on in his head. This talk of passing on the reins to his children is unsettling, and as far as I'm concerned, well before its time. Now, what can you tell me?"

Sandon crossed and pulled out a chair. Even the chairs were finely wrought antiques. The whole place was designed for awe and intimidation; a fact not lost on him. He ran his palm over the arm, where the wood was smooth and shiny from years of use, adding the slightest trace of sweat from his own hand to the accumulation of others gathered there from generations past. He looked across the table, wondering at the decades of power

this man, Aron Ka Vail, had held within his grasp. The Guild of Primary Production was one of the strongest on Aldaban.

"I don't think it's unusual for him to be thinking of succession now," said Sandon, "He's always been a planner, you know that, but you know just as well that he always keeps his thoughts pretty much to himself. It's hard to know sometimes which way he'll turn. But what about you, Guildmaster Vail? Surely you've thought about succession yourself. A Guild such as Primary Production "

Sandon didn't mind asking the question. Ka Vail was getting old and it didn't hurt to know which way the cards might fall when the time came. Sandon survived on the knowledge of what went on in the complex guild structure, and Principal Leannis Men Darnak relied on that knowledge to help shape the way things went. Though Sandon's position was never spelled out--he was just another functionary in the Principate--the other Guildmasters knew Sandon's position, understood the dynamics of the bargain and it served them all.

Ka Vail looked down at the hands clasped before him and nodded slowly. Then he fixed Sandon with hard gray eyes.

"Yes, of course I've considered it. Naturally, the position should fall to my eldest son, Markis. For a start, he was born when the Major Twin was in ascendance. They say he's the lucky one, but sadly, he has none of the cunning of the younger, Jarid." He paused, sighed, then looked up again. "You know about my youngest, Jarid. People would say I was mad even considering him. Mad I might be, and his birth may have been poorly aspected, but he's still my son. To be honest, I don't hold much with that superstitious nonsense anyway." He seemed to drift in thought for a moment, then regained his composure. "I have to admit to being a bit of a traditionalist, YI Aris. The position of Guildmaster has to fall to Markis. Ever since the First Families settled here, that has been the way, and so it shall continue. I plan no departure from tradition. Between you and me, I only hope his younger brother will understand."

Ka Vail unclasped and clasped his hands again. After a moment, he looked up, clearly not letting Sandon divert him. "Tell me, Sandon, what is Men Darnak going to do? What do *you* think he's going to do? The whole structure of the Guilds is going to be affected by what he decides."

"I wish I could tell you. There are rumors, of course, but how he apportions it is anyone's guess." Sandon spread his hands wide. "He hasn't told me anything. If he had, of course you'd be one of the first to know, Guildmaster."

Ka Vail shook his head and sucked air between his teeth. "That we don't need. With Storm Season just about upon us, there's enough potential for chaos. Do we have to put up with uncertainty as well? It's hard enough keeping a tight rein on the Kallathik without trying to train a new Principal, let alone three." He leaned forward slightly, his voice lowered conspiratorially. "Do you think he plans to influence things from the background; keep a guiding hand on what they do until the real order is established? At least until the Major Twin's in ascendancy?"

Sandon shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine, Guildmaster. It would be the logical way for him to handle it. I don't see him giving that up easily. But I lay absolutely no claim to be able to predict the way the future will fall. Storm Season is no short time, and anything could happen. Men Darnak is not a young man."

Nor was the man Sandon was talking to, he thought. He wondered if after the change, Guildmaster Ka Vail would still be around.

The old man settled back into his chair, pursed his lips and looked off into the distance. He spoke in a quiet voice, seemingly more to himself than to Sandon. "We've supported him for years. It has served all of us well. What is he thinking? We need a steady hand in the Principate. Particularly now."

A discreet cough from the doorway at the far end of the chamber interrupted them. The Guildmaster looked up with a frown that immediately softened. "Ah, Jarid, come in. Join us. We were just discussing the likely outcomes of the succession question." Then turning to Sandon: "I don't think you've formally met my son, have you, Yl Aris?" He waved the boy over. "Jarid Ka Vail, my younger son...this is Sandon Yl Aris. He works for Leannis Men Darnak within the Principate."

The young man's shoes clicked across the polished floor as he crossed to take up position between them, his hand resting on the back of his father's chair. He nodded at Sandon, a gesture Sandon politely returned.

He had only ever seen the younger Ka Vail boy from a distance. Up close, Jarid Ka Vail had much of his father's looks: the hooded gray eyes, the high cheekbones, and the thin lips. His mouth betrayed a slight arrogance. Sandon graced him with a polite smile.

"So, what news? How are the preparations going?" asked Ka Vail, looking back up at his son.

"We've started to pull in the groundcars from the farms and the communications networks are ready to be shut down. Preparations for line of sight are in progress. Data backup is already under way, but Markis is handling most of that. I've been helping out where I can, but I think we might be in for a difficult time. The Kallathik have been gathering again."

The Guildmaster passed a hand across his brow. "Why does it never change? Every Storm Season it's the same damned thing. What is it this time?"

"There have been mutterings about conditions in the mines, but most of that's third-hand. You know how hard it is to get any sense out of the creatures. I've sent observers in, but that's no guarantee. With any luck we'll have come up with some hard information before we start getting the first coms blackouts."

"And Markis is aware of this?"

The young man hesitated before answering, and Sandon read volumes into the pause. "Yes, he's aware of this." The response was flat.

Ka Vail continued, oblivious. "Good. He needs to be able to keep a strong grip on the Kallathik situation if we're to get through this unscathed."

The Guildmaster seemed not to notice the slight narrowing of his son's eyes. "Send him a message, will you? Make it clear to him that I'm expecting quick resolution of this Kallathik problem. Impress upon him that he has to do this with the minimum of fuss, mind. I don't want it turning into a major incident."

Jarid pursed his lips, saying nothing. He gave Sandon a brief nod and stalked from the chamber.

"Well, Yl Aris, you see what we have to put up with in Primary Production? You're somewhat shielded in the Principate. Every time the Minor Twin comes into ascendancy, we're faced with these sorts of problems. I don't know whether it's their religion, or what it is that stirs them up, but every cycle the Kallathik give us trouble. The more restless they are, the harder time we seem to have of it. If we didn't rely on them so much, I'd say be done with them, employ human workers on the farms and in the mines. And on that note, it wouldn't hurt you putting a word in with Men Darnak for us."

Ka Vail was right about one thing; Sandon was somewhat shielded in the Principate. As long as Guild functions went ahead smoothly, there was no need to get involved in the finer details of what they did. He doubted even Men Darnak would be aware of this Kallathik thing. Generally, it was Sandon's job to flag such issues.

A Kallathik totem stood in one corner of the room: long segmented body, two primary and two vestigial arms and a squarish head. Sandon eyed it speculatively. It made sense for it to be there, as most of their dealings were with Primary Production. He knew far too little about these creatures; Primary Production shielded most of the population in their dealings with the Kallathik. They had existed side by side with the human population for the five centuries since the ill-fated colony ships had landed. Rarely seen in the cities, they maintained tribal settlements in the more remote of Aldaban's lands. Their plate-like skin made them ideal workers for the farms and mines.

"You're right. I wasn't aware they were such a problem," said Sandon, finally returning his attention to Ka Vail.

"We try and keep these things within the Guild," said the Guildmaster. "Over the last few cycles, matters have become more strained. The Principal, of course, has been aware of it, but I suppose he didn't feel it necessary to spread the information beyond the Guild."

Was he indeed? Sandon made a note to question Men Darnak about it later. Whatever plan the Principal had, keeping that piece of knowledge to himself had to be important.

The Guildmaster continued. "I'd be very surprised if even any of the other Guildmasters were aware of the extent of it and I don't know how many in the Principate know. I'm happy to have it remain that way, Yl Aris," he said pointedly.

"Of course," said Sandon, inclining his head.

"There are enough things to worry about without even mentioning the factional divisions we can expect over the succession question."

"I understand." Another tilt of the head. "Naturally, Guildmaster Ka Vail, I won't say a word."

Ka Vail gave a satisfied nod. "So, Yl Aris, you'll keep me informed of what happens with Principal Men Darnak? I need to be able to move quickly on this, put things in place, depending on the outcome. Understand, I have the best interests of Aldaban at heart, not just the Guild."

"Yes, of course, Guildmaster Ka Vail. That goes without saying."

The old man stood and extended a hand. "Well, thank you for taking the time to come and see me, Yl Aris. I appreciate it."

Sandon stood and shook the proffered hand. "Certainly, Guildmaster. Thank *you*. As I'm sure you know, I too have Aldaban's interests foremost in mind."

#

Sandon strode down the front steps of the Guild building and crossed to the waiting groundcar. The door whirled open as he approached. He was due back at the Principate about ten minutes ago. He took a moment to glance up at the Minor Twin casting its baleful ruddy eye over the city and pursed his lips. Ka Vail was right; things were not going to be easy. He hated the Return just as much as the old Guildmaster. And yet the Kallathik seemed to manage with minimal disruption to their lives, but from the sound of things, there was

more going on between the Kallathik and Primary Production than was immediately apparent. That was definitely worth further investigation.

He slipped into the groundcar, gratefully. This would be one of the last journeys he would be able to make before they became too dangerous to operate. It really was about time the Guild of Technologists found a solution to their instability. With a shake of his head, he tapped in the destination.

He watched the passing buildings as the groundcar moved silently through the streets. He was as concerned as Ka Vail about Men Darnak's plans. Sandon Yl Aris had done well out of his loyalty to Leannis Men Darnak. He had lands, and wealth, but a new order could easily upset his hard-won position. A change of regime could herald changes to Aldaban and the Guilds, changes that would little benefit its people. Since the first colony ships had been forced to land, the families had run everything, just as they had in the years that the vast mother ship had traveled between the stars.

He pursed his lips and shifted his gaze to follow a sole Atavist riding through the streets on the back of a padder. The man's homespun robes fell about him, drab and dusty. Twin baskets were draped across the animal's back, vegetables poking out over their rims. The Atavist turned his face away as the groundcar skimmed past, almost as if by doing so, he could deny its existence. Sandon snorted. It was bad enough that the people of Aldaban had to forego many comforts of technology for part of the twin sun's cycle, much worse to do so *intentionally*. Sandon shuddered to think how they could live like that. Still, religion did strange things to people's minds.

A chime from the groundcar's instrument panel told him they were approaching the Principate, and he leaned forward in his seat, trying to count the number of vehicles already clustered in front of the building complex. The central Principate offices were long and low, constructed of thick stone built to withstand most of what the Minor Twin could throw at them. The dark brown stone spread uniformly throughout Yarik, the capital, as it did through every city on Aldaban. The austere traditions of the First Families had certainly left their legacy.

The groundcar slid to a stop in one of the scattered empty parking spaces and the door rose at a touch of his finger. He stepped out and scanned the vehicles parked around him as the door slid shut beside him. The news of Men Darnak's announcement had brought them in like scavenger lizards. Well, there was nothing else for it. Time to see what Men Darnak really had planned. With set jaw, Sandon Yl Aris strode up the front steps and inside to see what fate was about to deliver.

Three

Sandon stepped quickly into the long ceremonial chamber used for state functions, cursing inside. Because of his lateness, he would be forced to maneuver carefully past the ranked officials already present. With his lips pressed into a tight line, he tried to spy the best way through. A quick scan of the faces revealed many he knew. Representatives of several major Guild families clustered together across the broad space, but, in this instance, only those that had close political ties within the Principate. Men Darnak, it appeared, had been very careful about distributing the knowledge of his announcement. As usual, the Principal wanted to control the dynamic of the news, channeling it first through those to whom he gave the most trust. Typical Men Darnak.

Torches sat bracketed on the pillars lining the side walls, already burning, their light dimmed by the three vast chandeliers hanging from the ceiling's middle. Had it been two months earlier and the torches would have remained unlit, but now, with the Minor Twin threatening, it was better to be sure. A harsh burst from the twinned suns, or another quick quake, could put the power out at any time. A low murmur echoed from the

walls as those in attendance stood fidgeting, waiting for Men Darnak to appear.

Mumbling polite words of apology, Sandon slipped between the assembled officeholders and made his way to the front. There were protests and offended looks as he wormed his way through, but as soon as they saw who it was, the expressions quickly changed. Inwardly wincing at every unnecessary piece of extra attention he was gathering, he finally found a spot. The assembled Guild people knew who Sandon was right enough; he just didn't like to advertise. Just as well he could rely on Men Darnak's penchant for the dramatic to divert any real attention. The Principal would draw out the moment, the expectation of the crowd, until the last possible second, then with a suitably theatrical entrance, he would sweep away all thought of anything else.

Sandon searched the room for a sign of Men Darnak's children. There stood Yosset Clier, the middle child Karin's husband, a look of annoyance on his heavily jowled face. Clier held a leading executive post in the Guild of Primary Production. The old Guildmaster, Aron Ka Vail's absence suddenly made sense. With Karin's connection, Men Darnak had little need of Guildmaster Ka Vail at this particular gathering. Yosset Clier's dark brow was drawn in a thundery scowl. He noticed Sandon watching, narrowed his eyes, gave the barest nod of recognition and looked away.

Further around the circle, stood the thin aesthetic figure of Karryl Ky Menin. Roge, the eldest Men Darnak boy was already indentured to the Guild of Technologists, which the pale, gray-haired man led. Ky Menin stood calmly, his hands crossed before him, seemingly bound up in his own thoughts. If he saw Sandon looking at him, he gave no sign. Sandon had long thought privately that Ky Menin was a one to watch. Ky Menin was far too hard to read, far too hard by far. Matching this one with Roge Men Darnak was perhaps not the best choice -- Ky Menin was too clever -- but the Principal needed to extend his influence evenly. Despite the risk of Roge being overwhelmed by Ky Menin's sly intelligence, Sandon understood and appreciated the wisdom of Men Darnak's choice.

Sandon continued scanning, searching for one more face. And then he spied him, positioned near the center, right back toward the rear of the group -- Karnav Din Baltir. The small bookish man was the only other Guildmaster here with a real, direct interest. Din Baltir stood partially concealed, watching the rest of the crowd nervously. His family controlled the Guild of Welfare. Medicines, social amenities, relief in times of crisis were his province. During Storm Season, Din Baltir's Guild naturally accrued status. Principal Men Darnak's youngest son, Tarlain, was about to take up formal indenture with Din Baltir. The boy had been working within the Guild for almost a year now. In the current circumstance, the Guildmaster had every right to look nervous. Though Tarlain's acceptance into Welfare was almost a foregone conclusion, the agreements had yet to be finalized. If Sandon knew him, Din Baltir would be dreading the Principal's impending announcement, fearful that it might upset his own plans. Having a Men Darnak within their ranks gave a Guild direct access into the workings of the Principate and Din Baltir would be aware of the importance. His small bright gaze flicked from person to person. His eyes met Sandon's, and he quickly looked away, pretending he hadn't seen. Sandon nodded to himself.

Still no sign of the children, but seeing these three, to be able to watch the way they responded to Men Darnak, was just as important. Din Baltir might bear watching as well. The youngest Men Darnak boy was full of high ideals, and Welfare was the perfect breeding ground for misplaced idealism. Din Baltir could easily shape the boy's direction.

And yes, there of course stood Men Darnak's priest, Witness Kovaar. The gaunt, robed aesthete hovered near the entrance to the side passageway. The corridor led to Men Darnak's private chambers, the place from where the Principal would make his entrance. Obviously, the priest meant to join him as soon as he emerged. Sandon pressed his lips together.

Satisfied that he had everyone important marked, he settled back to wait, paying only scant mind to the others in the room, though there were many here who'd be worth casual observation in other circumstances. Too

many varied interests, too many houses were clustered in this one room for the moment. Better to keep his attention on the ones that mattered.

The Guild structure on Aldaban was complex, ruled by marriage, succession and family relations. The three major Guilds, Technologists, Welfare and Primary Production, controlled much of the world, but over it all sat the Principate. Voting rights within each guild varied, and they changed with each new succession, making it hard to keep track from season to season, but always there was the Guildmaster. As a Guild decided, the Guildmaster relayed its decisions to the Principate. No change could be enforced without the approval of the Principal and it was up to the Guildmaster to negotiate that approval. There was a long history to the Guilds' structure, echoing the way things were run on the vast colony ship *Paradise* that originally cast its human seed upon Aldaban's hostile ground. Technicians, Medical, Psyche, Supply, all had been run traditionally along family lines, and over all had sat the Officer corps, led in turn by the Captain. Principal Leannis Men Darnak could trace his origins back to the first Captain. Sandon sadly, could trace no such lineage.

And here, now, the Principal, Captain to Aldaban's entire population, was about to withdraw his firm hand. The very prospect made Sandon nervous. Men Darnak's children were individuals in their own right, but between them, they had a lot to learn. History, tradition were what really ruled but sometimes history and tradition required a little nudge. There was nothing in any of the children to disturb the way the Guilds functioned. Sandon wasn't particularly worried about losing his own role, certain that his services would be in demand, especially if Men Darnak wanted to maintain his influence. The old man relied on Sandon to be his eyes and ears behind the scenes. Sandon YI Aris knew the way things worked, the key people, what moved them and motivated them. That knowledge would be crucial to a smooth transition of power.

A stir from the side hall interrupted Sandon's musings. Two uniformed functionaries entered from the passageway and stepped briskly to either side of the door. Moments later, Principal Leannis Men Darnak, tall and bearded swept into the hall. His ceremonial robes flowed about him. He strode up the steps to a table positioned at the center of the dais at the chamber's front. A halo of white hair floated about his head, flowing out behind. He walked confidently across the podium, stopped behind the table, and scanned the faces of the assembly, as if counting them, fixing one or two with his pale stare before moving on. Someone toward the back of the room coughed. Men Darnak glanced in that direction, narrowed his eyes, then looked back toward the passageway. He was still an imposing figure, thought Sandon. He might be old, but the strength was still there, the presence; it made no sense for him to be talking about retirement yet. Still, it was sometimes hard to fathom the way the Principal's mind worked, and well beyond Sandon's place to question it.

Men Darnak waited, watching. Then, at last, he nodded briefly to one of the functionaries by the entrance and the man made a signal down the corridor. A brief moment later, and one by one, Men Darnak's children filed into the room. They each bore the pallid complexion and high cheekbones characteristic of the Men Darnak line. Leading the group was Roge, the eldest boy. He walked purposefully into the room, stopped to adjust his dark blue tunic, paused, caught Karryl Ky Menin's eye and gave a brief nod. Then he moved to the front of the crowd and stood, his arms crossed over his chest, as he faced the dais. Guildmaster Ky Menin had given no sign recognizing the acknowledgement. Interesting. Sandon glanced down briefly at his own suit, making sure there was nothing out of place.

Next came Karin, the daughter, her honey-brown hair bound in an elaborate knot at the back of her head. She walked self-confidently into the chamber and moved to take up position beside her husband, the portly Yosset Clier. She stood a good head taller than her husband, and wore an intricately carved *ajura* wood wedding bracelet on her wrist, matching the one on Clier's own. She barely glanced at her husband, and took up position half a step forward, her imperious gaze fixed on her father. Sandon cursed silently. She had partially obscured his view of the fat little, Guildsman--he didn't want to draw attention to himself by moving now. The children themselves were good indicators, but he needed to monitor the reactions of those within the Guilds themselves. With a grimace, he turned his attention to the last arrival.

The youngest child, Tarlain, brought up the rear. He was shorter than his brother and sister, and lacked the evident self-assurance that his siblings exuded. The younger son wore a dark blue tunic, similar to his brother's. He stopped at the entrance and frowned, as if wondering what to do, glanced across at the table where his father stood, then moved fully into the room as if sight of the Principal standing there had prompted him to action. He found his spot, stood and then looked around the room. Sandon got the vague impression that Tarlain was searching, as if by doing so he might see an exit he had previously missed. Leannis Men Darnak watched the boy impatiently, waiting for him to settle, vague displeasure evident on his face. Finally resigned to where he was, Tarlain stopped fidgeting and clasped his hands before him. Men Darnak watched him for a moment longer, then nodded and faced the room.

The Principal held the moment, and then drew himself to full height and spoke. "Thank you all for coming on such short notice, but I thought we had best deal with this while communications were all still in order, before the storms were upon us again. There are some of you who will want to convey the news of this afternoon's meeting as soon as possible."

Men Darnak's words and manner showed no sign of infirmity, nor the failing strength that came with age.

"I urge you all to use your discretion. You will be aware," he continued, "that not all Guild representatives are here with us. There is a reason for that. The announcement I am about to make will have far-reaching implications for the Guilds and for Aldaban as a whole. I wish the news to be handled delicately and in a manner befitting those closest to the Principate. The choice of those here should therefore be clear." He paused to let the words sink in, scanning the faces, pausing meaningfully once or twice as his gaze came to rest on specific people. Sandon watched, noting the reactions. The crowd waited calmly, barely a shuffle of movement apparent.

Seemingly satisfied, Men Darnak continued. "There comes a time within all proper order that those in authority must make way for those who come after them. History governs the way we proceed. Life is the greatest teacher and there will always come the time for the old to make way for those who need greater lessons than we can give them ourselves. For some time, I have been guiding my sons and my daughter in the ways of the Principate, passing on what knowledge I could, but there is only so much that can be taught. One day soon, my son Roge will take over as Principal. In support, there will be his sister Karin, and his brother Tarlain. As the time for Roge's accession approaches, it is fitting that all three take a more active role in the Principate's functions. To that end, I intend to step down from active involvement in the affairs of the Principate."

Murmurs rippled across the vast hall. Men Darnak held up a hand to still them. Surely, the crowd must have guessed .

"Of course," Men Darnak continued, "I will still be here to guide and encourage, but from this point on, I expect all of you to treat Roge with complete respect and to grant him the authority that you have shown in your day to day dealings with me. Believe me, I will be watching." He glanced across at Sandon, held the look for a moment, and then turned his gaze to the rest of the crowd. "For the time being, I will remain Principal, but in effect, it will be Principal in title only. This will be necessary until we have spread the news of the transition in a fitting fashion."

Sandon noted the smug glance Karin shot her brother. The younger son, Tarlain seemed lost in thought, barely a part of the proceedings. Toward the back of the crowd, Guildmaster Karnav Din Baltir shifted nervously. He was watching the younger Men Darnak boy. What was troubling him? Din Baltir and Tarlain Men Darnak had already been dealing with each other for some time. What exactly did Din Baltir know that was making him nervous?

Sandon's speculations were cut short. The chandeliers above rattled slightly, the merest tinkling. Others had

noticed it too and were moving away from the room's center. Men Darnak stood firmly in his position behind the large table, the only sign that he too had noticed the warning, a movement of his hand to the table's edge. Everything went still. Sandon immediately stepped backward, seeking something solid.

He had barely reached the wall when the second vibration came, stronger this time. All around the hall, people threw out their hands for support as the floor beneath them became suddenly unstable. The chandeliers bounced on their mountings, the cut glass ringing chimes across the hall. A single drop shook free, tumbled to the stone floor and shattered in a myriad of crystal shards.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, it was past. The hall was silent except for the tinkling coming from the chandeliers as they gradually settled. No one moved. Nervously they scanned the ceiling and walls, waiting. Ten seconds. Twenty. The chandeliers stilled.

A collective sigh ran around the hall and one by one, people moved away from the walls. There was slight, nervous laughter and a relieved murmur. It had only been a small one this time. Sandon looked up toward the dais. Men Darnak stood there, not even having bothered to seek anything more solid than the table. He watched the room as all around people smoothed their clothing and moved sheepishly back to their positions. Sandon smiled to himself. Even in a potential crisis, the old man stood strong.

Someone behind Sandon muttered to a companion. "So early in the season. It doesn't bode well, does it?"

Sandon missed the reply; Men Darnak's firm voice rose above them all.

"Now," he said, drawing everyone's attention, "that that's over, I believe some celebration is in order."

More nervous laughter sprinkled the room.

The Principal motioned to someone out of view and moments later, uniformed functionaries filed in bearing trays full of glasses.

#

Sandon circulated casually, catching snippets of conversation here and there. A smile here, a nod there, a carefully worded phrase of greeting, all eased his passage around the great hall as he kept his eyes and ears open. He noticed Men Darnak watching him once. The Principal gave him the barest of nods and then turned to converse with someone obscured behind him. The old man didn't miss a thing.

Knots of well wishers clustered around the three Men Darnak offspring. Sandon skirted the periphery of these groups. He was more interested in the interactions, the snippets of information that passed between individuals in smaller clusters on the fringes: the furtive glance; the hand on the shoulder to draw someone out of earshot; the serious expression and the frown. He was alert to them all.

He snagged a drink and wandered slowly, looking for opportunities. An animated conversation off to one side drew his attention now. The younger Men Darnak boy appeared to be in heated discussion with Karnav Din Baltir. Sandon edged closer to hear what they were saying.

"I don't care about that," said Tarlain. "Can't you see we have a duty?"

The Guildmaster sighed. "You are always so impatient, Tarlain. Why can't you just bide your time?"

"You know damned well why not. Once Roge has his hands firmly on the reins, once he's entrenched, there's not a damned thing I can do, that *we* can do."

"And I keep telling you," the Guildmaster replied in hushed tones. "Now is not the time to act. Wait until everything's settled. There'll be time enough to test the lie of the land then. You'll achieve nothing by undertaking anything if you're only half prepared."

"And what about the Kallathik meantime?" Tarlain was clearly becoming frustrated. "Don't you think we have a duty to them as well?"

Din Baltir raised a hand to Tarlain's shoulder and spoke even more quietly, as if urging Tarlain to follow his mood. "Quietly, Tarlain. Not here. The Kallathik have waited this long. A few more seasons won't hurt. I know it's frustrating, but if you can't keep this to yourself, you're inviting disaster."

The Kallathik? Again?

Tarlain was still speaking. His voice had raised a notch. "No! It's the common disease, just sitting back and letting things happen. I'm sick of it, always going around in circles. Lots of talk and then nothing happens. You may be happy just to let things happen of their own accord, but I'm not prepared to wait any longer."

Tarlain spun on his heel and stalked off. Karnav Din Baltir watched him go, the hand that had rested on the boy's shoulder closing slowly and moving to tug at his lower lip.

Such an impassioned speech from the boy had surprised Sandon, particularly in such a public setting. He knew Tarlain was an idealist, a little impulsive, but he would have thought him cleverer than to give vent to such words in a large public gathering. He sipped at his drink thoughtfully as he watched Din Baltir. How exactly could the succession and the Kallathik be related? Din Baltir caught his eye, and Sandon raised his glass, giving him a brief smile. Din Baltir nodded and turned away. It didn't hurt to let the Guildmaster know.

Sure that the Guildmaster's attention was now elsewhere, Sandon crossed to where Men Darnak stood in a knot of higher Guild functionaries. He took his time getting there, stopping once or twice to charm a few of the crowd and pass a few words. Finally, he stepped discreetly behind and to one side of the Principal, cleared his throat and spoke in a low voice.

"Principal, we probably need to have a word."

The Principal looked back over his shoulder, narrowed his eyes briefly then gave a short nod. "If you'll excuse me, gentleman," he said. "There's a small matter I must attend to." He stepped back from the group and turned to face Sandon, drawing him to one side.

"Can this not wait, Yl Aris?" the Principal said with just a hint of annoyance. "Right now is not the best time."

"I believe it might be important, Principal," said Sandon.

"And so is this, Sandon."

"Yes, I know, Principal, but I really do think you need to hear this one."

"All right then. My chambers. But give it a few minutes, will you?"

Sandon nodded and moved discretely away to hover near one of the side walls.

Men Darnak's height gave him an easy advantage in a crowd such as this and after the few minutes had passed, where the Principal moved effortlessly through the crowd, bestowing a word here or there, lifting a hand to touch an arm or a shoulder, he glanced over the intervening heads and gave the slightest toss of his chin. The barest of nods from Sandon, and the Principal turned, seeking out Witness Kovaar, motioning for the priest to attend.

The Principal had drawn closer to the Church in the days since his wife's death, and it seemed to have given him some sort of solace. The priest had recently become a constant figure in the Principal's sphere. Sandon was prepared to tolerate the man, but he wasn't comfortable with it. On this particular occasion, he would have preferred to talk to the old man in private. He clamped his jaw shut and, suppressing a sigh, followed Men Darnak as he swept from the hall. The Principal strode down the side passage without so much as a backward glance. He paused impatiently at the double *ajura* wood doors waiting for them to catch up, then ushered them both inside.

Four

Men Darnak's chambers were functional and sparsely adorned. A wide desk scattered with papers and files dominated the room. A screen sat at one end of the desk. The only concession to taste was the row of portraits depicting Men Darnak's predecessors hanging along one wall. Sandon knew these had another purpose, to subtly reinforce Men Darnak's authority, the power of history and succession. Everywhere else, the stone walls remained bare in defiance of convention. Behind a door to one side lay the Principal's private sleeping chambers and on the other, his library. Since the groundcar accident more than ten years ago that had robbed him of his wife, Men Darnak had existed almost like a hermit, spending most of his time in these chambers, paying scant attention to anything other than the smooth functioning of the Guilds and the progress of his children. The Principal was strong; his control of the Guilds, the smooth operations of the Principate, all attested to that, but recently he'd been showing signs of things that troubled Sandon.

Men Darnak moved to a position behind the desk, and Witness Kovaar moved to stand at one end, his hands folded before him. Kovaar wore dark blue unadorned robes that concealed most of his frame. The priest was gaunt beneath the obscuring cloth and his high cheekbones and hollow cheeks gave him a slightly sinister appearance. On the few occasions Sandon had bothered to listen to the man speak, his voice had been high and reedy, gaunt like his appearance. For some reason, Kovaar seemed to want to keep silent in Sandon's presence, and Sandon hesitated to think of the conversations the priest probably held with Men Darnak in the many hours when Sandon wasn't actually around. The superstitious nonsense fostered by the Church helped to keep the general population in their place, but it had no proper role in the Principal's chambers. Sandon looked straight at Kovaar, making it clear that his presence wasn't welcome, but Kovaar returned his look without expression.

Sandon pressed his lips together. The Principal, seemingly unaware of the brief, silent interchange, motioned Sandon to shut the doors behind him.

"So, Yl Aris. What is important enough to warrant dragging us away from the celebrations?"

"It's Tarlain, Principal."

Men Darnak sighed. "And what has my dear son done now?"

"It's not what he's done, but what I think he's about to do. I just witnessed a fairly heated discussion with Karnav Din Baltir...."

"And?"

"I didn't catch all of it, but he was talking about 'acting' before Roge had cemented his power. That can't be a good thing."

"Acting? And what has Tarlain got to act upon?" Men Darnak shot a glance at Witness Kovaar then fingered his beard thoughtfully. "Was there anything else?"

"From what I could gather, it involved the Kallathik somehow." Sandon waited patiently while Men Darnak sat, then shuffled through the top drawer on his desk. He was used to these apparently unrelated activities from the Principal when the man was thinking. He knew better than to interrupt the old man's knife-edge flow of thought.

"And what exactly might that be I wonder, hmm?" said Men Darnak without lifting his gaze. "Well, let us find out." He turned to Witness Kovaar. "Fetch Tarlain would you? You wait here Yl Aris."

"But, Principal, wait," said Sandon. "Don't you think it would be better if we found out what--?"

Men Darnak cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Go," he said to Kovaar who stood hesitating by the door.

Men Darnak called up something on his screen and started scanning while Witness Kovaar disappeared to find the Principal's youngest child. Sandon was left standing, staring across at Men Darnak's snowy mane. The Principal made no suggestion that he should sit, despite the three chairs arrayed in front of the broad desk. For the moment, Sandon might well have simply not existed. He sighed.

"If I might suggest, Principal--"

"You will suggest nothing, Yl Aris!" Men Darnak snapped.

Sandon bit his lip and clasped his hands behind him, knowing better than to push the point when the Principal was in a mood such as this. There had been more and more of these moods of late, and he had no desire to feel the Principal's ire right now. He needed him thinking with his usual calm rationality. With the transition already announced, the entire political dynamic was too finely balanced.

He didn't have long to wait. Kovaar reappeared a few minutes later with Tarlain in tow. The priest resumed his position by the desk's edge, folding his hands in front of him, and without further ceremony, Men Darnak spoke quietly without lifting his gaze.

"So, Tarlain, what's this I hear about the Kallathik?"

Tarlain shot Sandon the briefest accusatory glance. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Men Darnak slammed his palm down on the desk in front of him and stood. "The hell you don't." He drew himself to his full height and glared across the room at his youngest son. Tarlain glared right back.

"Just because you think you have eyes and ears everywhere, don't think you know everything," said Tarlain. "If you paid a little more attention to what was really going on in the world and less to your spies, you might

know a little more than you think you do."

A muscle worked at the side of Men Darnak's jaw. He spoke the next quietly. "What is this thing you're planning, Tarlain? I've worked too long putting everything in place to have you upset it all. We have an entire social order to run and maintain. There's no place for petty idealism. Everything we do depends on what happens here. On what happens right here. You might just be old enough to understand that. If you took the time to listen and consider, you'd know the truth of it. Yl Aris here understands the need, so don't question the work he does for me. Tell me what you're up to. What does this have to do with Roge and Din Baltir?"

Tarlain gave Sandon another accusatory look and strode across to stand right in front of the desk. "At least Guildmaster Din Baltir knows what's really going on in the world. You, Father, must be blind not to see the discomfort and suffering all around you. There are signs everywhere."

"Where? What discomfort and suffering? Haven't I given you a good life? The Atavists -- is that it? They choose their own lives. Or is it the Kallathik you're talking about? They've existed the same way for centuries. Long before the arrival of the First Families. They're little more than animals, Tarlain. Why do you want to suddenly take them on as your cause? Isn't there enough to keep you busy in Welfare?" He shook his head. "I would have thought more of Din Baltir. What's he been doing...filling your head with more of those stupid notions about what's good and right, no doubt?"

Tarlain placed both hands on the edge of the desk and leaned forward. "Say what you like, but this is nothing to do with Guildmaster Din Baltir. I know you can't see it, Father. I know how you think, what's important to you. And it's that which blinds you. You want to pass everything to Roge regardless of what's going on about you in the world. All Roge sees is his own power. And we know where he gets that from."

Men Darnak laughed. "And we know where you get your romantic ideals too. You're your mother's son, Tarlain. I'll give you that." He smiled at the boy and then the smile drifted away. "How can you even talk about acting against Roge? Haven't I done enough? I've done everything to ensure that you, that all of my children, have had everything. I spoke about a division of power, with Roge acting as Principal. There was place for you there. I've done enough for all of you, Tarlain. And now, now you choose to -- no, damn you. How dare you!"

Tarlain stood his ground. "I've said nothing about working against Roge. Nothing at all. All I want is to be free to act on what I think is right. We need change. If we don't change, things get worse and more suffer. It's a self-fulfilling spiral. These times are hard, Father, and they're going to get harder. And the only sort of reform Roge is likely to become involved in is to improve his own position -- no one else's. You have to be able to see that. Yet you still expect me to sit back and turn a blind eye. I can't do that."

Sandon watched the young man with renewed respect. He had always picked him as the softest of the three. Before today, he would never have expected the boy to face up to his father like this. The others, perhaps. Especially Karin. Men Darnak, however, was not accustomed to having people stand up to him.

"You will sit back and do precisely that -- nothing! Do you hear me, Tarlain? Tell him, Kovaar. Tell this foolish young man the way of the world." He strode to the other end of the desk and stood there with set jaw, glaring at Tarlain. Sandon frowned. There was something wrong here. The old man never reacted like this. There were the flashes of fury, but normally they were swiftly swept aside by the Principal's normal calm.

Witness Kovaar cleared his throat. "The Prophet dictates that there is an order to all things. Each person has their place and their role in life. It is everyone's duty to fulfill his or her given role. To work against that is to work against the natural order as written in the *Words of the Prophet*."

Tarlain rounded on the Principal. "Is that it? Blind acceptance? You only use this stuff to bolster your

position. Nothing more. You can't really believe this nonsense, Father, this meaningless prattling." He waved his hand dismissively in Witness Kovaar's direction "I expected more of you."

"Be careful what you say, Tarlain," said Men Darnak, his voice gone flat, his hand bunching into a fist.

"No, Father! I'm sick of being careful about what I say and what I do. This time you're going to listen to me."

"No, Tarlain!" Men Darnak thundered. "*You* will listen to *me*!" Witness Kovaar looked down at his hands, clearly uncomfortable.

The Principal lowered his voice almost to a whisper. "You will return to the celebrations and you will forget all this nonsense. Despite what you may think, this is *not* the time for change. There is enough at stake with Roge's position. He needs guidance and support. I'm aware of that. I don't need you to tell me. I'm fully aware of what each of you need. By the Prophet, Tarlain, haven't I raised you? Now, I'll tell you exactly what you are going to do. You will take up your indenture with House Din Baltir and do as I say. That will be an end to it."

Tarlain shook his head, a hard set to his jaw.

Men Darnak narrowed his eyes. "I'm warning you, Tarlain. Heed my words. There is too much at stake here."

"Are you threatening me, Father? Threatening me with what? What could you possibly do?" Tarlain's words were calmly rational. "No, I don't think so. I intend to do what I have to, regardless of what you say."

They stared at each other.

"Then you can go, dammit!" shouted Men Darnak. "I will not have you upsetting the transition." He held his hands clutched tightly in front of him. Then he seemed to suddenly regain his composure. "Just get out," he said quietly. "Go, Tarlain. Just go, before I say something I'll regret."

"Principal, don't you think we should --?" Sandon said.

Men Darnak cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Enough, Yl Aris!"

"But Principal..." said Witness Kovaar.

Men Darnak whirled on him. "No, Priest!" He turned back to face his son.

Tarlain stood where he was, simply glaring back at his father.

Men Darnak stared back in disbelief. "And still you would defy me, boy. Then you really can go, damn you. Leave! I forbid you to have anything to do with the duties of the Principate. You can take up your tenure with House Din Baltir and the Guild of Welfare, if the Guildmaster will still have you. If you want to continue following your stupid ideals, then you can do so in Welfare, but you will have no dealings with the Principate. None!"

Their gazes locked for what seemed an eternity, and then Tarlain turned on his heel and strode from the chamber, slamming the door behind him. Men Darnak gave a wordless growl from deep within his chest.

Witness Kovaar cleared his throat again. "Principal, do you think that's wise? Would it not be better to have the full support of Welfare for Roge's transition? Tarlain would -- "

"Tarlain would what? And you as well? Isn't it sufficient that my youngest son would attempt to counsel me?" hissed Men Darnak. "Enough, Priest." He moved back behind the desk, and sat heavily. "Fetch Din Baltir, Sandon. I have to be sure that this isn't coming from him. Right now I need to be assured of his support. With Storm Season upon us, we're going to need everything we can get from Welfare."

Sandon quickly turned to do as he was told. It would do no good to keep Men Darnak waiting just now. As usual, despite the emotion, the old man seemed to understand exactly what was needed. As he slipped out the door, he saw Kovaar bending over, talking quietly. He pulled the door closed behind him, narrowing his eyes at the thought of the priest's interference. Whatever Witness Kovaar was saying, it could do absolutely nothing to help the situation. Nothing.

He wasted no time making his way into the hall where the crowd still swirled, glasses clutched in their hands as they were topped up by an endless supply of functionaries who appeared as soon as the contents of a single glass started to diminish. He paused for a moment in the doorway, attempting to regain his composure, looking for some sign of Tarlain, but the boy was nowhere to be seen. He quickly spotted Din Baltir standing alone, looking thoughtfully at his glass. Sandon cut through the crowd and stepped in front of the Guildmaster, smiled, tilted his head and reached up to place a hand on the man's upper arm.

"A quiet word, Guildmaster Din Baltir. Are you enjoying the celebrations?"

A frown flickered across the man's face. "Why yes, Yl Aris. Thank you."

"Ahh, I'm glad. Actually, if you're not too busy, the Principal would like to spend a few moments with you in private."

Karnav Din Baltir's frown deepened. He swallowed and looked nervously about. "You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure, Guildmaster. If you'd follow me, please."

Din Baltir cleared his throat, grimaced and placed his glass on a passing tray. "All right, if I must," he said. Sandon led the way through the crowd.

Men Darnak barely looked up as they entered. He gestured for Din Baltir to take one of the three chairs arrayed in front of his desk and waited until the Guildmaster had settled comfortably.

"Guildmaster Din Baltir. What can you tell me about this proposed action against Roge?"

Din Baltir paled. "Why, Principal. What proposed action?"

"I have just spoken with Tarlain."

"B-but Tarlain said nothing about acting against Roge. I don't see how -- "

"I have just talked to the boy myself, Din Baltir. Would you deny it?"

"Principal, you know your son. The young man's an idealist. Not a bad thing in one so young. Especially with the work that we do in Welfare. It's an important attribute. But consider I would not take the things he says too seriously."

"And what would you suggest I do?"

"Why, these things pass with time. He'll soon learn of the realities of the world. Get him busy with the Guild,

with the Principate and he'll have other things to worry about than any concern about Roge and what he's doing."

"So you admit it!" There was a gleam of victory in Men Darnak's eyes.

"I admit nothing, Principal. I admit nothing more than idle talk. I have children of my own. The boy's your son. You should know his nature."

Men Darnak leaned forward. "And now you presume to tell me what I should and shouldn't know about my children."

Din Baltir glanced nervously around the room, seeking some sort of support, but finding none. He finally looked back at Men Darnak.

The Principal fixed him with his steely gaze. "Well, what if I told you that Tarlain has no further function within the Principate? How would you like that?" He sat back looking as if he'd just won some major point. "Does that surprise you, Din Baltir? I would think that Welfare might want to reconsider its position regarding Tarlain Men Darnak."

Din Baltir's shoulders slumped. He gave Witness Kovaar a pleading look.

"Principal..." said Kovaar.

"What!"

"What the Guildmaster says is reasonable. The boy is young. It may be not a bad thing that one of such idealism is associated with Welfare."

"So that he can stay around, waiting to seize the opportunity to work against everything I have set in place? Tradition guarantees Roge his place. I will not have Tarlain attempting to undermine that. Ignoring the traditions so blatantly would do nothing to ease the change."

"But, Principal -- "

"What is it, priest? Again? Or perhaps there's collusion between the Church and the Atavists. Or might it be the Kallathik themselves? What exactly is it, Witness Kovaar? Everything's perfectly all right as long as a Men Darnak is in power -- is that it?"

Sandon frowned. What was the Principal getting at?

"Principal, I -- "

"Enough," snapped Men Darnak. He turned back to address the Guildmaster. "I don't know what this has to do with the Kallathik, but you would be wise to consider your position carefully, Karnav Din Baltir."

The Guildmaster's mouth was set in a thin line. "It appears that I must, Principal," he said quietly.

"That's all, Guildmaster," said Men Darnak. Din Baltir rose, looked quickly at Kovaar, glanced over to where Sandon stood, and then dropped his gaze. He nodded once and then left, closing the door quietly behind him.

Men Darnak rubbed his hands together. "Now that that's done with, we can return to the celebrations," he said.

Sandon cleared his throat. "Principal," he said. "I urge you to reconsider. The implications of -- "

Men Darnak turned on him slowly, fixing him with an icy blue stare. His eyes were full of cold glinting fire. "You would question me too, Yl Aris? What is this? Does every single person in this place think I'm incapable of making decisions any more?"

"I just believe -- "

"You believe what?"

Sandon swallowed before speaking. "Principal, I think you might want to reconsider."

"No, damn you," said Men Darnak, slamming his hand on the desk. "I've had enough. I will not be questioned by you, either. What, are you in league with the boy too? Is that it?"

"Principal, I -- "

"That's it, isn't it? You. You and the boy are plotting together. Then dammit, Yl Aris, you can go as well. Go with him, if you want. Go and be with the boy. That's it. I don't want to see you again." He sliced his hand through the air in emphasis. "Finished."

"But, Principal -- "

Men Darnak had already stood, crossed the room and flung the door wide. He was gone, down the passageway back to the Hall before Sandon could utter another word. His mouth hanging stupidly open, Sandon stared at the open doorway.

Five

Tarlain looked around his simple room running an array of choices through his head. The anger was gone now. It had faded, changed, transforming into something more like concern. As he performed the mental inventory of his possessions, details and memories washed up to fill his thoughts. There were memories here aplenty: the souvenirs gathered on various trips; his books; a painting of the twin suns he'd done during his artistic phase. He remembered his father leaning over his shoulder, offering advice as he put the finishing touches on the work. A deep sigh came unbidden from within. None of it mattered any more. None of it.

He'd noticed a change in the old man over the past few months. He had become more distant, more removed, locked up in his own thoughts and political machinations seemingly without any more time for his children. Over the years Leannis Men Darnak had been a caring, gentle father, always eager to take time from the affairs of the Principate to wile away the time with them, guiding, listening to their dreams, telling them stories. Tarlain supposed there really was a time when you grew beyond that, but the distance he felt now was different, strange. It was almost as if something had stepped between them, blocking the man he knew from clear sight, obscuring the light and turning the memory into something darker. There was another thing that worried him; his father had always been volatile, but this was different, something not quite rational, almost unbalanced.

Tarlain sighed again. He wasn't sure where he would go, but go he must. If he was to achieve anything, he had to get out from under the watchful gaze of both Roge and his father's network of informants. Particularly that

Sandon Yl Aris. The man was everywhere, listening, observing, smiling, taking note. He had no doubt it was Yl Aris who had reported his discussion with Din Baltir. Tarlain hadn't even noticed the man's presence. He really should have known better than to speak openly at a public gathering, but the damage was done now and there was certainly no taking it back.

Wherever he wound up, he knew he could maintain his contact with Karnav Din Baltir. The Guildmaster was sympathetic to many of the ideas for change that Tarlain had discussed with him long into the night. Welfare was the ideal place to promote that change, but it was going to be much harder now with Roge having been ceded the reins of power. It only remained to work out how much of that power was really his. His elder brother had always cared for little but himself. As eldest son, as successor, he had been molded to expect nothing less than what he, Roge Men Darnak, wanted, whether it was the hunting trips, or the large rowdy parties he was so fond of. Let alone the affairs of the Principate.

Tarlain grimaced. In the past, his father at least would listen to reason. His years of controlling the Guilds, of experiencing what a wrong choice could mean, had made him more open -- or had done until recently. Roge, on the other hand, had none of the same sense born of experience; he was headstrong and capricious, and the worst thing was, his father would not hear a word against him.

A chime at his door brought Tarlain back to the moment. He glanced in a nearby mirror making sure his features betrayed nothing of the thoughts and emotions working inside his head. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath to further compose himself before speaking.

"Enter," he said wondering who might have taken the trouble to follow him to his chambers. If it was that Yl Aris

His sister slid in the door and closed it behind her. "Tarlain, what happened? I just heard."

He waved a hand. "Nothing. It doesn't matter."

"But Yosset said that father had just -- "

"What? Thrown me out? Beaten me with a stick? Damned me for all time? What?" Tarlain spat the words. He had no love for Karin's husband, and that the news had come to her via his lips made matters no better.

Karin looked at him with a frown. "There's no real need for that, Tarlain. What actually happened? I came here because I wanted to hear it from you."

He returned her look warily. As the middle child, Karin had always played both sides of their relationships to her advantage. She always seemed to know which one of the other two children to side with. Reluctantly deciding that he could trust her for now, he sat with a sigh and told her what had happened.

"But that's ridiculous," she said, frowning again. "Is it true? Did you really say those things? And who told him anyway?"

"Not that it matters, but most likely it was Yl Aris. You can't say anything when he's in the same room without it getting back to Father. You know that. And as to whether I said them...it was just talk, wasn't it?" He shrugged. "As for acting against Roge, well that's just stupid, isn't it? As if I'd even consider it."

"Oh, Tarlain. Can't you see what you've done?"

"No. What have I done other than simply have a conversation with someone? You tell me, Karin."

"Now. Right now," she said, exasperation in her tone. "Together, you, me and Roge, we could have had everything we wanted. You know what happens in Storm Season. With everything falling apart, we could have picked up the pieces and made things work how we wanted them to. We could put everything back together to work for us. For us, Tarlain. Don't you see what that means? We've been waiting too long for this, and working together...each one of us in the major Guilds..." She shook her head. "You've just made everything so much harder. You have to talk to him. You have to talk to Father and make it right again. Roge needs us. We need each other."

Tarlain looked up at her, barely able to conceal the slight narrowing of his eyes that would betray how he felt. Karin was only worried about her own position within the Principate. He should have expected little else. Fine. Let her believe he was willing to go along with whatever she suggested. He'd pretended to be easily led by her more than once in the past. And of course, she'd said absolutely nothing about how their father had encouraged them, helped to position them. It was just like Karin not to see or acknowledge his gentle guidance.

He fought to keep his voice even. "But you've seen how he is lately. What am I supposed to say? He virtually threw me out. It's not that easy."

She crossed and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You've always had a special place in his affection. I'm sure you can get past this. We really need you to talk to him, Tarlain. Will you do that for me?" She gave his shoulder a slight squeeze.

Tarlain slipped from beneath her touch and stood, crossing the room to look out the window. "I don't know. It's really not that easy."

"Of course it is," she said, walking over to stand behind him. "With news of the announcement starting to spread, he won't be going very far. He'll be locked away somewhere, avoiding the fuss. Go and see him in his chambers. Talk to him. Try and get him alone. He'll talk to you."

"I'm not sure that he will." Tarlain looked out over the squat block buildings stretching down the hill from the Principal's residence. The even structures broken into tidy lines stepped down the slope, the pattern only broken by the larger, blockier shape of the nearby Church of the Prophet. Perhaps he should do what Karin suggested after all. It couldn't hurt. They had both spoken in anger. Everyone had been tense leading up to the announcement, and afterward the hangover of that tension had remained, coloring the way they all reacted. Now that the gathering was over, that everything had calmed down a little, his father might actually be more willing to listen.

Karin still stood behind him, waiting for a response. "I'll see what I can do," he said without turning around. She patted him on the shoulder and gave a brief sound of approval. She hovered there behind him for a moment more, then, when it was clear he wasn't going to say anything else, said goodbye and slipped from the room. He stood staring out of the window, considering for several minutes after she had left.

#

Tarlain crossed the vast paved courtyard, hurrying toward the steps. Most of the groundcars had long since departed, carrying their passengers, and their messages back to the various Guilds. The square was unusually still. One or two tourists from far-off towns wandered past, gawping at the buildings, but most leisure travel had already been curtailed. Storm Season was no time to be far from home. The Principal's announcement had

effectively cleared the center of Yarik, sweeping away everything that normally marked the flurry of preparation that came as precursor to the Minor Twin's true ascendance. With the lesser sun's deep orange light painting everything with a somber russet wash, the square felt eerie, like some painting rather than the center of a thriving city. Tarlain was filled with the sense of its unreality.

He headed straight for the Principal's chambers, nearly colliding with a functionary as he turned a corner into the long corridor. The man barely acknowledged Tarlain's apology and hurried off about his business. That was a good sign. Apparently, there had been no general announcement about his status yet. Perhaps Karin was right and there really was time. He took a deep breath, flung the large door wide and stepped into his father's offices.

Sitting behind the broad desk was the person he least expected to see, especially not engaged in peering at his father's screen. Witness Kovaar looked up at the unexpected entry, Tarlain's own surprise reflected on his gaunt features.

"Tarlain, what are you doing here?" He quickly shut down the display, trying to make the action as unobtrusive as possible, and then folded his hands in front of him. "Can I help you?"

"Where's Father?"

"He's in consultation with Roge. They've asked not to be disturbed," said the priest.

"Well, where are they? I need to talk to him."

"The Principal has made his wishes quite plain. If you would like me to relay a message to him..."

"No. I don't want you to relay a message to him. I want to see him. Now where is he?"

Kovaar stared at him impassively across the table, his features unreadable.

"Fine. If you won't tell me..." Tarlain crossed the room heading for his father's private library and threw open the door. The room was dark. Tarlain strode across to the other side heading for the door where the sleeping quarters lay, noting with annoyance the slightest hint of a smirk on the priest's face. His father's private chambers were empty too.

"Dammit, Priest. Where have they gone?" He walked quickly back to the desk.

Kovaar slowly shook his head. "Principal Men Darnak made his intentions quite clear. They are currently involved in the business of the Principate. As your father told you, you have no further interest in those matters."

Tarlain could barely believe what he was hearing. With difficulty, he restrained his urge to step around the edge of the broad table and grab a fistful of Witness Kovaar's robes. By what right...? He fought for calm. Taking it out on the priest wasn't going to achieve anything.

"Would you please convey a message to my father? I need to speak to him. I will wait here in his chambers until he's ready to see me and his business with Roge is done." Kovaar sat where he was, waiting. "Now!"

Taking his time, Kovaar got to his feet. He stared blankly at Tarlain for a moment or two, and then walked unhurriedly out the door, closing it quietly behind him. It was a full half hour before he returned and by then, Tarlain had barely managed to regain some of his composure.

"I gave him the message as you asked," said Witness Kovaar.

"And?"

Kovaar held his hands outstretched with a shrug, and then proceeded to take up his place behind the desk. He said nothing further.

Tarlain nodded and settled back in the chair to wait. He used the time to look at the man who had become his father's constant shadow over the past few Seasons. The Church of the Prophet was an essential part of all of their daily lives, but with Leannis Men Darnak, it had always been more form rather than substance, and so it was with many of the more powerful Guildsmen. But now, what of the priest? What was it that drew a man to a life such as that? Surely, it had to be more than mere religious conviction, particularly with a man like Kovaar. There was something about him that hinted at things other than religious belief, things that Tarlain wasn't sure he liked. The priest returned Tarlain's gaze unflinchingly. The aesthetic look, the fine-boned hands and face, they all gave the impression of someone barely of the world, let alone in touch with it. The wait grew longer and longer and the silence stretched between them.

Finally, when Tarlain had almost given up hope, the door opened behind him. He sat where he was, not trusting himself yet to meet his father's face.

"So, Priest, what is this about Tarlain?" His father's voice.

Witness Kovaar gestured to the chair where Tarlain sat.

Principal Men Darnak grunted, then crossed to sit next to Kovaar behind the desk. He fussed with things on the desk's top for a moment or two, before finally lifting his gaze and meeting Tarlain's eye. He looked distracted. Finally, he frowned.

"Tarlain. What is it?"

It was as if their previous confrontation had never taken place. Tarlain didn't know where to start.

"Father, I..."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Father, can we not be alone? I'd prefer to have this discussion in private." He looked pointedly at Witness Kovaar.

Leannis Men Darnak glanced from his son's face to Witness Kovaar and back again. He paused, as if considering, and then, with a slight frown, he said, "No. He stays."

"But can't you just -- ?"

"Just what?"

Tarlain sighed. "All right. Fine, he stays. Seriously, Father, on the matter of our earlier disagreement, I know things got a little heated. I apologize. I would ask you to reconsider."

"Reconsider what, Tarlain? Tell me exactly what it is I should reconsider?" The Principal's tone was short, clipped.

"Everything. What you said about my role in the Principate. We both spoke in haste. Don't let what that Sandon Yl Aris said influence you, Father, I beg you. Together, Roge, Karin and I can make the Principate stronger, not weaker."

"Stronger? Just as you would have made it stronger by acting against Roge, I suppose." Men Darnak shook his head. "What I have decided, I have decided, Tarlain. This has nothing to do with Yl Aris. Nothing. Yl Aris has been relieved of his position."

Tarlain sat back in his chair, stunned. "But Sandon has worked for you for years. He's always been like a rock to you. What could he possibly -- ?"

Men Darnak waved his hand to cut off Tarlain's speculation. "Nothing that need concern you. What's done is done."

Tarlain looked from his father's face to Kovaar's and back again, but there was nothing to be gleaned from either of them.

"Fine," he said. "But I can still be useful in the Principate, Father. Surely, you must see that. We've been trained for this. All of us. You've always taken the care and trouble to teach us what's right, how to act. You've been a good teacher, Father. Don't throw that all away."

Men Darnak fixed him with a long hard stare. "Perhaps trained too well, Tarlain. I cannot risk your, your..." A frown flickered across his face, then disappeared. He shook his head and the frown was back again. "It's done, Tarlain. It is done. You should leave now." The last was filled with a depth of tiredness Tarlain had rarely heard in his father's voice.

"But -- "

"No."

Tarlain looked desperately at the priest, seeking support where ultimately he knew he'd find none, but blank disinterest met him in return. He looked back at his father, but the old man was no longer looking in his direction. He was staring down at the desk, his forehead cupped in one hand, gently rubbing his brow.

Tarlain pushed the chair back and stood. "So there's nothing I can say." Anger was starting to creep into his voice.

"Nothing. No, nothing. You disappoint me, Tarlain. That's all." There was no anger in return, only weariness.

Tarlain stood waiting for his father to lift his gaze and meet his eyes, but the old man remained sitting as he was. Closing his eyes, and taking a deep breath, Tarlain turned and stalked from the room. He had tried. There was nothing further to be done. Karin *would* be disappointed.

Outside the door, he stood and took stock. Roge. He had to see Roge, tell him of his decision. Despite the underlying tension between them, he could not just leave. Where was Roge likely to be? There was no point going back into the room and asking. That leave taking was done. He didn't know where Roge might be, but he could guess. The main business center of the Principate was the most likely choice. Knowing Roge, he would be quick to cement himself in the seat of power. Tarlain headed up the corridor in that direction.

Roge was exactly where Tarlain thought he would be. He looked up as Tarlain entered the central offices. Large desks, screens, a few low tables and couches filled the room. This was the nexus of the Principate's business affairs, and there, planted behind the central desk in the heart of the Principate buildings sat his

brother, looking already at home.

"Tarlain. I did not expect to see you."

Tarlain took a few moments, considering, his brother looking at him expectantly. "No, I don't suppose you did," he said finally.

Tarlain was torn. His father and Roge would have already talked about him, already made their judgments. He could have pleaded, asked Roge to intercede on his behalf. It was what Karin wanted, but it was unlikely that Roge could think far enough ahead to worry about that or even consider the implications. Karin had always been more of the thinker.

"Roge, I'm leaving."

His brother nodded. That was all. He simply nodded.

"Did you understand what I said?"

"Of course I did. What do you want me to say, Tarlain? You've made your choice. Father and I have already discussed what it means for us. We will do what we need to do to fill the gap."

Tarlain bit back his first reply. "Do you really think it was my choice? Do you really think this is what I want?"

Roge waved his hand dismissively. "You've shown it by your actions, little brother. What do you want me to say? Father told me exactly what you'd been planning. Do you think I'm just going to ignore that?"

"But I wasn't "

"Of course you'd say that."

Tarlain stepped forward and placed his hands flat on the desk, leaning across the surface and bringing his face closer. Roge leaned back in his chair, moving away, looking slightly uncomfortable.

"By the Prophet, Roge," said Tarlain. "What do you think I am? Will you stop and think for a minute? Listen, I'm worried about father, the way he's behaving. You must have noticed it too. Doesn't that matter to you?"

Roge avoided meeting his gaze. "Of course it matters. It matters because we need to be strong now. Father's time is done. He's had some good years. Now, it's time for him to step aside. We can't afford your naïve little ideals, Tarlain. There's too much to do." He looked up at Tarlain, then, the accusation clear in his face. "You should care about now. You should care about what we have to do. I can't afford to let you make any more trouble. You'll have to work things out for yourself. We will just have to make do without you. I always thought you weren't really good enough for the job anyway."

"Do you care about anything but your grand plans, Roge?"

"Of course I care." His brother stood. "I care about what matters for the order of things, for the Guilds. What do you want me to do for you? Just forget about all that?" He moved around behind the chair, placing one hand on its back, the chair's body serving as an extra wall in addition to the desk.

Tarlain looked at his brother, hope starting to fade. "Will you at least talk to Father?"

Roge shook his head slowly. "It's too late. Far too late. Why the hell should I?"

Tarlain looked at his brother for a long time, then narrowed his eyes. "All right. That's how you want it. I wish you luck, Roge. I wish you all the luck in the world."

"It won't be me who needs luck, little brother."

Tarlain shook his head, rubbed the back of his neck, then sighed. "Fine. Then I'll say goodbye." The words were spoken quietly.

Roge simply nodded and Tarlain turned, his steps filled with heaviness as he crossed to the door. Just before opening it, he turned back to look at Roge, but his brother was already seated back in the chair, keying commands into one of the screens. He glanced up briefly.

"Well, what do you want now?"

Tarlain slipped from the room and closed the door gently behind him.

Six

Sandon stood gazing across the parking area outside the Principate buildings. There was something wrong here -- something very wrong. Despite his protestations, Principal Men Darnak hadn't even been prepared to discuss the matter further. The realization hit him yet again and the bottom went out of his stomach. He'd just been removed from office. Men Darnak had just dismissed him. It wasn't possible. Everything he had worked for, all of his careful moves, gone in an instant. It just didn't make sense.

He'd spent his life devoted to supporting the old man, supporting his plans and his actions. Leannis Men Darnak was the only man that held their world together, gave them the stability that they needed. Everything that Sandon was, everything he did, was because of Men Darnak. The old man was the only person capable of holding the complex structure of the Guilds together. What was he going to do now? He needed the Principate. He needed the Principal. Men Darnak needed him. The old man had invested in him, made him what he was. Years of work, of support, of faithful duty. Years of careful counseling, of patient teaching. This simply couldn't be happening. He slapped his hand down on the roof of the groundcar and uttered a curse through gritted teeth.

Shaking his head, he slipped into the groundcar, not even sure which direction he should take. He had a few options: his country estate; one of the many hunting lodges scattered across the rich landscape surrounding Yarik's rocky plateau. He sat, not doing anything for some time, just staring out of the front window. Large stone blocks filled his view, solid, thick, meant to last. A blank stone wall. If they had a large enough quake though, even that expanse of solidity, that smooth surface, might end up as little more than a tumbled mass of broken stones. He'd seen it happen before. So much for permanence. Nothing in life was truly permanent, but there had been things in his world that Sandon Yl Aris had thought he could rely on.

He reached forward to punch in a destination, but then paused, his hand hovering over the controls. He drew back the hand slowly, reconsidering. Concern about his personal circumstance had clouded his perspective. He could see that now. There was something at work here that was clearly wrong.

Leannis Men Darnak had always been a reasonable man -- stern, unforgiving, but all his decisions had been informed with good sense, even wisdom. Sometimes they seemed crazy at the time, but the long view invariably told otherwise. Sandon frowned. He should have noticed it sooner and he could not understand why he hadn't. He spent his entire life watching, observing people, but to miss something as basic as this was wrong. Over the past few weeks, the Principal had been preoccupied, moody. Things that would have previously been trivial angered him. True, the approach of Storm Season was always a time of tension, but Men Darnak had lived through more Storm Seasons than Sandon himself. It could hardly be that. He had also been spending far more time with Witness Kovaar, listening to him more readily, actually seeking his advice on important Principate decisions, something he would not have even considered in the past. Men Darnak had always been careful to show appropriate respect for the Church of the Prophet, at least in public -- it was expected of a man in his position. The traditions handed down from the First Families, their religious foundations, were an essential part of Guild life. That was a given, but now, for some unknown reason, Men Darnak seemed to have taken that legacy and seemingly adopted it as his own set of beliefs.

Sandon tugged at his lower lip thoughtfully. There were things to discover here, things that remained unanswered. Whatever was happening in Principal Men Darnak's mind might just be something that was beyond the man's control. But for Sandon to discover what that something was, he had to be in a position to observe. He could do no such thing in his current circumstance. To go back, try and reason with the old man, would be courting disaster right now. He had to find some other way. Besides, he had a duty. Years, he had worked with the man. Years he had spent watching as Men Darnak grew older, as his children matured, as the Principal tried to fill the gap left by his wife's loss. Witness Kovaar was a mere newcomer.

This time, Sandon reached for the controls with set jaw. He knew what he had to do. He just had to work out how he was going to do it. The approaching Storm Season just wasn't going to make it any easier. He called up the menu and tapped on the symbol for his country residence. As the groundcar slid back out of the parking space, Sandon leaned back in his seat, resolved.

The groundcar made a slow turn and headed out of the Principate's grounds. As it drew out of the complex, he scanned the streets and buildings out of cautious habit. When the quakes started, it was normal practice to keep an eye out for unreported damage. The long flat lines of virtually featureless stone structures were resilient, but from time to time, the unreported crack, a shifting of the stone walls could present unwelcome hazards to the populace. Being alert to these was important. Better to deal with a problem early than let it get out of hand. He grimaced wryly at the irony of the thought.

Gradually, the groundcar skimmed out of the city center, shifting its ratio to cope with the gently increasing slope. As they grew further from the Principate, the buildings grew more squat, the construction less solid. Out on the fringes was where they'd sustain most damage as Storm Season heightened, and Sandon's scanning became less perfunctory.

The city felt strange. Hardly a soul traveled the long straight streets. Most would have already made their way out to country holdings, closer to the farms, closer to the source of their supplies. With transport an issue, it became easier to live nearer to the sources of primary production. A number of Yarik's residents even held down seasonal jobs, a pattern of work that grew increasingly common as the generations became more attuned to the seasonal variations. During Clear Season, they'd move into Yarik to work, returning to the countryside as Storm Season burgeoned, starting to work land that had lain fallow while they were gone. Not so Sandon. The workings of the Principate continued throughout all, Clear, Storm and the transitional half seasons between. He had his country estates, but generally, he paid them little mind, being more focused on Principate business; he had others employed to work the holdings for him.

A cluster of individuals caught his eye and he turned his head to watch them as the groundcar cruised past. Atavists. It was odd to see more than a pair together. One stood by his animal, holding the reins. The baskets strung over its back looked empty. The two others were engaged in an uncharacteristically animated

conversation, the third standing by, simply observing. They stood at a street corner, seemingly oblivious to everything else around them. Poor deluded fools. Let them be masters of their own unremarkable futures. He had much more important things to think about. The groundcar slid past and Sandon shifted his attention back to the road.

He was nearing Yarik's true outskirts now. Very soon, the few scattered buildings would give way to open ground, and then, following the main route out of the city, his groundcar would sweep a wide arc around the plateau's edge and commence the gentle descent to the valley floor below. Without the groundcars, the descent would have been far longer, riding down the broad roadway that snaked back and forth from Yarik's peak to the closer smallholdings clustering around its base. In a few weeks, he'd have that to look forward to too, just like everyone else. Back to animals and walking.

A sudden lurch rocked the car. Sandon grabbed for his seat as the vehicle slewed crazily to one side.

"Dammit, not now," he hissed. He stabbed at the controls while trying to steady himself with his other hand. It was too early for this. He cursed again as the vehicle continued its angled drift, tilting further to one side. A wall was approaching rapidly, and he stabbed at the controls again. No! It was far too early in the Season for this. Quickly he slapped at the kill pad, but he knew he was too late. The wall was rushing in on him fast. He closed his eyes and screwed up his face, waiting for the inevitable, his hands in a white-knuckled grip on the edges of the seat to either side. It seemed to take forever. He was wishing it would just happen, when a jarring blow and then...

There was dust in his mouth. He moved his jaw and ran his tongue over his teeth, tasting the grittiness. He seemed to be lying at an angle and it felt too dark. Cautiously he opened his eyes. Blank stone faced him. He swallowed, trying to get the taste of earth out of his mouth, trying to work the saliva to sweep away the dryness. He lifted one hand to rub at his face and as he did so, something creaked around him. It was not a good sound. He stopped the movement immediately. Trying not to shift too much further, he tentatively explored his situation.

He could feel his arms and his legs; that was good. His neck and head felt sore. It must have been the impact. He tried shifting his head to get a better view but all he saw was dented wall and crumpled roofing. The groundcar must have slammed into the wall sideways, tilting as it did so with enough force to crumple the roof and leave a deep gouge in the stone where it hit.

A voice was saying something. Sandon coughed, trying to clear some of the dust from his throat, and the groundcar creaked again. Slowly, slowly he put his arm down.

"I'm all right," he said. "I'm in here. Is there someone out there?"

"Are you injured?" The voice was reasonably close.

"No, I don't think so, but I don't like the way the groundcar's moving. I'm afraid it might shift."

"Do not move," said another voice. "We will try and help you."

"Well, be careful, dammit. I don't know how far the damage goes."

"Rest assured. We will take all care necessary." The first voice again.

Sandon felt the groundcar move beneath him. There was a loud creaking groan and pop as something shifted in the crumpled structure. "Careful!" he yelled.

The groundcar shifted again then slowly righted itself, dropping the last short distance with a shuddering crash. A hammer of pain beat through his head and he winced. Trying to ignore it, he pushed his shoulder against the door, trying to force it open.

"Can you help me here? The door seems to be stuck."

Something wrenched at the groundcar and the frame rocked but the door remained closed. Again, the groundcar rocked.

"It is against the wall. You will have to climb out the other side."

Stupid. Of course, he should have realized.

"Are you hurt? Can you manage, or do you require assistance?"

"Yes," he said, ignoring the throbbing in his head as he tried to clamber across the seat beside him. "I'm fine."

He tried opening the door, but something in the locking mechanism seemed to have seized as a result of the impact. Clamping his jaw tightly, and attempting to get leverage with his legs, Sandon forced his shoulder against the door and heaved, ignoring the throbbing that welled up anew inside his head. It was extending to his face now. His cheeks felt hot. They were aching too. A sharp pain was growing across his nose and one cheek.

Then suddenly the door sprang open and he was deposited half in and half out of the crumpled groundcar to the road. Right in front of his face stood a pair of dusty feet wearing hand-made sandals. Hands appeared and reached for his shoulders, another set from behind, and half lifted, half pushing, he extricated his legs and clambered to his feet. Gently, he ran his hand over the top of his head, gingerly prodding to feel for damage. There was a bruise there, but nothing major, or at least there didn't seem to be. He glanced at the groundcar, but it was clear it wasn't going anywhere soon. Then he looked up. Arrayed in a semi-circle stood three Atavists.

"Um, thank you," he said hesitantly. What did you say to Atavists?

"Are you hurt?" The one who spoke was peering at him with a concerned expression.

"Yes, I think so, but not badly. I think I've hit my head, but apart from that a few bruises and..." He looked again at the crumpled groundcar, uncomfortable meeting the gaze of his rescuers. "Word of the Prophet!" he spat. "Damn it. What am I going to do with this?"

His oath brought a hiss from one of the Atavists, and Sandon cursed himself for stupidity.

"I apologize, I didn't mean to..."

"We understand. You are confused. The Prophet has blessed you with good fortune. It could have been much worse." This one was older, his voice deep and full of authority. He stepped closer, reaching out with one hand. Sandon took a step backward, but the Atavist held up a reassuring hand. "We cannot leave you like this. You must come with us."

The third member of their group nodded solemnly. "Yes," he said. "The way is clear. My animal can carry you to where you need to go. We will accompany you."

"But I...no. Thank you all the same, but it's too far."

"Then you will come with us."

Sandon rubbed at his face, trying to get rid of some more of the dust as he thought, but his thoughts were a little confused. "Really. I'll find my way back to the Principate." That seemed like the best solution.

One of the two Atavists glanced at the older one. The look did not go unnoticed, despite the situation, and the fuzziness in his head. Then the older one spoke.

"No. We don't know if you are able to travel. Taking a blow to the head is unpredictable." He peered in closer. "The bruising and the cuts do not look good. It would be far better if you came with us. Far better. We have a healer among our group who can see to your injuries. Our healer will make sure you are well, and then we can be assured that you can continue your journey safely. This is our duty as written by the Prophet, and it would be wrong for us to let you go on your own." The other two solemnly nodded their agreement.

Sandon peered back at the Atavist, but the concern seemed genuine, as much as he could read on the man's face. He looked down at his hand. Yes, he was bleeding. He dabbed at his face. In truth, he did feel a little unsteady. Besides, what could he do back at the Principate? He no longer had the authority to requisition a new groundcar, or the authority to demand assistance to clear the current one. Better to do as they said, for now. He sighed and nodded slowly.

"You're right. Again, I thank you."

"There is nothing to thank us for. It is our duty. To be able to fulfill that is thanks enough."

As they walked toward the waiting padder, Sandon looked at his companions. Each wore an identical drab homespun robe. The leather sandals were all similar as well. The older man, clearly the authority in the group, wore his hood over his head, concealing most of his features. A full beard trailed from beneath his face, shot with gray and white. Virtually nothing distinguished the other two. They had their hoods thrown back and they wore their dark hair long. They walked with strong, straight backs. One of them turned, caught Sandon looking and nodded. His face remained impassive. It was as if the nod recognized Sandon's scrutiny and accepted it, nothing more. He handed Sandon a piece of cloth, and Sandon used it to dab at his face, and then hold it to his cheek.

What was it that motivated these people? What sort of life was it that they led? He'd never really paid them much mind before, except as the object of jokes, or something to scorn. The Atavists were simply always there, on the periphery. Their lifestyle was something that people generally would rather forget, particularly in Clear Season where the general population tried to keep the necessary deterioration to simplicity well away from their minds. The enforced Return brought about by the inconstancy of Storm Season was bad enough without dwelling on it. Why somebody would willingly wish to eschew the comforts that modern society brought escaped him. Technology could not be such of an anathema, surely? Perhaps he would have an opportunity to discover more wherever they were about to take him.

The Atavists helped him up on the back of the padder, and he sat there, washed in the animal smell, feeling slightly ridiculous as one of the younger two proceeded to lead the animal forward along a side street. They walked at a leisurely pace, as if simply out for a stroll. When crossing the next intersection, a pair of passers-by glanced over at the unusual procession and stopped dead in their tracks, staring open-mouthed. He knew their natural reaction would have been to simply look right through such a group, ignore them completely, but the sight of one of their own in the Atavist's midst must have caught them by surprise. Sandon smiled and nodded at them, suppressing with difficulty his urge to call to them for assistance. The germ of an idea was starting to take shape in the back of his head, and he wanted it to be fully formed before he did anything else. He faced front again, attempting to appear as if it were the most natural thing in the world, but inside he squirmed with embarrassment. After another two intersections, the feeling had faded, but the

Atavists' silence was starting to get to him.

"Um, where are you taking me?"

The older Atavist didn't even look up, speaking as he walked beside the padder. "There is a group of our people, our family, on the outskirts of Yarik. We are taking you there. The healer is also there and can tend to you then."

"A group? How many of you are there?"

"We have a traveling party there. I do not know the number. We are joining them after being away for some time. It is our intention to travel to Gorana."

Gorana? That was weeks away by foot. It could be reached in a day or two by groundcar, but walking? But the Atavists did that, didn't they?

The Atavist population slipped in and out of society, nearly unseen. They were just there, in ones and twos, never many more. Up until now, for Sandon, they had been little more than an ever-present nuisance, something to be scorned, not considered seriously. Nobody really paid them any attention. The thought caught him. The Atavists were almost invisible. And with that thought, Sandon's growing idea started to solidify.

They turned up another street, and another citizen passed them, barely glancing in their direction. Her gaze simply slid right over the group as if they didn't exist. She must not have noticed Sandon in their midst. He nodded quickly to himself. He would have done exactly the same thing, the same way he had in the groundcar, the same way he did every time he saw an Atavist.

"I really appreciate what you're doing," he said. "What do I call you?"

The older Atavist glanced up at him this time, a vague look of assessment on his face. "My name is Badrae."

"Badrae. Badrae what?"

"Simply Badrae. We do not seek titles and other ways to set us apart. We do not have family names as you do. We are one family. I am Badrae. This," he said, gesturing at the younger Atavist leading the padder, "is Melchor. And over there is Arnod."

"One family? You mean you are related?"

"We are all tied together by the *Words of the Prophet*."

Sandon thought about this for a moment. "But then how do you tell each other apart? How do you know who is related to whom?"

"We are all related. We all of us came from the First Families. We are a small group bound together on this world, tied together by the sins of our predecessors. Is that not knowledge enough?"

Again, Badrae glanced up at him, but he didn't hold the look. His statements were full of matter-of-factness, expressions of a truth he clearly thought everyone should understand, but despite that, there seemed to be no expectation that Sandon should accept them. It must be strange for them living on the periphery of an entire world, removed from society's normal day to day interactions. Sandon doubted he could ever truly live like that.

They traveled in silence from that point, Sandon lost in his own thoughts. He barely registered the streets, the houses, the buildings they passed on the way to their destination. He found it hard to believe that he could have been aware of the Atavists for so long -- they had been a constant presence ever since he could remember -- and yet know so little about them. Of course there was the perpetual stream of messages that they tried to deliver: technology was bad; the state of their existence on Aldaban was a punishment for reliance upon technology for their existence; the only true way to enlightenment was to return to a rudimentary lifestyle, following the original teachings of the Prophet as handed down from the First Families. According to what they preached, Storm Season was nothing more than a revealing message sent by the Prophet to show them all the true way. The disastrous first landing of the colony ships was simply another. Sandon, of course, dismissed these beliefs as superstitious nonsense. He wondered how they could possibly justify that the reason for their very existence was the exact same colony ships that they condemned as part of technology's panoply of evil.

Badrae spoke again, drawing him back from his speculations. "We are almost there."

Sandon looked around, wondering exactly where 'there' was. They were in a section of the city outskirts that he was not very familiar with. This was a poorer neighborhood, the houses and buildings showing the signs of disrepair. Here and there lay the tumbled ruins of squat buildings demolished by previous quake activity. A group of children clambered over the debris of one such, digging through the stones and probing and prodding with sticks. Sandon wondered briefly how long it had been since the building had fallen. Could it have been a casualty of the latest quake? Were the children playing, or foraging? He had no way of knowing, and the pounding in his head was forestalling any true speculation.

These, the fringes of Yarik city, stretched up and back to the rock strewn heights of the plateau upon which the capital rested. The scant vegetation struggled for its existence here, away from the fertile plains below. There was no proper cause for any from the city to really venture out this way. Dry ground, desolation, and the occasional herder held no real attraction for Yarik's population, the true inhabitants of the nexus of Aldaban's political and commercial life.

They passed the last small house on the outskirts and headed along a narrow, poorly maintained road. Stunted trees and spiny bushes sprouted from the rocky ground at either side. The dull throbbing worked inside his head, the cut across his face pulsed hotly, and his thoughts were more sluggish, clouded. The blow he'd taken in the crash was having its effects. Still the Atavists walked on in silence.

They climbed a slight rise, and as the ground dropped away again, a cluster of tents and wagons appeared. In and amongst them, moved groups of people dressed in Atavist garb, more than Sandon had ever seen gathered in one place before. Despite the pounding in his head, despite the queasy feeling sitting in the depths of his stomach, his mouth hung stupidly open. So many of them. He wondered how long they'd been here, and how many more such groups existed alongside major cities across the land, virtually unnoticed by the rest of the population.

"Here we are. Welcome to our family," said Badrae. "Please feel easy amongst us and be welcome."

"Be welcome," said the other two in unison.

"Um, thank you," said Sandon, not knowing quite what else to say. It was somehow awkward. Badrae had said that they were joining this group of theirs for the first time, and yet they bade him welcome to it. He decided there was little else to do but wait and see. More speculation would only serve to confuse things further.

Seven

Tarlain felt he was finally ready. All that he needed for now was packed. The rest could be acquired, one way or another throughout the weeks to come, or however long it might take. His father had merely banned him from the Principate; he still had access to the resources of the Guild of Welfare, and he was sure Karnav Din Baltir would assist him; as long as the Guildmaster hadn't been turned, but he simply couldn't believe it of his old friend and mentor.

He crossed to his private screen and called up the mail program. Quickly, he tapped out a message to the Guildmaster. The note contained one word: Bortruz. He hit send, set his password, then shut down the screen, gave his chambers one last look before grabbing the bag he had filled with the few things he was taking with him. If he made a quick exit now, there'd be no chance that Men Darnak would suddenly have another stray thought and stop him. He could trust Din Baltir enough not to give away his intended destination, but the quicker he moved, the safer that decision would be.

Shouldering his bag, he strode rapidly down the corridor leading out to the parking area. He walked quickly across the broad stone slabs set in even rows across the courtyard to where his own private groundcar sat, rarely used. The low, sleek vehicle, one of the more recent designs, blended with the drab stone coloring of the walls and the ground, fading into the background even more now that the Minor Twin's light smudged the edges of vision. He'd chosen the color purposely; something that would not attract too much attention. The surrounding vehicles were bright -- yellows, greens -- except for the standard issue whites and the more formal official black of the Principate. He scanned the parking lot before opening the door and tossing his bag into the back. Not a soul. That was good. Of course, there'd be records on the security monitors, but it should be some time before anyone got around to checking them, if they even bothered.

He clambered into the driver's seat and waited for the door to slide shut before tapping the ignition pad. It was risky this close to Storm Season, but it was more than a mere recreational vehicle this one. Tarlain had had one or two extra features added to the mix some time ago. A contact inside Technologists had helped him.

Checking that there was still no one around, he slid the groundcar out of the lot and headed away from Yarik's center toward the plateau's escarpment and the winding road leading down to the valley floor below. Letting the vehicle accelerate to more than was normally polite in the city environs, he whisked down the main streets, only slowing for the occasional groundcar or stray pedestrian. The quake they'd experienced at Roge's reception had been the first real sign of the approaching Storm Season, and after an indicator like that, most of Yarik's population would be off preparing for the upcoming trials of the season ahead. The unpredictability of the Twin's cycles meant that the seasonal change was also hard to foretell, and despite the clues, despite the fading light, the gradual consumption of the Major Twin's disk by its darker sibling, you could never quite predict when it was finally going to happen for real.

He was quickly through the city proper and out onto the flat expanse of rock-strewn landscape that led off to the precipice. He whisked across the stony ground, steering for the funneled depression that dipped into the broad winding highway snaking down from Yarik plateau. He slowed cautiously as he neared, wary of other traffic. There was a notorious blind spot near the lip. There should be no foot travelers or animals just yet, but an ascending groundcar was as much of a risk. Gently he maneuvered the car into the gap and headed down the first expanse of smooth well-traveled road. The cliff dropped away sharply at the edge, and down below, far, far below, the road trailed back and forth to the valley floor. The first gentle incline ended in a sharp bend, turning the broad expanse of road back on itself, increasing the gradient to the next section. Instead of slowing, Tarlain accelerated toward the bend. Just before he should have turned, he tapped a quick sequence

on the controls and his groundcar launched into empty space. Though he'd done this several times before, the thrill still rose inside him with a rush. Over the edge! He restrained the customary whoop, and bit his lip as the cliffside rushed by outside, bare crags with hardy clumps of vegetation forcing their way through the cracks. If ever he misjudged the leap, he'd be dashed against those crags to tumble the thousands of feet to the valley floor below. Not a pretty thought.

The groundcar's ability was actually quite limited, but it was enough to sustain a controlled descent down the long drop to the level ground far beneath. More than anything, the enhancements provided him with a release, an escape from the day-to-day enclosure of structured life within the Principate. Just occasionally, he needed to get out, to let off the contained frustrations he felt. With no one to see him acting the fool, he could find that escape. He sat, encapsulated in his own private space, watching but not really seeing the crags above, the expanse of checkered fields below, untouchable, removed from all of it.

Tarlain monitored his descent, scanning the road below, the top of the cliffs and keeping an eye on his progress. First, there was the cushioned descent, and then, when he reached the valley floor, and after a lengthy drive, Bortruz. Bortruz was little more than a mining settlement. It wasn't a town you could call a town as such, but a healthy Kallathik community nestled nearby, and that suited his purposes. For now. He'd spent a lot of time with the Kallathik over the past few months, and he was almost starting to feel at home in their midst, unlike most of the other Guild Members. They were a complex race and there was a lot yet left to learn about their ways. Bortruz, owned and controlled by the Guild of Primary Production, had been since it was established, but he didn't think that would provide any threat to his plans. Welfare had its place there too, and Guildmaster Din Baltir was as familiar with the site and with the large Kallathik population that worked the mines proper as Tarlain himself was. Karnav had had years longer to explore. The Guildmaster would know where to look when the time came.

As the groundcar met the roadway at the cliff base, he tapped the controls to resume normal function. A quick glance up and behind and he was satisfied that there would be no one to follow. He tapped in his destination and settled back to watch the changing countryside roll past. The landscape around Yarik's base was peppered with smallholdings -- farmers who could not afford the lengthy transportation costs of Storm Season but could still eke out a living during Clear by supplying the city above. The further away from Yarik, the fewer of these small farming plots there were, and as he passed through the scattered farms, the surrounding country quickly made way for wide rolling fields, used mainly for grazing. The long expanse of dun-colored road ran unchanged throughout. This route was well traveled and accordingly was kept well maintained. Come Storm Season, and there'd be some deterioration and sporadic quake damage, but there were road crews to deal with that, often made up of the groups of itinerant workers who roamed the land during Storm Season looking for whatever employment they could get.

Gradually, open flats replaced grazing land, and the richer vegetation faded. Already the Clear Season grasses were starting to die off and grow patchy as the Minor Twin gained dominance. Soon the ground would be dotted with squat ugly broad-leafed plants trapping as much as possible of the weaker light. He hated this time of dying, this half life that sat between. Storm Season was hard enough, but this semi-existence, this place where neither one thing nor the other held sway seemed much worse to Tarlain's mind.

His groundcar kept to the major route for about half an hour more before performing a swift turn, then heading up a lesser-used side road. It would be at least another hour before he reached his destination, so Tarlain settled back in his seat to doze. The events of the last few hours had taken their toll.

He awoke blearily to insistent chiming from the control panel. He ran a hand over his face, rubbed his eyes, and leaned forward to scan the surrounding area, large sandy mounds marring the otherwise smooth landscape. The leavings from the mines lay everywhere. Small humped hills, the result of earlier Kallathik activity, were interspersed with vast, unstable cliffs, the result of the more directed efforts of Primary Production. Waterfall-like slides made tracks in the smooth surfaces where the top layers had slipped, leaving

small piles at their bases. Narrow roadways ran in and between these artificial outcroppings. Fully alert now, he gave it five minutes more, then, adjudging he was close enough to Bortruz proper, tapped at the controls to slow the groundcar. He didn't want to go right into the mining settlement itself. He was known there, and he didn't want to make his presence known quite yet. Somehow, he held some vague hope that his father might reconsider and send someone to look for him, but should that happen, he didn't want to be simply found, just sitting there waiting.

Spying a likely track, he headed the groundcar around and between two large piles of sandy stone. These service tracks would be little used in this time between seasons and he should be able to leave the groundcar well out of sight, but still where he could find it for the next few days. Within the next couple of weeks it would become virtually useless anyway, unstable. He spotted a small side branch, headed down it and stopped. A quick assessment confirmed that the nearby mounds looked solid and low enough that they might survive anything but the worst quake activity. He stepped out, reached into the back to grab his bag, hit the locking sequence and left the groundcar, intending to walk the rest of the way to the Kallathik settlement.

Heading back to the main roadway on foot, he glanced back once or twice to make sure that the spot he had chosen was truly invisible to casual observation. For now, it would do. He'd get Kallathik assistance to relocate the vehicle somewhere more secure through the approaching Season, but first he had to decide his next steps, wait for Karnav Din Baltir to contact him, and then... he wasn't sure.

He hefted his bag on his shoulder and started the long trudge to the Kallathik burrows. There was a fluttering inside his guts, a sense of unease, as if he were on the edge of falling. Every few steps, he would think he had it under control, then, as soon as he stopped thinking about it, the feeling would return. He tried to force it from his mind and concentrate on getting to his destination. It took him a few minutes to reach the main road and he scanned his surroundings to get his bearings. He glanced up at the twin suns, shielding his eyes, thankful that the sky was still clear. Bortruz lay that way, to the east. If he continued across the road and through, bearing at a slight angle, it would take him to the edges of the Kallathik settlement, at least close enough to find his way there anyway. Then, all he had to do was wait.

He crossed the road and threaded his way through further hummocks, frowning as he was struck by a moment of doubt. What if Din Baltir failed to understand the message he'd left? What if the man was truly more concerned with the Guild's functioning? What if...no, there were too many uncertainties at the moment. What was the worst thing that could happen? That he could be left to wait out Storm Season among the Kallathik? Would that be such a bad thing? He'd be left on the periphery, unable to influence the course of events, but there would be time. And if it came to that, he would learn so much. Kallathik life, Kallathik society was still something of a mystery, even after their co-existence for so many years. As long as the Kallathik continued to work the mines and maintain their involvement in the more onerous tasks of Primary Production, then the Guild hierarchy didn't really care. It didn't matter now, but as long as Tarlain spent time here with them, he could learn, understand, and that would be valuable in the long run, one way or another.

The first totem appeared a few minutes after leaving the main roadway. Tarlain dropped his bag and stood looking at it, his fists on his hips. Twice his height, it was thick at the base, carved from one solid piece of an ajura trunk. Firmly planted alone in the middle of a flat piece of ground it stood as a sentinel to the borders of Kallathik territory. He wondered briefly how the Kallathik themselves saw it. To him, it was merely a detailed likeness of a single Kallathik, nothing to distinguish it from the rest of their race. If it bore an expression, there was nothing there to give Tarlain any clue to what it might be. Its twin sets of arms were clasped in front of the thick rounded torso. The two sets of eyes, deeply set beneath the flat skulled brow ridge, were highlighted with gems of different colors fixed into the dark, hard wood. He ran his fingers back through his hair, peering up at the powerfully jawed face. *Ajura* wood was prized for its hardness, its resilience, but to work it to such detail could not be easy. He didn't even know what tools the Kallathik might use to do it.

"Well, my friend," he said. "Perhaps we can do something together now."

The totem stared impassively into the distance. With a sigh, Tarlain stooped to retrieve his bag and walked on by, trailing his fingers over the finely carved scales, feeling their ridged smoothness as he passed.

He came across other totems, some smaller, some larger, the frequency of their placement telling him he was getting closer. The ground rose gently, traces of the mine workings becoming fewer and being gradually replaced by scant vegetation and the occasional Kallathik trail. Plain gave way to hill and small humped rocky outcroppings. Tarlain headed up the hillside, knowing he was close. At the top of the path he followed, another totem slipped into view. He merely glanced at it, but then, something, some sense, drew a second look, and with a start, he realized that this wasn't a totem at all, but one of the Kallathik themselves. It stood so immobile that it was hard to tell. Clearly, it was watching his approach, but it gave no sign, not a single movement to indicate anything other than a passive uninterested observation. Tarlain stopped, dropped the bag from his shoulder and raised a hand. For several seconds, the Kallathik did nothing, then finally, at last, it opened its arms in greeting. Tarlain nodded and smiled despite knowing the gesture would be lost on the creature standing above him. He retrieved his bag from where it lay at his feet and headed on up the hill.

The waiting Kallathik turned with his approach, heading back up the rise and over. Despite its slow gait, Tarlain had to hurry to catch up. The Kallathik lumbered on its squat rear legs, the supporting tail leaving a trail through the grasses. Tarlain quickened his pace until he drew alongside, looking up at its dark gray-brown face, trying to make contact and get the creature's attention. Finally he spoke.

"I am Tarlain Men Darnak, from the Guild of Welfare," he said.

The Kallathik hesitated and turned its head slightly to face him, looking down from a height half as tall as Tarlain again. That brief pause, the brief inclination of its body was all he got before the Kallathik turned back and continued on its path. All right, Tarlain thought to himself. There may have been recognition, there may not. They seemed to understand human speech, but what sense it made to them he had no real idea. He might have spent actual time in the past with this very same Kallathik but he would have no way of knowing. With their habitual impassive responses, he doubted that the Kallathik itself would care whether he had or not. They seemed to pay scant attention to the human population moving amongst them.

Together, they crested the rise and the ground dropped away gently to a slight hollow. More Kallathik stood below, either lumbering slowly from one place to another, or standing, totem-like staring into nothing. Further up, across the next rise, lay the entrance to their settlement proper. A group clustered around the wide cave mouth, signing to each other with their twinned arms. As Tarlain and his companion hove into view and walked down the approaching hill, nothing changed in their position. He watched carefully, looking for any sign of recognition. Abruptly, his companion stopped. Tarlain looked up, but the Kallathik was staring across the intervening space toward the large entrance doing nothing. Finally, it lifted one arm, clacked the sides of its jawbones together in a movement Tarlain knew indicated an exclamation, gestured in the direction of the cave mouth and then turned, heading back up the hill from where they had come. Tarlain took the creature's meaning and continued down across the small valley's floor and up the other side.

Five Kallathik stood together at the entrance. Inside, Tarlain knew, the complex continued deep into the hill, branching and re-branching, opening into vast hollow chambers where the settlement continued its daily life. Somewhere deeper inside lay one or two smaller chambers fitted out for human habitation, built not long after human and Kallathik had begun working together. They were away from the main complex, far enough away from the continuing noise and scents of Kallathik daily life to make them livable, barely. Mostly, visitors from the Guild of Welfare used them, though in earlier times, they were constructed specifically for Primary Production. Nowadays, Primary Production had little use for them: the task of Kallathik liaison had since fallen to others. Tarlain stood and waited patiently until the Kallathik were ready to acknowledge his presence. It took a few moments. Eventually, one of them turned and gestured a query with its upper pair of arms.

"I am Tarlain Men Darnak, from the Guild of Welfare," he repeated.

A pause, and then, "Elcome," a slow barely comprehensible burr coming from where the Kallathik's throat would be if it had one. Over the years, the Kallathik had learned to constrict some of their chest muscles to approximate human speech. It took practice, but with time, you could learn to understand what they were saying. Augmented by knowledge of their gestures and signings, it was possible, almost, to carry on proper communication. Teaching of their signings was a standard part of Guild of Welfare training, but it could never replace the experience of learning first hand. It was different from listening to a recording of their sounds or being taught by a human trying to approximate the sounds that buzzed from the Kallathik frame.

"I need to use the living spaces," said Tarlain. "I also need to speak with the heads of this sept."

The Kallathik signed assent, and shuffled away from its companions, giving a set of complex gestures that escaped Tarlain's understanding. The remaining four Kallathik stood where they were. Another set of signings passed between two of them, and as a whole, the group lifted their tail sections, rattling the scales with a rapid shaking -- a gesture that Tarlain knew indicated amusement. He wondered what had passed between them. Well, let them be amused. They'd be less happy when the changes about to sweep through the Principate touched them properly. Roge had very little time for the Kallathik. So, let his brother do what he might, he thought grimly. It would not be without resistance. Not now that he was here. He would put this right, no matter what Roge chose to do.

With the resolution still echoing in his thoughts, Tarlain shouldered his belongings and followed the Kallathik that had broken from its group, past the deep cave mouth and into the depths of the complex beyond.

The metal-shod walls led into gloom. Shafts of light punctuated the darkness further down the tunnel where the Kallathik had worked ventilation and light holes to the surface. They didn't need much light, but they couldn't operate in total darkness either. Tarlain peered along the passage length, trying in vain to make out any real details. He'd been in this complex a number of times before, but blank walls and absence of light made it hard for him to maintain any sense of direction. Scraping noises echoed up the tunnel, speaking of Kallathik movement deeper within, further confusing the sense of direction and location. Their scaly forms brushed against the metal walls as they passed through the complex, and the sound carried for long distances, distorted by the smooth hard surfaces. Over the sound ran an eerie moan, almost like a sigh as the breeze above funneled across the tops of the ventilation shafts.

He didn't know how many lived within this particular burrow, but it must be several hundred. His companion shuffled along in no particular hurry. Everything the Kallathik did was at a leisurely pace, partly necessitated by their bulk, but partially because they never seemed to be in a hurry to do anything. Right in the middle of doing something, they might simply stop, adopt the rest stance with their arms crossed over their chests and barely move, the only indication of life being the gentle in and out movement of their sides showing they were breathing. Tarlain had ceased puzzling about that a long time ago. It simply was. It could be a source of immense frustration, especially in the middle of a conversation, but after a time, you made allowances; you had to recognize that the humans functioned at an entirely different pace.

Their progress down the main tunnel continued, passing several intersections and sinkholes until they reached a major junction. A number of tunnels led off in various directions, and noises drifted up from each, melding into a confused undercurrent of sounds. Here, deeper into the burrow, the smell was more pungent and Tarlain wrinkled his nose. He would become desensitized to their scents after a few hours, he knew, but for the moment the sharp tang caught at his nostrils, making his eyes water.

His guide had stopped. Tarlain stood where he was and dabbed at his eyes with one sleeve as he waited, hoping the Kallathik had not gone into thought mode. Finally, it gestured down one of the adjoining passages and headed that way. This passageway was smaller, the roof almost touching the Kallathik's broad flat head as

the tunnel wound deeper into the hillside. Fewer light shafts marked the way, and though his eyes were becoming accustomed to the gloom, he still had to strain to see. They passed a number of smaller alcoves set into the tunnel walls, and within one or two, he sensed movement. There were Kallathik here, shifting vastly in the darkness as they passed. He wondered if he smelled as strange to them as they did to him. Were they disturbed by his alien presence, by his passing scent? Did they recognize the human taint upon the air? Their interspecies communication wasn't advanced enough that he'd ever really know.

At last, they reached the small chambers set aside for human use. Tarlain ducked inside one, fumbled around for the light and switched it on. Its battery would keep it alive for several hours, but he didn't want to waste it, so he dropped his bag on the small cot, found the fuel lamp and lit it before turning off the other one. These small cells were relatively close to the entrance, giving him some real idea of the true vastness of the complex. His guide had already disappeared, scraping off along the passageway outside. Tarlain hoped it had gone to inform the sept leaders. If not, he was in for a long wait. Dealing with the Kallathik eventually taught patience. It had to.

Sitting on the edge of the rude cot, he settled in to wait, hoping that his guide was focused enough to bear the message to the right place. All around him, the noises of the burrow's other inhabitants continued unabated, echoing through the dimness, punctuated by the resonant low moaning wind filtering down the passageways. Tarlain shivered and shook his head. He cursed himself for not having had the foresight to bring something as simple as a book reader, at least something to occupy his mind.

Eight

Over distant hills, clouds gathered, forming and reshaping, deep and brown in the copper light. The taste of electricity sat subtly beneath, ever present, upon the gentle breeze. Veins of light throbbed within the burgeoning cloud mass, illuminating the pregnant shapes from within, and then re-fading into darkness. Leannis Men Darnak stood, watching, listening as the sound of herd beasts drifted up from the fields below. A voice called, then another, and the sound was broken by the whine and buzz of a groundbike, quickly fading away into the distance. Another call, and the sound of animals replaced the sound of machine, clanking bells indicating the movement of the animals on their way back in from pasture.

A wide low veranda ran all around the edge of the residence, one of the Men Darnak numerous country holdings. This, one of the smaller estates, was a place where he came to relax, far removed from the details of the Principate. Here, he had space to think, to channel his thoughts without them being pulled in all the directions of the Guild Business, changing from hour to hour; he could sit back and assess, uncluttered. The breeze stirred his hair and he closed his eyes, letting the cool wind breathe upon his face. Had he done the right thing? He thought he had, but here, away from the heart of things, he was starting to wonder. He was tired now, tired of the daily demands, the decisions, the constant power plays, but he wasn't ready to give up yet. There was still too much left to arrange. With Roge in his new role, he would need to keep a gentle guiding hand in the background, be available to lend counsel when the situation demanded it. The Prophet knew, Roge would need it. With Karin's support, it would be easier. Karin was attuned to the nuances of political life in a way Roge could never be, but with her to advise, to observe, his eldest son would be stronger. He grimaced. Karin, as good as she was, however, was not quite enough. What Tarlain had said was right. Roge needed to be tempered, to develop beyond his first inclination to selfishness.

And what of Tarlain? Where was the boy now?

"Principal?"

Men Darnak opened his eyes, letting his gaze wander one more time across the horizon before answering. "Yes. What is it?"

"You seemed preoccupied, Principal."

"A little, Priest. A little. There is so much more to do."

"Yes, but things are set in place now. As they should be."

Men Darnak sighed and turned to face Kovaar. "But how can I be sure that I've done the right thing?"

"There are choices to be made in life. Some follow the ways of the Prophet, and some do not. Tarlain's choice did not. You have chosen the right path."

"So you say, Witness Kovaar. So you say. But he's my son, just as much as Roge is. Just as much as Karin is my daughter. I cannot deny him that. Would you have me deny it also?"

"No, of course not. The path you have taken leaves him choices, leaves him status within the Guilds, but the time is not right for any disruption to the order of things in the heart of the Principate itself. It is Roge's place as eldest child to take the lead. As the youngest, Tarlain should have accepted that lead and listened to what you said. He chose not to. It is as it has always been since the traditions handed down by the First Families. You know this is right. You have no need to question your actions now, Principal. In the Prophet's words, following the right order gives an ordered life."

"Hmmm," said Men Darnak, looking back out over the rolling fields. "I can't help thinking Tarlain would have added an extra spark of energy, a different slant to handling things within the Guilds. Especially now, with Storm Season approaching and Welfare coming into its own. We really could have used him there. We could also have used a different viewpoint just to offset Roge's approach to things."

"What's done is done, Principal. Tarlain has gone. You know that. And what is done is done for the better. It is a time for strength. Forgiveness can come later."

Men Darnak shook his head. "We shall see, Priest. We shall see."

"Perhaps so, Principal, but now you should come inside. The hour is getting late and I have prepared your tea."

"I don't want the cursed stuff. Why do you keep insisting that I drink that foul brew?"

"Principal, you know we have to take care. You need to maintain your strength. There are difficult times ahead and you need to be in a proper state to face them."

"All right, all right. Just don't fuss. I'll be in a moment."

Witness Kovaar nodded and withdrew, just the barest hint of a satisfied look on his pale, gaunt face.

Far in the distance, a large bird soared and spiraled, riding the air currents preceding the approaching storm front. Men Darnak had other doubts now, doubts that he could barely talk to Witness Kovaar about. Sandon Yl Aris. He had sent Yl Aris away as well as Tarlain. He couldn't take that back now. Not now. He had to remain strong. But he would miss Sandon's quick observation, his unfailing loyalty. Roge and Karin both

could have made use of his man's services to keep a watchful eye on what went on within the Guilds. Perhaps it was better for them to find their own way, but he couldn't help feeling uneasy. He just hoped his rash outburst wasn't going to prove too big a mistake. Time would tell. He watched the spiraling bird for a few minutes then turned to follow the Witness inside.

#

Roge stared out across the now empty offices and buildings, feeling safer, more in control. He had encouraged the move, though the old man had been reluctant at first, protesting, wanting to stay, to help Roge settle in to his new position, he had said, there to act as counselor, as a guide to his every move. It was the last thing Roge wanted. With the old man gone, he felt less like someone was breathing down his neck. And as for Witness Kovaar -- good riddance. Old Vapreth Face gave him the creeps. With Tarlain gone as well, things could hardly be better. Karin and he had discussed Tarlain's involvement long before the announcement and they'd agreed. Though Tarlain might have been useful in maintaining control, he was a risk, and they could only afford to tell him so much. Now, together, both of them were free to act without constraint.

Karin and he had much to talk about. They'd earmarked a few key individuals within the Guilds who were likely to be useful, as well as those who were likely to present a threat over the coming weeks. Roge knew that she had a better feel for such things, and accordingly, he was willing to rely on her judgment. It was funny in a way. It was almost exactly as their father had planned it, and yet...

Roge stood, smoothed down the front of his uniform and walked slowly around the office, trailing his hand over surfaces, lightly tapping a shelf with his hand, then a desk. All his. All of it his. Principal Men Darnak. Principal Roge Men Darnak. He stopped the circuit and drew himself to his full height, took a deep breath and glanced at his half reflection in the window. Yes. Principal Roge Men Darnak. He practiced the slight tilt of his head that was so often captured in official pictures of his father, matching it in his mind's eye. He pulled at the ends of his sleeves, making sure they were straight and set the pose again. He decided that for the first few weeks, he would wear the dress uniform, until he got settled at least, until they all accepted his new authority. It was better if he looked the part. There would be time to relax later.

A cough from the door made him turn.

"Roge, what are you up to?" asked Karin. She waited for him to respond before fully entering the room.

"Nothing. Just thinking," he said, beckoning her in. He tried to ignore the doubtful expression on her face; instead, he made a show of smoothing the front of his uniform one more time. "I'm going to miss Tarlain. He would have been useful, but I suppose we've done the right thing."

"Yes." She nodded and crossed to sit in front of the central desk. "You're right, he would have been useful, but I think he would have given us trouble too, and that's something we don't want at the moment. Anyway, I'm sure he'll be around."

"Are you? Do you even know where he's gone?"

She looked at him a moment before answering, considering. "No I don't, but he's probably just off somewhere sulking. You know how sensitive he is. He'll come round sooner or later. And by then, we'll have things well in place enough for him not to make any trouble. Don't worry about him. We have more important things to think about."

"I can't help feeling slightly guilty."

"Well don't. Why should you? You didn't do anything. It was Father who made the decision. It was Father he had the argument with."

"But I could have said something, couldn't I?"

"And what good would that have done except to put more doubts into the old man's head? Anyway, forget it. It's done. I told you I spoke to him before he left. He was as stubborn as ever."

Roge shrugged and nodded, then pulled out a chair and sat. "So, what do we have to discuss?"

"What do you think, Roge? With Tarlain gone, we have to work out what we're going to do about Welfare. I'm not convinced we can rely on Din Baltir. He's clever. Far too clever."

Roge frowned. "Surely he has to realize that it's in his own interests to work with us. What can he gain by refusing to cooperate? He needs our support now just as much as we need him."

Karin leaned forward. "I'm not saying he won't cooperate. I just think we need to watch him. He hasn't gotten to where he is without some smart maneuvering."

"Oh come on. The man's totally inoffensive."

"That's just it, Roge. If he's totally inoffensive, how did he manage to become head of one of the most powerful Guilds on Aldaban? He's clearly filled Tarlain's head with a lot of nonsense. It wouldn't surprise me if he'd engineered this whole situation."

Roge looked at her blankly. "I don't understand."

"Well, think about it. Who stands to gain with Tarlain out of the picture? Not us. We have less influence in Welfare now. Din Baltir takes the role that Tarlain could have played by default. He's not going to want changes to the power structure of the Guild. He's worked too hard to get them to where they are today."

He chewed at his lip thinking about what she was suggesting. "So, instead we're going to have to negotiate with him."

"Of course we are. I'm not saying that's what happened, but it's a possibility isn't it? Think about it. With Tarlain there, we would have had much more influence. Anyway, it amounts to the same thing. I just think we're going to have to keep a close eye on him."

Sometimes Roge marveled at the twisted routes his sister's mind took. He leaned his head to one side and scratched at his temple with a grimace, still considering what she'd said. "But what about Father? He didn't seem to have any trouble with Din Baltir, did he?"

Karin fixed him with a hard look. "Would you expect him to? How many years, how many Seasons did he control the Guilds? Do you think one among so many was going to give him any real trouble? Father always had things firmly within his grasp."

Roge grunted, still unconvinced. "All right, so let's say you're right. What do you suggest we do?"

"Nothing for now, but bear in mind that we need to watch him. Make sure we don't have any discussions with him separately. If you're going to talk to Din Baltir, make sure I'm there. Remember, we have to stand

together in this, Roge."

Karin was leaning forward, almost as if eager to enter into a fresh debate with him, ready to pounce on the next thing he might say. He sat back, watching her. "Listen, Karin, do you really doubt that?" he said with a frown.

She too sat back after a moment and then sighed. "No, of course I don't doubt it, but we have to be careful, Roge. I just think you need to be aware of just how careful."

"Yes, yes, I know."

She seemed satisfied. "All right, what about the others?"

"Who for instance?"

"Well ... Yosset has Primary Production pretty well tied up in the areas that count, but there's an element there we have to watch for."

"Who?"

"Aron Ka Vail."

"What about him? He's going to retire soon, isn't he?"

"Yes, it does look like it, but I'm not sure that Yosset is positioned well enough to counter the Ka Vail sons. And besides, as far as we know, that's just rumor for now."

Roge pursed his lips. "Hmm. I wouldn't worry about the older boy. Markis, isn't it?"

Karin nodded. "No, you're right, but it wasn't Markis I was thinking about. It was the other one, Jarid."

"I don't see..."

"What, because Markis is going to take the position? Don't discount the other one. I haven't seen that much of him, but he always struck me as a player. Anyway, Ka Vail hasn't announced any intention of retiring, has he? As I said, it's just rumor." She looked down at her lap, smoothing her clothes over the flat of her thighs, then looked up again. "Ka Vail hasn't retired yet. So, until he does, the sons are an unknown. They're shielded by the presence of the old man. We can't afford to have unknowns either. You and I need to be sure, Roge."

Roge looked out of the window, out over the flat city skyline, thinking. She was right, there were far too many unknowns already. Karin always knew what she wanted, always knew what she had to do to get it. She'd been waiting for this time for years, putting things in place, making alliances, but now...? How could she possibly believe that she could control so many things at once? How could anyone control so many things at once? He liked things to be simple. He knew there was no real hope of that as Principal, but to take it to the extreme that Karin did. And how had Father managed? Roge couldn't imagine that the old man had made everything so complicated.

"Roge?"

"What?" he said, turning back to look at her.

"What are we going to do about the Ka Vail boys?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Why don't you get Yosset to deal with it? You can do that can't you? He's your husband, after all."

"Yes, yes, I know. But it's intricate. The way Primary Production is split makes it harder. The Ka Vail's have control of the mines and factories. Yosset is only involved in agriculture and transport. There are some crossovers, but not as many as you might think. Sometimes it's as if they were completely separate guilds, you know?"

It was Roge's turn to sigh. "Yes, I know that. I'm sure he can do something. The rumors have to be enough of an excuse, don't they? Let him talk to the Ka Vail boys, find out what they're thinking. Then you and I can talk about what we need to do."

She nodded. "Yes, you're right of course. Just sometimes..."

"What?"

"No, nothing. It doesn't matter."

"So ... what else?"

"Technologists."

"Yes."

"Well, what are we going to do there?"

He hated the way she did that, jumping from subject to subject. "What do you mean, what are we going to do? I'll look after it. It's my Guild, Karin."

"Yes I know it is. That doesn't mean we can ignore it."

He felt the resentment rising inside. "I'm not ignoring it."

"So tell me what you're doing."

"I'm looking after it." He closed his jaw firmly and took a sharp breath. What made her presume he wasn't capable of dealing with it?

She fixed him with a long calculating look. "All right, Roge. You look after it ... for now."

He tore his own gaze away and looked back out the window. "If there's anything we need to do, I'll let you know." He covered one hand with the other, gripping it hard, concealing the half-formed fist.

"Fine," she said, but he could still sense a trace of doubt still in her voice. "The lesser Guilds shouldn't present a problem at the moment. Everyone's too busy worrying about Storm Season and running around getting everything prepared."

Almost as if underlining her words, a deep rumble flowed over the city. Karin had stopped pinning him with her probing gaze and with the sound, had turned to look out the window. Roge looked at her sharp profile. There was very little of their mother in her face. Tarlain had the softer features, but Karin with her angled face, high cheekbones and pale skin mirrored her father. She was certainly her father's daughter. The only trace of their mother was the honey-brown hair. Roge ran his fingers through his own darker hair, and then

rubbed his forehead. Yes, the lesser Guilds were all busy preparing for Storm Season. There was so much to do, and it wasn't just the Guilds that had to worry about it. Clearly, he had to be careful. Sometimes, just sometimes, Karin scared him.

Karin turned back and caught him looking at her.

"What?" she said.

Roge shook his head. "Nothing," he said. "Just thinking."

#

Aron Ka Vail paced the Guild Chamber. The burgeoning storm filled the wide polished room with gloom-touched light. He glanced out at the heavy pall of cloud with a grimace. Curse the Return. Always the same things to deal with time after time. He was getting too old for this. Over the past couple of seasons, he'd ceded more and more of the organizational requirements of this approaching time to Markis. Jarid was a useful backup, and the Prophet knew, Markis needed someone to clean up after him. Sometimes he just wished that Jarid were the elder. It would have made things so much easier. He would have been able to sit back and relax, content in the knowledge that everything, every detail would be looked after.

"Father?"

Aron stopped his pacing and looked up. Jarid stood at the end of the chamber. He beckoned the boy closer.

"What is it, Jarid?"

Jarid cleared his throat, standing with his hands on the back of one of the large *ajura* wood chairs. "I ... there's something I need to talk to you about."

"Yes? What is it?"

"It's Markis."

Aron sighed and crossed back over to the window to peer up at the roiling storm clouds. "What is it this time? What's he forgotten now?"

Jarid crossed to stand behind him. He spoke quietly. "No, Father, it's more ... well, it's more delicate than that."

Aron narrowed his eyes. He spoke without turning, his voice just as quiet. "What is it this time, Jarid? Are we going to cover old ground here?"

The rumble of far-off thunder stirred in the cloud mass. Aron waited for it to pass, leaning forward to watch some of the loading activities taking place in front of the Guild Halls below. "Tell me, Jarid. Are we going to talk about your position again? We've been through this a thousand times. You know what the Prophet's teachings require." There was a long pause. Jarid stood where he was, not saying anything. Aron continued. "You know what we have to do. Markis will hold the succession regardless of what you might say. Tradition dictates it. The Prophet requires it. What do you want? I know you can't help the circumstances of your birth. It doesn't mean I have any less love for you, but it's your duty to support your brother."

"As it's his duty to support you and your choices." The words came softly.

Aron took a moment as the statement sunk in, then turned slowly.

"What are you suggesting?"

Jarid stepped forward and stood close, his eyes at the same level as his father's. He took a breath and licked his lips before continuing, his face blank.

"Markis has been talking about changing things. He knows I'm unhappy with the way fate and tradition have denied me. He wants to use that. He's been talking about stirring up the Kallathik."

Aron Ka Vail pushed past his son. "What nonsense. What foolish tales are you concocting now?"

Jarid spoke without turning, still facing the window. "It's no tale," he said.

Something in the lad's voice made Aron stop where he was and turn slowly to face him. "Turn around and look at me."

Jarid did as he was told, leaning back on the window ledge and placing his hands behind him for support, an expression of deadly seriousness on his face. "You know we're having trouble with the Kallathik."

"As we do every time the Return is upon us. There's nothing new there. Every Storm Season they take their opportunity."

"And this time there's a reason for that."

"What? You're telling me that Markis has something to do with it. Come on, Jarid. You can do better than that." He moved back to join his son at the window. "What could he possibly have to gain from doing something like that? You really expect me to believe such stupidity this time."

Jarid nodded. "You will when I tell you what's been happening."

"So tell me. Let's see how much I believe of your little story then."

Jarid nodded slowly. "Markis has been spending a lot of time at the Kallathik burrows. It hasn't been to pacify them. I believe it's been to incite them, to take advantage of the current confusion. He's told me all about what he plans. He wants you to retire, to lose control, one way or another, so he can take over fully. He's sick of waiting for you to announce your retirement. He's asked me to work with him in return for a greater share of the power and his inheritance. With the Return here, with a Kallathik revolt, you'd be forced to travel to the burrows yourself to sort things out. No communication. Poor transport. Accidents happen in Storm Season, don't they?"

Aron looked at his younger son aghast. "How can you even suggest such a thing?"

"Because it's true." Jarid spoke in a flat tone.

For once in his life, Aron felt lost for words. He clamped his jaw shut and crossed back to the table. He pulled out a chair and sat heavily. He didn't know which was worse: to believe that Markis should become involved in a plot to unseat him by whatever means, even to the extent of his life, or that Jarid should concoct such a tale just as a way of bettering his position. Why now?

"Jarid, come here and sit down."

"No, Father. Before I do, there's something I have to show you. Wait here."

Aron frowned. What was the boy playing at now?

Jarid crossed the room rapidly and disappeared from the chamber. He returned a moment later with another person in tow. It was an Atavist! Jarid had brought a scruffy, dirty Atavist here, into the heart of the Guild, into the Guild Chamber itself. Jarid stopped with the Atavist a pace behind, looking around nervously.

Aron made to lift himself from the chair, his knuckles whitening on its arms, but Jarid lifted a hand, waving him down.

"No, wait. Listen to what he has to say. You don't believe me. Then listen to what he has to say. Go on."

The Atavist bowed his head. "It is true. I have been present at meetings where Markis Ka Vail has spoken to Kallathik elders, talking of action against the Guilds."

"What meetings? What are you talking about?"

"Over the past few months, Guildmaster, there have been a number of meetings in the Kallathik settlements."

"And how do you come to know about this?"

"You must know that there are links between our communities and the Kallathik people. We trade. On occasion, we work together to mutual benefit. From time to time, we have reason to be in the same location."

Aron shook his head. No, this was too unbelievable. "And why should I believe you?"

The Atavist lifted his head and looked him straight in the eye. Aron held the gaze and then finally looked back down at his hands. This was an Atavist. He didn't need to ask.

"Get this creature out of here," he said quietly. "Now!"

Jarid rapidly ushered the Atavist from the Chamber and promptly came back to stand in the same position, a self-satisfied look on his face. Aron waved vaguely at a chair opposite. Jarid hesitated, then nodded and pulled the chair back to sit.

"So why, Jarid? Why?"

Jarid worked his jaw before answering. "I told you. Markis is impatient. He's said more than once that he is sick of doing all the work without having any of the status. He says that he can't believe you're going to retire any time soon. To be honest, I can't see you stepping down tomorrow, either."

Aron rubbed one palm over the smooth wood. "No, you're right. Markis isn't ready yet. I'm not ready yet." He looked up and narrowed his eyes. "And neither are you." Jarid was keeping his face expressionless. Aron had a sudden thought. "So what part have you had in all of this?"

The boy looked suddenly aggrieved. "I've told you about it, haven't I? I didn't have to say a thing, did I? I didn't need to tell you anything. What do I have to gain anyway?"

Aron considered. "No, of course." Aron nodded. He closed his eyes with a deep sigh, then slowly opened

them again. "At least I can rely on you."

Jarid's expression softened. "Of course you can, Father," he said. "You can always rely on me. Always."

Aron nodded, looking away. "Now, leave me. Go and attend to things. I need to think."

Jarid pushed his chair back and stood. "You let me know if you need anything," he said. "I will do whatever you require."

Aron nodded again and watched Jarid thoughtfully as he strode purposefully from the chamber. Let him know if he needed anything. Certainly. It was hard to know *what* he needed right now. He shook his head. What could he possibly need?

"Jarid, wait," he said.

Jarid stopped and turned slowly. "Father?"

"There is something. Find out everything you can about Markis's plans. But do it subtly. I want to be in a position of strength when I finally decide what I'm going to do. Find out how he means to do it, and when. That way I can be prepared."

Jarid nodded, turned, and left the chamber, leaving Aron to chew over the things that he could barely now believe. There was a deep hollow sitting in the depths of his stomach as he stared blankly across the table.

#

Just outside the room, Jarid leaned back against the corridor wall and closed his eyes. He bit his lower lip, trying to suppress the grin that kept threatening to overtake his face. Step one accomplished. The Atavist had been a stroke of sheer brilliance. Who would dare to question the word of an Atavist? Hopefully the man would be gone, far from the Guild Halls, his payment enough to keep him quiet for the time being. A position of strength. That was what he'd said. If Jarid knew his father well enough, the old man wouldn't bother with verifying the man's story, and even if he did, he wouldn't find him. He'd be looking for a real Atavist. And if he questioned Markis, so what? It was his word against the word of Jarid, and now that the seed had been sown....

He pushed himself from the wall and headed down the corridor, letting the grin finally take shape.

Nine

Sandon and his three companions wound their way into the Atavist camp proper. The padder's motion beneath him was not exactly uncomfortable, but the animal smell was all around him, making his head feel thicker than it already was. The Atavists walked on in silence; during most of the journey, the only thing to disturb

the quiet progress had been the occasional grunt and snort from the padder. Sandon watched the three men as he rocked gently along, trying to pick up any clues, but their gazes remained fixed ahead, the hoods partially concealing their faces, leaving him nothing to play with, though he was barely in the mood for it the way he was feeling. They seemed intent only on reaching their destination, wherever that might be in the midst of the approaching cluster of tents, wagons and cookfires.

Although there seemed to be many Atavists gathered here, the greetings between members of the camp were few. A brief nod, a slight lifting of the hand, that was it. If Sandon's head would just stop throbbing for two minutes, he might be able to pick up some relevant details, but it was all a confused jumble of impressions, of strangeness. He'd never been even close to an Atavist camp, let alone right slap bang in the middle of one.

"Here we are," said Badrae, drawing the padder to a halt.

His two companions reached up to help Sandon down off the animal's back. He regained his feet unsteadily, swaying slightly, feeling as if his knees were about to give way. Badrae motioned Melchor and Arnod to lend support. They stepped forward, one on either side, placed hands on his arm and beneath his armpits, steadying him. Feeling a little more comfortable with the support, Sandon looked around, trying to determine exactly where he was.

They stood in front of a low wagon, hard wooden wheels high and round at its sides. The wagon body and the wheels were painted a deep blue. A cloth roof covered the back, stretched taut above wide curving wooden ribs beneath. At least Sandon presumed they were wood. At this moment, the front spars of the wagon lay at rest, its animals tethered elsewhere. The owners clearly weren't planning on going anywhere in a hurry. Beneath the wagon bed an arrangement of shelves was affixed, packed full of cloth-wrapped bundles. He briefly wondered what might be in those bundles, goods, provisions; it could just as well have been laundry, for all he knew. The cloth was rough, woven, slightly yellow-cream or pale brown.

He only managed brief glimpses of the ordered encampment that surrounded the central firepits; it was hard with Arnod and Melchor on either side. A line of padders stood tethered off to one side in a line. Children ran in and out between the animals. They might have been anybody's children, anywhere on Aldaban, if it were not for the simple homespun clothing they wore, all in plain, drab colors. Apart from the wagons, each picked out in a different simple blocked hue, with wheels to match, there seemed to be a singular lack of color in the camp.

"Alise," said Badrae. "You are needed."

There was a stirring inside the wagon, followed by the appearance of a head at the rear -- a round, pleasant face, clear blue eyes and dark hair tied in a tight knot behind her head. She quickly took in the scene and gestured them forward.

"Bring him here. What happened?"

"His groundcar fell over," said Badrae.

Strange way to put it, thought Sandon.

The woman called Alise simply nodded and waved them closer. "Well, help him up, you two," she said, reaching down to take Sandon's hand and help him up the steps at the wagon's rear. She led him inside the cluttered interior, and once he was seated on a simple wooden bench that ran along one side of the interior, she poked her head out the back again. "That's it, brothers. I will look after him from here. I'll call you if I need you. You too, Badrae. Go on now."

Sandon took in the wagon's interior. There were shelves and bundles everywhere. A simple sleeping pallet lay at one end toward the front. At the wagon's rear stood what was obviously a stove, fixed tight into one corner. He frowned at that -- surely, it must present a risk -- and winced at the sudden pain across his face. He could feel the heat emanating from the stove, even where he sat. How could you have a stove inside a wagon? A simple curtain was drawn across the front, blocking his view of the outside. Alise pulled down the rear curtains, closing them tightly to the interior. It was darker, but enough light filtered through the canvas roof for everything to be plain enough.

She leaned forward, casting a critical gaze over him. "Well, you don't seem to badly hurt, but it pays to be sure," she said. She reached up to shift the hair away from his forehead and inspected it closely. She felt the skull, gently probing with her fingers, and withdrew when she encountered the lump and he gave a sharp intake of breath, wincing.

"Nowhere else?" she said, standing back, her hands on her hips.

"My arm and my shoulder," he said.

She came and sat beside him, gently probing at the arm and the shoulder where he indicated. Sandon sat there through it impassively, trying to ignore the ministrations and concentrate on the jumble of materials on the wagon's shelves. This close, he could catch the smell of her -- clean, fresh, unscented soap. Not what he'd imagined at all. And there was something else: the smell of plants, or herbs, or perhaps earth. It wasn't an unpleasant smell, but it was clean and different. Finally, she seemed satisfied and she stood, smoothed her dress and moved across to crouch in front of one of the many shelves.

"It's mainly bruising," she said. "But I'm more concerned about your head. You could have a concussion and we need to be careful. I'm going to mix you something, which I want you to drink. It will take away some of the pain, though not all and help steady you. I want to keep an eye on you for a few hours. There'll be no sleep."

"I -- "

"No, don't try and talk. Just try and relax."

He watched as she placed a pot on the stove, filled it with water from a jug sitting nearby and then proceeded to pour a mixture of things from various packets into the pot. She stirred it slowly, mixing the ingredients. All the while she concentrated, barely taking her eyes from the task at hand. Sandon watched her, trying to guess how old she might be. It was hard to tell with the simple homespun dress, the lack of personal decoration. She could be late twenties, perhaps early thirties, but no older than that. Finally, she seemed satisfied, and she dipped a plain pottery mug into the brew, and returned to him, cupping it between her hands.

"Careful. It's hot. Sip, don't swallow," she said offering the mug. "What are you called?"

"Sandon Yl Aris."

"Well, Sandon Yl Aris, drink this slowly."

Sandon took the proffered mug. "And what about you? I know you are Alise. But what else? Alise what?" She hesitated, looking slightly confused. "Oh, I forgot," he said. "Badrae told me. You don't have family names."

"No, we are all one family here."

"Well, you can call me Sandon," he said. "Just Sandon is fine."

He took a tentative sip at the mug, expecting the worst. It didn't taste too bad, after all, slightly earthy, but not too bad. He took another sip.

She fussed around the shelves, looking for something, then returned with a pot and a small wooden spatula.

"Sit still," she said. "I am going to apply an ointment to those cuts on your face. It will stain the skin, but you must keep it there. It will make sure there's no infection."

He hadn't even been aware of the smaller cuts, but as she first patted his skin clean with a moist cloth, and then dabbed the preparation over his forehead, he very quickly knew they were there. Everywhere she smeared the ointment, there was a sharp hot stinging, tracing the lines of damage. The cut that ran across his cheek and over his nose burned like fire and he sucked air in through his teeth. Finally she sat back, inspecting her handiwork and nodded.

"When you have finished that, we will find you somewhere where you can stay undisturbed and I can look in on you, but take your time. There's no hurry. Give it time to work." She moved to sit cross-legged on the sleep pallet, watching him.

"So what are you doing here?" Sandon asked, after another sip. He reached up with one hand to probe his injured face, but quickly withdrew it in response to a stern look.

"We are where we are, where the Prophet takes us."

Sandon slowly lowered the mug. "But I thought you believed the cities and all they represent were evil. Why so many of you so close to Yarik?"

"We are where we are."

"But -- "

Alise shook her head. "Drink."

Sandon bit off his next question and took another sip at the medicinal brew. He was itching to find out more, but she was right, he was in no real state for logical thought. Despite his curiosity, the pounding still thumped inside his head. Better to drink whatever it was she had prepared for him and let it do its work if it was going to do anything. Then he remembered. On the journey to the camp, Badrae had mentioned a healer, but he had the distinct impression that whoever it was had been a man.

"So," he said. "Are you the healer?"

"I help in that regard. I am not alone in this task. We share the work amongst those with the knowledge."

Sandon nodded and immediately regretted the action. He grimaced and returned to the brew, feeling slightly uncomfortable under Alise's gaze.

By the time he was nearing the bottom of the mug, he was already starting to feel something. The dull throbbing in his head was beginning to subside, the ache in his shoulder had diminished, and suddenly he was overcome with a strange feeling of unreality. What had she done to him? He knew he should be concerned, but he just couldn't be bothered. Still she sat watching him. He took a last swallow and placed the mug down gently on the bench beside him. Alise gave a satisfied nod, stood and disappeared out the back of the wagon, motioning him to stay where he was. Moments later she returned, this time with Badrae's head following her through the canvas flaps.

"Good," he said. "Help me get him to his feet."

Badrae stepped into the wagon and with Alise's assistance, helped Sandon to stand. He felt numb, but despite the strangeness, alert. The stinging on his face had faded too. Now the skin felt merely warm. It throbbed faintly, in time to his pulse.

"Come, Sandon," said Badrae. He led him down the steps and out across a patch of open ground to a small group of tents. Sandon wobbled as he ducked to enter, Badrae guiding him down. Inside, the tent was bare, except for another simple sleeping pallet. They weren't high on comfort here. Badrae disappeared, and then reappeared moments later, bearing a large book beneath his arm. He stopped and handed to Sandon.

"Here. This will help you pass the time: *The Words of the Prophet*."

Sandon took the tome, wincing slightly with the weight of it. "Um, thank you," he said. Badrae watched him as he nestled the book in his lap, then, with another brief satisfied nod, ducked out of sight.

The Words of the Prophet. Just what he needed.

#

The book was old. Ancient yellowing leaves and a worn leather binding creaked as he turned the pages. He scanned the painfully lettered text, all hand worked, barely taking anything in. He'd been sitting for hours. From time to time, Alise had appeared, ducking beneath the tent flap, then crouching beside him to look at his face, his eyes, and poke and prod. He put up with the ministrations, instinctively knowing that she had his best interests at heart. Last time she'd visited, he had even attempted a smile, but found his face hard to move. That had been over two hours ago. Bored, and with the aches starting to return to various parts of his body, he closed his eyes. Within moments, he was starting to drift.

Bilious orange swept behind his lids. A crack and rumble. The noise of padders straining against their tethers, skittish movement, filtering through canvas walls. He opened his eyes quickly, groaned and shifted, regretting the move immediately as he put sudden pressure on his hip. Canvas walls? Flat sleeping pallet. Ancient text. What was he doing here? He lifted an arm, the wrong arm and groaned as sharp pain shot up from his elbow. His hip was sore too now, along with everything else, from where he'd been sitting on the hard ground. How could people live like this? He lifted his other arm and gingerly explored his head. The bruise was still there. He didn't know what he'd been expecting. At least the strange sense of unreality seemed to have faded a little.

More noises came from beyond the tent walls. Voices issuing commands, the sound of padders again. He felt it too, a tension in the air, an expectancy, waiting for -- what? Then suddenly, all was still. He levered himself into a more upright position as another boom and crash lanced light across the narrow space, sharp yellowish light, harsh against the deep orange. Silhouetted figures stretched against canvas walls, distorted in their length. Damn it. He wasn't supposed to be here. He had to...he had to...

He felt the first stirrings of the ground as he struggled with the thought, chasing the idea away with realization. A gentle trembling flickered through the ground beneath him. Then another. Throwing his arms back, he braced himself, waiting. One moment. Two. An eternity. Then there it was; the ground slammed up against him, throwing him flat. He sprawled, his arms offering no support at all. He knew as he bucked and rode the heaving ground that he'd have been better off staying flat. Now there was fresh pain in his shoulder, and his wrist on the other arm had been wrenched as well. He screwed his eyes tight shut, ground his teeth

together and waited for the endless shaking to stop. Then it was gone.

Sandon let out a breath, took another. It wasn't over yet. Again the ground rose, taking him with it, motion shuddering through his bones. Eyes screwed tightly closed, he opened his mouth and yelled, forcing the air from his lungs, screaming into the storm of motion. Soon, soon it would end. It had to. The ground was still once more. He lay where he was panting, waiting, and waiting. It couldn't be over yet. The ground shuddered gently beneath him, again, once, twice, three times, and then all was quiet. That might have been the last of it. Very tentatively, he raised his upper body, ready to throw himself flat at the first sign of anything more.

Then came the noises. A padder screamed, then voices, called queries, the sound of feet and more shadows casting bizarre angles against the tent walls. Cautiously he poked his head outside.

One wagon lay overturned. Off on the tether line, a padder lay on the ground, its legs splayed. One or two tents had fallen, but for the most part, everything seemed intact. It hadn't been too bad then. Within the tent's confines, it had seemed enormous, but there was no sense of scale in such a confined space. In small groups and singly, Atavists, both men and women, and children too, Sandon noticed, wandered between the tents and wagons inspecting for damage. An older Atavist in homespun headed purposefully toward the tether line, a broad flat knife in his hand. Sandon looked away, not wanting to watch what was about to happen. A group of men clustered about the side of the overturned wagon, already preparing to right it. They grouped evenly around the base, around the set of wheels that faced skyward and around its ends. Then, as one, they heaved, pulling it upright. The wheels held, but its roof sagged on one side where the struts had been cracked by its impact with the ground. Sandon stood and watched, not wanting to get in the way.

"Sandon, it is you. Are you all right?"

It was Alise. He turned to face her, one eye still on the proceedings around the damaged wagon. "Yes, I think so. Thanks. But I don't think it's done my head any good."

A concerned look flickered across her face, and then she gave a shy smile and nodded. He gave a short laugh in return, then immediately wished he hadn't. "But you shouldn't be worrying about me. What about the others? Is everyone unhurt?"

She nodded, and then glanced over toward the tether line. "Yes, except for, well, whatever is the will of the Prophet." She looked back at him. "Come," she said. "You must drink another dose and keep calm."

"But isn't there anything I can do?"

"Everything will be taken care of. Now come with me."

Feeling useless, he did as he was told. The ache in his head and the throbbing through his face and body were back. She was right. He was in no real position to argue. He glanced up at the sky, still covered in thick cloud, marked by the occasional flash of light. Storm Season was going to be heavy this cycle. A quake of that force up here and so early did not bode well. Storm activity often occurred early, especially on the Yarik plateau, but this storm looked ugly. So far, the winds had not started, but they could come at any time. He turned his attention to Alise who walked unhurriedly in front of him. He wondered whether she was keeping her pace slow to spare him. It was not until they reached her wagon that she finally turned and looked at him again.

"Sandon Yl Aris. It is a strange name," she said, then gave a little frown, climbed the steps to her wagon and disappeared inside, beckoning him to follow.

#

The next few days progressed in much the same fashion. Sandon either stood or lay around feeling completely useless. They rode out the storm, and Sandon found himself poring for hour after hour over the text in the large book Badrae had left with him. At intervals seemingly known only to Alise, she would appear, escorting him to her wagon for more of the restorative brew. Once or twice, she washed the paste away from his face, and then carefully reapplied it.

He couldn't understand how an entire people could live like this, divorced from the comforts of modern life: their simple wagons, the basic clothing, the hard sleeping pallets; they all had the feeling of penance rather than normal life. Yet Alise, whom he saw most of, seemed perfectly content. On a couple of occasions, he had tried to question her about her life, about the way they did things, but she would not be led. Most of the time she replied with a simple stock answer: As the Prophet wills. As the days wore on, his frustration grew. Alise was clearly not the route to the answers he needed, and he needed those answers if he was to follow through the plan that was gradually forming in the back of his mind. He decided to seek out the older man, Badrae. The only time he had seen him since entering the simple tent, it had been when he'd appeared just to look in on him, to see if he had any questions about the book.

They all dressed alike, these Atavists. The older men wore beards. There was only slight variation in their frames. One might be a little bit heavier, another more slight, but generally, they all looked alike. As he spent more time observing, he became more adept at distinguishing the individuals. Five days now, he had been among them. There was thick stubble on his own chin. No one had offered shaving materials, and he had none of his own gear with him. That had all been back in the groundcar. His clothing was starting to become worse for the constant wearing as well, and he was starting to smell of the potion Alise had been feeding him day after day. He had bathed, daily, in a large metal tub with the unscented homemade soap they provided, but it did little good if all he had were the same clothes to step back into. The paste on his face remained working on the cuts, despite the bathing. For the most part, the Atavist community simply ignored him. He was there, but they stepped around him, or out of his way. None of them offered conversation, and they shared very few words between themselves.

He scoured the camp, but Badrae was nowhere to be found. Asking was pointless. The first time he tried, he was met with a blank stare, a slight shrug, and then the person had simply walked on, ignoring further questions. The next was a repeat of the first. Not even a word. He then tried to find either Melchor or Arnod, the two who had been with Badrae when they brought him in, but both of them seemed to be missing too. He needed to find the old man. Already days had passed, and in those days, he had no clue what might be happening with Men Darnak. Badrae was the only one who might be able to provide the answers that would let him return, let him help the Principal in the only way he knew how. The more time that passed, the further he was from being able to do anything.

In the end, frustrated, he returned to Alise's wagon. He stood at the bottom of the steps, feeling slightly foolish. He didn't want to just climb the steps and walk inside. He knew she was in there, because he could hear her moving about, but with the Atavist avoidance of unnecessary talk, he was reluctant to call her name as well.

Finally, after he'd stood debating with himself for several minutes, Alise's face appeared.

"Sandon. What are you doing here? Is the pain back?"

"No, no," he said. "I, well, I wanted to ask you a favor or two. I cannot seem to get any sense out of any of the other members of your, um, family."

She nodded and beckoned him up, disappearing again inside the wagon's interior. He followed, ducked beneath the entrance flaps, then stood, still feeling awkward at one end. She gave him a slight frown, and waved at the bench. "Sit, Sandon, sit."

He nodded and complied. "Alise, I ... I would not want to impose, but there are two things you can do for me."

She stood waiting, and when he said nothing further, shook her head. "Speak, Sandon. Tell me."

He gestured down at his clothes. "Well, these, I've been wearing for almost a week now, and, I wonder if you could find me something else to wear."

She looked at him and laughed. "You should have asked before. We thought you would be more comfortable in your own clothes, made of such fine cloth. We did not think you would be at home in our simple garb. We have robes aplenty. All you needed was to ask."

"Hmmm," he said, looking down at the floor. "All right, I'm asking."

"And the other? If it's as simple as that."

"I need to talk to Badrae. Do you know where he is?"

Her face became serious again. "He is not here."

"I know that, Alise. I've looked for him. So, where is he? And Melchor and Arnod."

"Where the Prophet wills." She looked away.

"And where might that be?"

"Where the Prophet wills."

Sandon grimaced. It was the same set of stock answers again. "All right. I understand," he said.

Alise nodded, her face still serious; then her expression lightened.

"Then let us find you a worthy robe," she said. "Come." She held out a hand, and smiled.

Ten

Jarid paced around the confines of his private workrooms in the Guild quarters, almost as if measuring the limits of his allotment. Yes, lesser status, lesser space; that was how it worked. A slight sneer came to his face, and then, with an effort, he forced himself to forget about it. There were more important things to do than worry about the size of his rooms. If he could actually get Markis to play, without gaining direct knowledge of the game he was playing into, or of the real nature of Jarid's plans, then all the better.

He stood looking at his communication screen for a few minutes considering. He knew what he was going to say, but it didn't hurt to go over it one more time in his head. Markis would have to feel threatened enough to drop what he was doing and come rushing back to the Guild rooms. Jarid would have to feed him enough

information that he'd doubt, without giving the entire thing away, and that was a delicate juggling act. His brother had never been a really big thinker, however, and that should work to Jarid's advantage.

The screen stuttered and flickered a few times before the image stabilized. Jarid pursed his lips as he was waiting. Already the interference was bad. He drummed his fingers on the table, killing time while the various connections directed the call through pathways that would guarantee the best signal. It took longer than usual, but at last, the symbol indicating connect wavered into solidity in the screen's center. It flickered once or twice, shuddering and jerking in and out of definition while he waited for Markis to respond. His brother was probably out at the mines right now. He'd have to get back to the screen to answer, but any call at this time should be enough to prompt him to hurry back to the mobile communicator wherever he might be. He pictured Markis reaching for his prompter, the look of concern on his face, a muttered curse, then the looks, this way and that, working out how he was going to make his way to the communication station. As Jarid waited, the screen faded in and out. The image wavered, shook, solidified and sparked across with random lines. It seemed to be taking forever. He stood and stretched a few times waiting for the tone to arrive.

At last, the insistent chime drew him back to the desk, and he sat before the screen. His brother's image swam into view, broken by static and random lines. If this was the best connection they could get, interference from the stellar storms clearly had to be strong, getting stronger.

"Jarid," said his brother's voice from the speaker, overlaid with hissing white noise. "What is it? What's happened."

"Markis, hello. How are things at the mines?"

"Yes, they're fine at the moment. Pretty quiet, considering."

"No trouble with the Kallathik?"

"No, none to speak of. But come on, Jarid. You didn't call me simply to discuss what's going on at the mines. What is it? What's happened?"

Jarid chose his next words carefully. "It's father."

His brother's face loomed larger in the screen. "What's happened?" A note of panic in the voice. That was good. Very good.

"Is he all right? What's happened?" His face was now reflecting the panic.

"Yes, yes, he's All right. Relax. Nothing's happened to him, but there are things you need to know."

Markis's features eased slightly, but a frown wrinkled his forehead. "And couldn't this wait?"

Jarid reached out and gently traced the fingers of his right hand up and down the side of the screen and then leaned forward, dropping his voice. "Markis, no, it couldn't wait. There are things you need to know about right now. As soon as I found out, I had to get in touch with you. *Before* you spoke to father."

"I don't understand."

Jarid maintained the conspiratorial tone. "There's a lot you have to understand, Markis, and understand now. Someone's been at father. There have been accusations. We need to talk as soon as possible, and we need to do it in person."

Markis cocked his head to one side on the other end. "I'm sorry. I didn't get that. Too much interference. You said something about someone being at father, about something else. What are you saying?"

Jarid nodded in understanding and repeated what he'd just said. Markis's face drew back from the screen. The image wavered again and then he spoke. "This is going to have to wait. I have things to do out here, Jarid. You know that. We have to get everything ready. I can't trust the people out here to do it properly without supervision, and I certainly can't..." His voice disappeared into a burst of static.

"Sorry? Repeat the last."

"I said I certainly can't trust the Kallathik."

"Yes, I know. But this is far too important." He paused, waiting for maximum impact. "Do you value your position, Markis?"

"What?"

"You heard what I said. Do you value your position?"

His brother started to look concerned anew. "What are you...?"

"You need to get back here. We need to talk in private, plan how we're going to deal with this together. We can't trust this link, Markis. You have to get back here. This is serious."

Markis looked torn. "Are you sure?"

"I'm absolutely certain. How soon can you get here?"

There was a long pause. Markis was clearly debating with himself, assessing his priorities. Finally, he seemed to reach a decision, and leaned forward again after glancing off to one side. He looked tired and harassed. "All right. As soon as I can. Where will you be?"

"I'll be here, my rooms, waiting for you. I'm not going anywhere."

Markis nodded, and Jarid cut the connection, forestalling any further questions. He sat back, fingers linked behind his neck. Good. Markis would be off balance by the time he arrived. He had let him have little enough information to keep him guessing. Anything serious enough to have him called back from the mines was serious indeed. He nodded to himself then tapped at his screen to call up a strategy game. He would have some time to kill before Markis arrived.

One by one, he selected, and then lined up his chosen forces, positioning them carefully. He made one or two adjustments, repositioned a unit here and there and then rethought the composition of one of the groupings before pressing the sequence to start the game. He didn't know how old the program was, but it was one of the few non-utilitarian things saved from the wreckage of some of the first colony ships. He'd only discovered it by chance when trawling through some of the old records. One day, maybe, they'd be in a position again to have such things, to have them generally available, but such a time was not yet. Until then, he would use his own position within the Guild hierarchy to get whatever he could. He scratched the back of his head, grimaced, made another adjustment, and then finally satisfied with the composition of his forces, keyed the sequence to start the game.

#

Jarid was still playing when Markis finally arrived, looking hot and flustered. He hung on the doorframe slightly out of breath. Dust from the mines was still on his clothes. Good, he'd wasted no time at all getting back. Jarid nodded once, glanced back at the screen, determined that he had a good position and took his time checking his decision was right, before pressing to save the scenario. He'd recall the game later.

"By the Twins, Jarid. You call me back here for some mystery, the least you can do is give me more attention than your bloody game."

Jarid swiveled his chair to face the door. "No, Markis, you're right. I'm sorry. Come in." He waved a hand. "You'd better close the door behind you."

Markis did so and crossed to sit nearby. Taking a position on the edge of the couch, he smoothed his trousers, then his sleeves, wiping away some of the dust. Jarid waited, watching. He could see some of himself in Markis's face, but they were different, clearly different.

"Jarid, will you just cut playing with me? I'm not one of your damned games." His annoyance was clear on his face.

"No, you're not, Markis. And if you've quite finished spreading dirt all over my couch, you might give me your proper attention. You have to realize that this is all a game when it comes down to it. Especially where Father is concerned. It's all politics, and you damn well know it, whether you want to admit it or not."

"Yes, so what? I can get on without getting tied up in all that. There are things we have to do."

"But you want to be in a position to be able to do them, don't you?" Jarid leaned forward.

A flicker of confusion, and then a frown. "What do you mean?"

"What I told you on the communicator. Someone's been at Father, making accusations. They've convinced him that you're involved in some plan to agitate the Kallathik and seize power in the Guild."

"Who? What?" Markis got to his feet, looking aggrieved. "That makes no sense at all."

"I don't think that matters. What matters is that the old man believes it. Whatever was said was convincing enough to sway him."

"But that's ridiculous. How could he possibly think -- ?"

Jarid raised a hand. "It doesn't matter. Sit down, Markis. What matters is that he *does* think it."

"But I've done nothing!"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. Who, Jarid? Who?" Markis bunched his fists, looking around the room as if seeking someone to strike. "Who would want to do this to me?"

"Just sit down, Markis. You're not going to achieve anything getting all worked up like that. We have to approach this calmly."

Slowly, Markis relaxed his fists and then sighed. "Yes, you're right. I'm just tired." He lowered himself to sit on the couch again. "Tell me, how bad is it?"

"Bad enough. Father's talking about removing you from the current operations. You know how he gets. Once he's got an idea..."

Markis made to stand again, but Jarid gestured for him to stay.

"What good is it sitting here?" said Markis. "I have to talk to him."

"No you don't. You know you can trust me to look after things at this end. I just don't think it would be a good idea to see him right now. You know Father; he's liable to do something rash. No, I think it would be better if you let me handle him. If you can trust me to do so, that is? You do trust me, don't you, Markis?"

Markis nodded slowly. "But then what should I do?"

"You should go somewhere out of the way for the moment. Get down to one of the estates, out of the mines and out of the city. You've probably done enough to make sure everything's running smoothly at the mines. I'll wait for the old man to calm down, and then I'll choose my moment, get him alone and talk to him quietly. We'll stay in communication with each other, as much as we can, and I'll let you know when it's safe to face him yourself. This is clearly something from within the Guild. Someone is taking the opportunity of the current instability to make their move. Leave me to deal with Father and to find out who, and that way you'll be out of direct line. I think that's safer."

Markis shook his head. "You drag me in here just to tell me to go away again?"

"I know," said Jarid. "But it was the only way, Markis. You have to see that. The only way I could convince you how serious things were was to talk to you face to face."

Markis did stand this time. He crossed and placed his hand on Jarid's shoulder. "You were always better at this stuff than I was, Jarid. I think what you're saying makes sense. We need to be able to stand together whatever happens. There are difficult times on their way, I know it. It looks like we're in for a rough season. If you're sure I shouldn't talk to Father "

Jarid looked up at his brother's face, the expression of concern, the tinge of hope. The poor gullible fool.

"Trust me, Markis," he said. "I know we're in for a rough time. Don't worry. I'll fix things at this end. Now, go, make yourself comfortable at the estates. This shouldn't take too long."

"Thank you, Jarid."

"No, Markis. It's what we have to do. Oh, one last thing, though...did anyone see you arriving?"

Markis frowned again and thought. "I don't...well, yes. They saw me drive in at the gates. There was someone on the front desk. Yes, yes, I suppose so."

"No matter. But you'd better get going before someone important sees you're here. Get to the estates as quickly as you can, and I'll cover things here."

Markis gave his shoulder a brief squeeze. "Thank you again, Jarid."

"Just go," he said.

Markis crossed the room and, giving one last backward glance and nod before closing the door behind him, he left. Jarid waited a few moments then stood and crossed to the window. He spotted his brother's groundcar and noted with satisfaction as it sped out the gates. Markis was right though, and he should have thought things through a little better. He'd nearly ruined the whole thing. He thought he'd managed to cover it though.

"Now we start," he said quietly to himself.

Eleven

"Principal, I'm not sure that this is wise," said Witness Kovaar quietly. His gaunt features seemed even more shadowed than usual, even allowing for the fading light. Men Darnak peered at him.

"And why is that, Priest?"

"I don't know what benefit you hope to achieve. If you want the Principate to function properly, you must let the children start to make their own way. Interfering in what they're doing is going to do nothing more than unsettle that process."

Men Darnak snorted and the padder shuffled nervously beneath him. "Interfering is it now?" He shrugged off Witness Kovaar's look. "Do you not think I know what I'm doing? Whose children are they anyway?"

They stood before the outer gates of Karin's private holdings. Broad sand-colored walls swept off to either side, too high to see beyond at this angle. Behind them lay outbuildings, stables, the main residence, all concealed from direct view. What went on behind these walls generally remained a mystery to the general population. The holdings were self-sufficient, enough to outlast even the worst that Storm Season could throw at them. There was no sign of life near the main gates, nor beyond. Men Darnak chewed at his bottom lip, frustrated at the lack of response. The animals were starting to become restless. He glanced up at the threatening sky, and then motioned to one of the men behind him.

"Go and see if you can stir up some action. We stay out here any longer and it's going to come down on our heads." As if to underline his words, there was a rumble in the distance and a quick gust blew his cloak around him, slapping against the padder's sides.

The man dismounted and strode to the gate, reaching for the entry-phone. He spoke quietly and stood back, allowing the camera to focus on him.

"I still don't think this is a good idea, Principal," said Witness Kovaar quietly.

Men Darnak snorted again and returned his attention to the gates. "Why is there no one in attendance? Most strange. This is not the time of year to leave things unwatched."

The man at the gate nodded, and then turned back to the intercom. There was another exchange, and he turned. He did not look pleased. "They say we have to wait."

"They what!"

"Principal..."

"Don't they know who we are?"

"Yes, Principal," said the man at the gate.

"They said someone would be along to let us through in due course."

"Dammit, man. What do they expect us to do -- remain out here and get blown away?" He shook his head.

"I don't know, Principal."

Witness Kovaar maneuvered his beast closer and placed a restraining hand on his arm. "Patience, Principal. There will be someone here. Perhaps we should reconsider."

Men Darnak shook off the Priest's hand and moved his own padder two steps forward, then growled deep in his throat. There had to be something diverting his daughter's staff. Perhaps it was the preparations. He hadn't been expected, after all. Still, it was most unlike Karin to behave like this. He would have words with her later. He glanced up at the sky again trying to judge how long it would be before the threatening rain arrived. The clouds were definitely feeling heavier, grayer and there was a charge present in the air around him, prickling his senses. Curse the girl; he was not used to having to wait. He shifted again in his saddle. Something must be holding them up, some problem with the household preparations that required her personal oversight. In any case, he would talk to her about her staff.

"Witness Kovaar, will you go and see what the delay is?"

The Priest gave him a long steady look, saying nothing, but sat where he was.

"Did you not hear me, Priest?"

Any response was forestalled by the appearance of one of Karin's own people at the gate. The man stepped through the small side door and motioned the party forward, as the broad gates swung inward. Men Darnak frowned at the man as he urged his padder past, but the uniformed functionary returned the gaze unflinchingly. Men Darnak shook his head and turned away, his jaw clamped tight.

Leannis Men Darnak had equipped all of his children well. Their property holdings extended over broad rich land, many-roomed dwellings sprawling across the inner enclosures. There were separate quarters for stabling, and for living quarters to accommodate the many household staff. Neatly sculpted gardens and pathways meandered between all. Yosset Clier had done very well out of his attachment to the Men Darnak daughter -- position, lands, political influences far beyond the worth that his family name might at first indicate. There was more than one way to move beyond familial heritage on Aldaban, but it was not the norm. Clier's position existed simply because of Karin, and ultimately, it was she who ran the man, and thereby the Guild to which he was attached. Men Darnak had never really found much to admire in the oily little spineless upstart, but the marriage had been expedient, helping to solidify the Men Darnak influence over the Guilds themselves, and so he'd approved it. Thus far, there had been nothing to prove him wrong. Thus far

They reached the stables, and he swung himself from the saddle, looking about while the rest of the party dismounted. By now, someone should be here to greet them, to guide them to the reception rooms, but still no one had appeared. He frowned with annoyance. Kovaar returned his look.

"Where are they, Priest?"

Even the man who had opened the gates had disappeared, leaving the entourage alone in the vast courtyard in front of the stables.

"I don't know, Principal. You would think -- "

"Yes, you would, wouldn't you?" he snapped, cutting the priest off in mid sentence. "Come. Let us see what is keeping my loving daughter from treating us with the proper politeness we are due." He turned to the rest of the group giving them a distracted wave. "The rest of you wait here." He turned back, and motioned Kovaar to follow, striding off in the direction of the main hall.

Karin had always been the most capable of his children -- ambitious, clever, able to read the nuances of political byplay with little effort, growing up with that innate sense of the machinations at work behind the scenes. There had been times when he had cursed the societal traditions handed down by the First Families. Karin had every capability, if not the right, to take up a position within the Principate's hierarchy, but he just couldn't ignore the fact that tradition dictated otherwise. And now, because of her arm's-length relationship with the hegemony, she needed all the support she could get. With Tarlain out of the picture, her platform would be less stable, less solid. He rubbed the back of his neck and grimaced. Perhaps he had been a little too hasty in his actions with the boy, after all.

Waiting until the Priest caught up with him, he flung wide the glass doors at the end of the audience hall that led through the neatly tended garden they had just passed. The garden was neat, just like everything inside these dwellings. Karin was almost obsessive about having things in their place. Sometimes he almost pitied Yosset Clier his life with her. He stepped into the long room, glancing about at the furniture covered in tidily arranged protective covers. Even the edges of the covers trailed in neat lines, following the borders of the wide stone flags making up the floor. He knew that she would even have people coming in during the entire length of Storm Season, sweeping accumulated dust, or straightening anything that had been shifted out of place by any tremors. No. Better Clier, than he.

The chamber was dim. He turned to...

What was he doing?

He had come to see Karin. But what was she doing here? She shouldn't be here.

"Sandon, why are we here? We're not using these residences at the moment. Why is Karin here? Sandon? Where are you Yl Aris? I need you to "

He looked at the gaunt figure standing behind him. "But you're not Sandon. Where's Sandon?"

The man spoke evenly, calmly, in a high, reedy voice. "Principal, we are here to see Karin. You want to see how she's settling in with the transition."

Men Darnak blinked a couple of times, and thought about what the man was telling him. The man? Who was...

Witness Kovaar?

Yes, whatever Kovaar had told him seemed right. The transition. He turned back to the room. Where was everyone?

"Go and see if you can find some signs of life, Priest."

He crossed to one side of the room and freed one of the broad armchairs placed evenly along the wall from beneath its protective cover. He tossed the dustsheet carelessly on the floor. There'd be hell to pay from Karin, but that was the least of her worries at the moment. Turning, he lowered himself into the armchair's deep

padded support and resting his arms on each side, steepled his fingers in front of his face. "Well, Priest? What are you waiting for? I will remain here."

Kovaar hesitated for a moment more, then ducked his head and disappeared up the other end of the room and through a connecting door. Men Darnak was left alone with his thoughts.

He really should attempt to find out where Tarlain had gone. After the argument, the boy had simply packed his things, taken his groundcar and left. That was a concern, for if there were problems with the transition, particularly with Tarlain no longer in the mix, then he'd have to take more care, more of a guiding hand to make sure things went smoothly, not only with Karin, but also with Roge too. He felt a momentary pang of guilt. Perhaps he had not spent enough time with the boy, given him enough attention. What with the affairs of the Principate... But no, he'd always been a loving father. Always. And he did love the boy. Nobody could deny him that.

So why had he let him leave like that? And where the hell was he now?

A deep furrow grew in his brow. What had he been thinking? He didn't even know where Tarlain had gone. He tapped his two forefingers rhythmically against his lips. Perhaps he had spoken with Karin or Roge before leaving. He was sure that Karnav Din Baltir would have some idea where he might have gone. And he'd be damned if the Guildmaster would not tell him. Approaching Din Baltir would be awkward, particularly after the confrontation, the way Din Baltir himself had been drawn into it. Better to approach it from another angle. He could get Sandon to but no, he couldn't even do that any more. Hopefully Karin would know. He frowned again. They really ought to be here by now.

Levering himself to his feet, he glanced about. The room was far too dim for his liking. He looked for a light switch, but considering the time, thought better of it. He wandered up the side of the room to a large wood cabinet set against the wall. He remembered the cabinet; he had installed it in this very spot himself when the children were still young. He slid the dustcover from it and let it slide to the floor. Opening the leftmost top drawer, he ran his hand inside. Yes, just where he had left it. There wasn't a thing wrong with his memory after all. He lifted the flint triumphantly, crossed to one of the bracketed lamps set into the wall and proceeded to spark it into light. He dropped the flint back into the drawer, admiring the way the soft yellow glow picked up the highlights in the rich wooden panels. Such a fine piece. He stood back and admired it, his hands clasped behind his back. It was a good piece. A fine piece of craftsmanship. He stepped forward and rubbed one hand up the side, feeling the smoothness of the rich polish. Sometimes it was easy to forget the finer things that had come with his former life.

"Father?"

He glanced up to see Karin standing in the doorway, Witness Kovaar hovering behind her. She quickly glanced around, took in the two crumpled dustsheets lying tumbled on the floor, the open drawer, the lamp upon the wall and her lips pursed in disapproval. Her gaze returned to him.

"What are you doing?"

"Waiting for you, Karin."

"But what are you doing here?" She crossed to stand in front of him. Kovaar scurried across the stone-flagged floor to stand beside her.

"That's a fine welcome for your father," said Men Darnak.

Her lips remained set in a firm line, and a vague frown appeared on her face. She nodded and lifted one hand

to touch his shoulder.

"But the preparations " she said, as if that was explanation enough.

"Well, surely you can take a little time," he said. "You have people enough to look after them for you."

"Yes, yes, I suppose so. But you should come inside. We've already cleared this room."

He nodded and followed as she turned and led the way. Witness Kovaar followed behind, not having said a word.

Karin led them into one of the inner rooms, a large dining room set with a long table and several high-backed chairs. Family portraits hung on the walls. The bracketed lamps were already lit, and the room was bathed in a welcoming warm glow. She gestured to the chairs and crossed behind the table to seat herself, folding her hands on her lap before her.

Men Darnak sat, looking across at his daughter, slightly put out by the reception. Not a word of how he was. Just an impassive gaze, as if waiting for something. He returned her gaze and waited.

Finally, she spoke. "Well, Father, what is it? What can I do for you? We're awfully busy."

He narrowed his eyes. "I understand you're busy. We're all busy."

"Yes, but what with the transition, and the preparations, and everything else..."

He glanced up at Kovaar, who cleared his throat and looked away.

"Well, you can take a little while to talk to me, can't you?" He glanced at Kovaar again. "Dammit, man. Sit, will you? You make me nervous hovering there just out of my sight. At least stand where I can see you."

The priest looked sheepish, then pulled out a chair and sat, looking down into his lap, his eyes averted.

Men Darnak turned back to face Karin. "So, how are the preparations proceeding?"

Karin nodded slightly. "Well enough, I suppose. You know yourself that the quakes are strangely sporadic this season. Their lack of predictability is making it hard."

He nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose so. But things are in hand."

"Of course they are," she said a little peevishly.

"And what of your brother?"

"Oh, Roge is fine. He'll take appropriate advice when I think he needs it. He has his own things to worry about in Technologists at the moment. Trying to explain why they're having so much trouble predicting the quake activity is hard enough, let alone the storms. He has people looking after the trivial things."

"I wasn't talking about Roge."

"Tarlain?" She paused for a moment as this sank in. "Why, we haven't heard from him. After what happened, I wouldn't think -- "

"Wouldn't think what?" he snapped. "Wouldn't think that I'd be worried about him? That I didn't care? Of course, I'm worried about him, Karin. What I did may have been for the best interest of the Principate, but I still care about Tarlain. Why wouldn't I?"

He paused, trying to read her expression, but her lips were pressed tightly together, her face a mask.

"All right," he said, lifting a hand, then lowering it to the arm of his chair. "I'm worried for other reasons too. The balance within the Guilds. The structure. Cutting Tarlain out of the equation has more impact than I first realized. You should realize it to. Roge has the Principate; he has Technologists. But you have what? The connection to Primary Production is only through Yosset.... Where is he by the way?"

"Oh, he's off attending to something "

"Yes ... to what?"

She shrugged. "He's worried about his precious groundcars or something. Wants to supervise the final storage himself. I don't know."

"All right. But we know how much real influence Yosset has in the Guilds. Then there's Welfare. We have to be assured of their support."

Karin rolled her eyes. "Roge and I have already discussed all that. Tell me something important."

Men Darnak leaned forward. "It doesn't pay to become overconfident. So, you've already talked about it. Very good. And now what?"

Karin crossed her arms. "I don't think that's any real concern of yours now, Father, is it?"

"What?"

"I said, I don't think it's any real concern of yours any more. I know what I'm doing. Yosset knows what's good for him, and Roge will see the logic of what I intend. What more do you need to know?"
He stared at her incredulously.

Witness Kovaar lifted his gaze and cleared his throat once more. "Principal, if I may suggest -- "

"Shut up, Kovaar! Just, shut up!" He braced himself, ready to stand. "Karin, I cannot believe you're saying this."

"Father, just sit down, will you? Sit down and listen. You passed the title of Principal to Roge. When you did that, you stepped into the background. You must have expected us to be able to perform the task you set us. You must have believed we had the capability. There is no way you could have taken such a decision without that faith. Make no mistake, Principal Men Darnak, you taught your children well."

He eased himself back into the chair. He turned to Witness Kovaar, seeking advice, a reaction, anything, but the priest had his gaze fixed firmly back in his lap. Again, he suffered a pang of regret. If Sandon had been here

Slowly he turned to face his daughter again. "You cannot mean that."

She frowned again, this time leaning forward. "Of course I mean it." Then her features softened. "It is time, Father. It's time for you to step back, to relax. It is time for you to take some well-earned rest. Since Mother

died, I've watched you. You've driven yourself, never stopping, never taking the time you need to come to terms with her passing. You have been a good teacher. You've been a good parent, despite the burdens of the Principate. We have watched and learned from you. You have prepared us well. Now it's time for you to rest. It's time to let us take the load."

He felt all the strength leave him for a moment, and he slumped back into the chair. She was right. He stared across at her, the clean features, the honey-brown hair and he glanced up at the wall behind her. There, mirroring Karin's coloring, the steady gaze, the clear open features, hung a portrait. Twelve, fifteen years old, the painting was still the woman he had wedded. Sadness and loss welled up inside him, but he pushed it down. Instead, he just felt suddenly weary. Gavina had always been the voice of reason, his steadying hand. He swallowed and pressed his lips together, seeking composure.

"No, Karin, you're right. But you cannot blame me for wanting to take a part, to help. I can't just step away."

She placed her hands gently on the table edge before her. "No, of course I don't blame you. And I know you can't. But if we need help, we'll come to you."

He looked down at his old, pale hands and pressed the fingers of one with the other. "I'm still concerned about Tarlain," he said quietly. "Have you heard nothing?"

"Roge and I talked about it. We think that the most likely place for him to have gone is the mines. He's spent so much time there over the last few months that it makes sense. He and his beloved Kallathik."

He glanced up at that, but let it pass.

"But why would he go there?" he said.

"Does it matter? He'll be as safe there as anywhere, and if he wishes to continue any of the work he started in Welfare, then that's the place for him to do it." Her voice had become all business again. He peered across at her, assessing. Sometimes he wondered at just how much hardness nestled inside her.

"So, what now, Father?" she asked. "Will you go back to your estates?"

"Well..." He considered for a moment. "I thought we might stay here for a few days. Rest up. Then, I think we might head out to the mines and find your brother. He can still be useful to you."

She shook her head emphatically. "I'm afraid that's impossible. Edwin has already told me you've got about thirty men with you. I have nowhere to put them. Not now. There's enough with getting ready for the move without my household having to put up with thirty more, and their animals and everything else. I'm not equipped for that. We're not equipped."

Again, he was forced to look at her in disbelief, then shake his head. "But we have just traveled from the estates. You don't expect us to camp in the grounds do you?"

"Absolutely not. More than thirty of you? If you had announced you were coming, I would have tried to discourage you. As it is, there's no way I can accommodate that number of people. I don't know what you were thinking, but there is simply no way. I don't know why you think you need such a large collection of hangers-on anyway."

He sat where he was, unmoving, unable to find the words.

"I believe, Principal, we might be better heading for the mines, if that's your plan," said Witness Kovaar,

finally. "We should make the journey before the storms really set in."

Men Darnak answered, still staring across at Karin. "Yes, Priest, I believe you're right." He pushed his chair back and stood, still without moving his gaze from his daughter's face. "Come, we should get the group ready to leave." He turned, striding from the room, not even bothering to check if Kovaar was following, leaving Karin sitting there with a self-satisfied expression across her face.

He barely knew what he was feeling as he marched through the audience chamber. He reached out a hand and dragged the dustcover from another chest as he passed, letting it billow and fall on the stone flags behind him. At the end of the long room, he threw wide the doors and stepped out into the cloud-filled gloom. He'd already walked half a dozen paces before he noticed it was raining. He stopped, his teeth clamped firmly together and turned his face up to the sky, letting the large heavy drops beat against his face.

"Principal."

"What is it, Priest?" he said from between clenched teeth.

"We should get out of this weather. Get the men together."

Men Darnak slowly lowered his face and looked at the pathetic figure huddled beside him, stepping nervously from foot to foot. Damn him. Damn all of them.

"Yes, you're right" he said, and with a frustrated sigh, headed off toward the stables.

Twelve

Sandon scratched at his stubbled chin, then gave a wry grin. It was more than stubbled now. The itch was starting to drive him mad. He could barely remember the last time he had gone unshaven for so long. He stood just outside Alise's wagon, waiting impatiently. That was another thing he couldn't get used to. Not a single one of the Atavist community ever seemed to be in any sort of hurry. He could understand why, from spending long hours poring over the passages in the large book left to him by Badrae. Everything with a time and a place. And so said *The Words of the Prophet*. At first, he couldn't wait to get away, to be off to find what had happened with Men Darnak and the Principate. After the first four or five days -- it was so hard to get any sense of time amongst the Atavists -- instead, the idea that had started working in his back thoughts had started to take real shape.

He'd been here over ten days, now, but there was no real sense of urgency. The day-to-day preparations at his estates would look after themselves. They were used to his long absences on various tasks for Principal Men Darnak. He only really supervised to give himself a sense of comfort. No one would be missing him at the Principate, and the only actual person who really mattered in the equation had effectively banished him. Men Darnak would not be expecting Sandon to show up in defiance. Spending so much time with Alise hadn't hurt either. He could almost feel as if there might be a place for him here. She had ministered to him, showed real concern, even talked to him about life here among her people when pressed hard enough.

He glanced down at the old homespun robes he now wore, then ran one hand over the rough weave. It was coarse, but still slightly soft at the same time. They were much more comfortable than they looked. The thick hood guarded against cold and wind alike, and the shapeless cut hid a multitude of sins. He cleared his throat and scratched the side of his face again.

He could hear noises of her bustling about inside the wagon, getting her things together, but he knew better than to call out to hurry her up. She would take her own sweet time, just as all of them did. He scratched at his chin again -- he had to stop that -- and turned to watch the rest of the camp. Something was different today. There seemed to be more activity, all at the same unhurried pace, but there just seemed to be more.

"Sandon, ah there you are."

Turning his attention from the campsite, he swung to face her. "Yes. I was waiting for you, Alise."

She frowned reprovingly, shook her head, and then smiled. "Always in such a hurry, Sandon. I hope I did not keep you waiting too long."

"Well, no, I suppose not." He gave her a quick smile. "Not too long, anyway."

She half returned his smile, looked slightly puzzled for an instant, then seemed to dismiss whatever was troubling her. "So," she said. "Are you ready?"

He had promised to accompany her to collect some of the plants that grew further inland from the edge of the escarpment, plants that she apparently used in her treatments and remedies. He wanted to learn as much as he could now. He needed to understand the Atavist way of life as best he could in the limited time available to him if he was going to carry out his plan. There were too many dependencies right now, but at least he had a way forward. Going with Alise as she went about her errands would allow him to observe yet another aspect of their life and give him convenient opportunity to ask the hundreds of questions that kept tumbling through his head. He had to sort them out, prioritize them and talking to her helped that process.

"Come, Sandon," she said, leading off, the hand-woven basket she carried held in the crook of her arm.

"Where are we going?" asked Sandon.

She answered without breaking stride or turning around. "Up behind the hills there grows a profusion of plants. If the Prophet wills it, we will find what we need."

Her stride was quick and sure, and Sandon had to hurry to catch up. They moved through clusters of tents, the groups of Atavists performing various tasks. Everywhere, still, despite the unhurried pace of the adult population, the children ran between the tents and the tether lines. Sandon shook his head. Did the onset of puberty release some special chemical into Atavist blood to slow them down? There was certainly no restraint shown in the younger members of their numerous family. Nor a great deal of discipline as far as he was able to observe. Perhaps it was discipline by example that brought such order and unhurried calm.

"Is there something special going on, Alise?" he asked, having finally matched her pace. "There seems to be more activity than usual."

She didn't answer; she didn't break stride.

"Alise?"

"What is it, Sandon?" Her attention was fixed on the landscape stretching out and upward from the camp's edges.

"Is something happening that I should know about?" Sometimes it was exasperating trying to extract the merest shred of information. Patience. He had to be patient.

"We are leaving soon, if that is what you mean."

"Leaving?" He hadn't planned on that. Not yet. "Where?" he said. "Yes, yes, I know." He echoed her words even as she spoke them. "Where the Prophet wills it."

He sighed. She seemed not to notice.

"Well there must be someone who knows where you're going."

She gave a slight shrug. "Yes, Badrae, some of the other Elders. Of course they know, but then they know better what the Prophet wills."

Then he would have to find out, if he could ever track down Badrae long enough to ask him the question. His plans hinged on knowing where they were going to be and when. As he thought about this, he lapsed into silence. Without his questioning, Alise fell silent too, and then after a couple minutes more walking, pointed over toward a slight sandy rise further up the slope. They headed in that direction, and as they walked, Alise started to hum a low tune. Sandon glanced up briefly, trying to see if the tune was anything he might recognize. It was a slow, sweet melody, but nothing he was familiar with. There was something almost ceremonial about it.

As they crested the low rise, the landscape became shrubby, scattered with small stunted bushes, hard and gnarled against the seasonal winds and the poor, sandy ground. They stretched out as far as he could see, finally disappearing behind another rise further up the slope. While he had stood there looking, Alise was already ten paces ahead of him. He grunted and moved to catch up.

"Where are you leading us, Alise? There hardly looks anything usable here."

"No, not yet. Up further. That's where I usually find the plants we seek, but they only appear in this time close to Storm Season. It is important to be here at this time for that reason. Normally, there are fewer in the seasonal camp, but it is good to be here."

"Uh-huh." He nodded. "And for any other reason."

"Sometimes," she said. This time it was Sandon's turn to frown, but already he knew better than to try and seek more explanation of a statement like that one. It had all the characteristics of yet another as-the-Prophet-wills-it response. He looked sideways to peer at her face, but there was nothing for him to divine. She looked off across the landscape, a faint smile on her lips, the humming starting again, almost as if it had never been interrupted. He watched her for a while as they walked. If it had been another time and another place...

He would have to find Badrae soon, if they were about to break camp. He must find out which direction they would head, but he had no idea if the Atavist elder would be forthcoming about their plans either. With any luck, they would coincide with his own. He would find Leannis Men Darnak. He would find him and then, well then, he'd do what he did best. He'd observe and he'd assess and when the time was right, he would act. He had to put things to rights, or at least try. It was the least he could do for Leannis Men Darnak. He owed him that much.

Traveling with the Atavist family would allow him the freedom to get where he had to go undetected, and then, when he found Men Darnak's party, hopefully join with them. There were three main things he was counting on when that finally happened: The general lack of attention paid to the Atavists by the rest of the population should assist with his cover; the deep reliance on the teachings of the Prophet should give him some connection with Men Darnak; and lastly, his own role over the last few seasons, always in the

background, always unobtrusive. All these things should work in his favor. He had already decided to borrow a supply of Alise's healing ointment to keep his skin stained dark. Pale-faced official Sandon would be transformed into the dark skinned, robed and bearded Atavist. There were too many ifs, but at least it was a plan, and he could improvise as he went along. He was good at that.

"Sandon, where are you going?"

He'd been so bound up in his own thoughts, that he'd completely lost awareness of his surroundings. He turned around to see Alise standing there, basket in hand, quite a distance behind. "Um, sorry. I was thinking."

"We will start here. Come, let me show you what we are looking for."

She placed the basket down on the ground beside her and knelt on the sandy ground. Feeling slightly sheepish, Sandon made his way back to where she waited for him expectantly.

"It is funny, Sandon. Sometimes you remind me of Tchardo. Do you know who I mean?"

As he joined her, he shook his head. The name was familiar, but he couldn't remember from where.

"In *The Words of the Prophet*," she said in response to his blank look. "Always lost in your own head. Always heading in another direction. You should learn to focus, as Tchardo did. Find the true path, Sandon. There is a lesson for you there."

Yet something else from that damned book. "Hmmm," he said.

He stooped to join her. Tchardo. It was a good name. It was a name that an Atavist might easily use .

#

They spent most of the day wandering from place to place, stopping and gathering while Alise explained the purpose of one or another plant, how to recognize the areas they might grow, which ones to avoid. By the time they headed back to camp, Sandon was marveling at the level of knowledge she seemed to carry around in her head. As they wandered down the slope, Sandon could see that the preparations for departure were well advanced in their absence. They would be breaking camp soon, perhaps the following morning. He really needed to find Badrae. If they were truly going to be leaving, then the older man should be around the camp somewhere. He had to be.

"Listen, Alise," he said. "I have to go and do something. Will you be all right with these?"

"Yes, of course," she said with a smile. "I could have shown you what we need to do to prepare them, but if you have other things to do..."

"I would love to have you show me, Alise, but really, I have to do this now."

She nodded. "Thank you for your assistance."

"No, Alise," he smiled back at her. "Thank *you*."

As he headed off toward the camp's center, Alise made her own way to her wagon. Sandon felt a little torn. He really would have liked the opportunity to spend some more time with her. Still, he had other priorities now.

Many of the elders kept their wagons and tents in an area on the other side of the camp, and he headed that way. The wagons he passed now had a full complement of tightly wrapped bundles stacked on the trays underneath. Pots, ropes, other pieces of equipment hung on pegs along their sides along with water skins and sacks. The central fires bustled with activity as the older family members made preparation for the communal evening meal. Long low trestle tables had been set up around the central clearing. It made sense. Constantly on the move, a mobile community, they couldn't do with permanent furniture. Anything that could be transported on a wagon would be practical, hence the trestle tables. They could be slipped away under the wagon beds for transportation, along with so much else. There had to be less transient Atavist communities dotted about the place elsewhere, those involved in farming and raising crops. He wondered how they interacted, whether it was a system of trade and barter, but he couldn't think what it was this particular family might trade. Something for more thought, and he filed it away in the back of his head along with the multitude of other bits and pieces he was accumulating.

Now, where would he find Badrae? The elders were over that way, if he remembered correctly. He was just about to head toward their wagons, when he saw something that drew him up short and made him quickly reach for his hood. He had spotted Badrae, and with him was a pair of the other family elders, but that was not what had stopped him abruptly in his tracks. With them stood another man, an outsider, and he wore the robes of a priest. Witness Kovaar! Sandon ducked his head, trying to draw further into the shadow of his hood. What was the man doing here, of all places? Resisting the urge to turn and walk quickly away, he peered across the intervening space and watched.

The four men appeared to be in deep conversation. Badrae shook his head and held out his arms, palms outstretched. Sandon narrowed his eyes. Kovaar. But wait. This was not Kovaar. This man was heavier, with hair, and it was gray. It wasn't Kovaar at all. But that still didn't explain what a priest of the Church of the Prophet was doing here in the midst of an Atavist camp. The priest stabbed the air in front of him with one finger, and Badrae shook his head again. The other two elders were still discussing something, their faces close together, and then one of them turned and said something to Badrae. The older Atavist seemed to consider, then nodded slowly. The priest nodded in return, gave a formal gesture of blessing, then turned and disappeared between the wagons. Sandon hung back, waiting to see what would happen next. The three elders drew together in discussion. After a few moments more, the other two left, heading in different directions across the camp. Badrae remained, staring out over the evening activity, seemingly deep in contemplation.

After a moment's consideration, Sandon decided that this opportunity was as good as any.

"Badrae, Alise informs me that we're moving camp," Sandon said as he approached. Sometimes, the direct approach was as good as any. "I would like to come with you, if I can."

It took a moment for the older man to answer, and when he finally did, he seemed distracted.

"Oh, Sandon. Yes. Yes, if you want to. You are welcome among us."

"But where will you be headed?"

"Where the -- "

" -- Prophet wills. Yes, I know. But Alise said you were perhaps closer to the Prophet's will, that you might have some idea where you were headed."

Badrae seemed to collect himself, and he turned to look at Sandon's face, peering first into one eye, then the other. "Why is it so important to you, Sandon?"

Sandon hesitated, and the pause was enough to prompt a nod from the older Atavist.

"So be it," said Badrae. "You have your own reasons." He fixed Sandon with a steady gaze before continuing. "We will likely head to one of our settlements down on the plains. We need to stock up before Storm Season descends with its full force."

"I am not familiar with your settlements, Badrae."

The older man held his gaze. "There are several," he said. "The ones best able to fulfill our needs are to be found close to the area of the mines." His expression became slightly calculating. "Will that suit your purpose, Sandon Yl Aris?"

The use of his full name caught Sandon slightly off guard. "Yes, yes. Of course. And I am immensely grateful for all you've done for me, all you continue to do for me."

"It is no more than we would do for anyone." Badrae turned back to look over the camp. "You are welcome to stay with us as long as you need." There was an air of finality about the last statement.

"Um, Badrae..."

"What more, Sandon?"

"Was that a member of the Church of the Prophet I saw with you earlier?"

"That is none of your concern."

"But isn't it -- ?"

Badrae swung then, his eyes full of sudden fire. "None of your concern!"

Sandon swallowed the rest of his question. "Yes, of course," he said, gave a brief tilt of his head and turned away. He could feel Badrae watching him all the way as he walked back across the camp, heading for Alise's wagon.

#

The noise of breaking camp drew him to consciousness. He stumbled out of the small tent and looked around himself. During the course of the night, much of the campsite had already been cleared down, the remaining items being bundled and packed away in wagons and carts. The camp was much barer now, and only a few of the tents remained in place. Sandon's was one of the last. Without a word, two of the Atavist family, having noticed him emerge, headed toward his tent.

"Hold a minute," he said to them, and they waited patiently while he ducked inside and retrieved the book. It would be likely that they'd have weeks of travel, rather than days, and he preferred to have something else to do other than bombarding Alise with further questions. Eventually she'd get bored with his constant chatter,

and he didn't want that at all. As soon as he reappeared, the pair of Atavists started breaking down the tent and folding it away. Within moments, it had been carted off for stowing in one of the wagon beds that seemed to carry more than half of all the camp's equipment. It was all remarkably efficient. Sandon ran his fingers through his hair and looked around for the communal wash facilities, but there was no sign. He wrinkled his nose in distaste at the thought, but it was clear he'd have to make do with being unwashed and unkempt, at least for today. Hopefully Alise could put up with him. Perhaps she might have some sort of herbal scent he could apply to mask the odor of his body. That brought another thought. He'd made the assumption that he would travel with her. He'd better check that it was an acceptable arrangement. Despite the amount of time they'd already spent together, he didn't want to presume, and he wasn't sure about how their whole association was being viewed by the rest of the family. No, he'd better check. He headed for her wagon to do exactly that.

He needn't have worried. Alise was inside, making the final preparations, making sure everything was secured and stowed in its proper place. Bunches of herbs, the results of their gathering exercise, hung upside down from the wagon's ceiling, and a faint vegetable smell permeated the atmosphere inside. Alise looked up from what she was doing as Sandon poked his head through the rear flap.

"Sandon. I wondered when you might appear," she said.

He flashed her a brief smile. "Well, I'm here," he said.

"And not before time. Are you ready to leave? I presume you are coming with us."

"Well, yes. That's my plan. I have nowhere else to go right now."

"Good. Though you should think about a better reason for being here, don't you think?"

He felt slightly chastened by the remark. "No, I didn't mean -- "

"It is all right, Sandon," she said. "You are coming with us, and that's what matters. If you can help me with the last of these things, then we too shall be ready to leave."

He placed the book down on one of the internal side benches, and she glanced at it, then gave a look of approval. With a brief nod, she beckoned him over. "Here, I need to tie this. Hold it in place for me?"

He crouched beside her and held the bundle in place while she secured it with coarse twine. He watched her as she concentrated on her task, the clear blue eyes, the healthy skin, her hair swept behind and tied behind her head. This close, there was the scent of her again, clean, fresh. She looked up from what she was doing and caught him watching her. An almost imperceptible twitch of her lips, and she looked away again, and then crossed to secure one last bundle.

"There we are," she said without turning around. "That is the last of them. If you come up front with me, we can join the rest of the group."

He moved through the wagon, and pushing through the front flaps, positioned himself on the hard board up front. No cushions, no padding, nothing. Hours of traveling like this, days even, and he was going to have hardwood impressed forever on his backside. He refrained from commenting, and turned his attention to the various wagons and carts drawing together in an ordered line in the center of what had, until this morning, been a bustling campsite. There was no confusion, no real noise. It all happened in the unhurried, uncomplicated manner that most of the things undertaken by the Atavists had occurred since he had been here.

"So, you found Badrae?" she asked, as she steered the padders toward their place in the line.

"Yes," said Sandon.

"And did he satisfy your curiosity?"

"More or less. He gave me some idea where we might be heading. Which reminds me. Do you often have dealings with the Church of the Prophet, Alise?"

She looked at him with an almost frown. "I don't know what you mean," she said.

"Well, do you have much to do with them?"

"Our beliefs are based upon the same teachings, but other than that, I still do not know what you are asking, Sandon."

"It doesn't matter," he said. She gave him a curious look, held it for a moment, and then let it pass.

Theirs was one of the last wagons to draw into place. A few moments more, while everything got settled, and then the front wagons drew out, leading the rest of the line. For such a large group, the departure was as ordered as the preparations. The wagons creaked forward in a long column. A few Atavists rode up and down the sides on their padders keeping pace with the general progress, and others walked, either carrying packs, or with the aid of long *ajura* wood staves. The sound of the wheels turning and the occasional snort from one or other of the padders was interspersed with the clanking of metal pots and containers against the wagon sides. The start of the column moved unhurriedly forward, up the slope and away from the clearing.

"Alise?"

"Yes, Sandon."

"Where are we going?"

"Where we are meant to go. Where the Prophet wills."

"But we're heading the wrong way." Sandon peered around the side of the wagon and looked behind them, then turned back. "The path down is there, behind us."

"So it is," she said. "One of them. But we have something to do first."

"What do you mean?"

She smiled at him. "Wait and see, Sandon. Learn patience."

He clamped his jaw tightly shut and willed himself to calm. Sometimes she spoke to him as if she were indulging a small child. All right. He would wait. He turned to watch the passing landscape, occasionally focusing his attention on one or another of the passing Atavists who rode or marched alongside their wagon. There was still little to distinguish one from the other. He'd have to spend a lot more time with them if he wanted to really know them and be able to tell them apart.

Two hours, they took to get where they were going. It was a long march up and behind the city of Yarik, obscured by intervening rises and inhospitable scrubland, the landscape broken intermittently by a solitary gnarled and stunted spiny-leafed tree or profusion of boulders. This was a direction that the city's population rarely ventured in, up and away into the mountainous wasteland. There was nothing really there for them. Perhaps as kids, they had come this way, exploring out beyond the city's edges, but not for years. He scanned

the area around them as they traveled, looking for anything unusual, which might prompt them to come this way rather than down from the plateau. Just a continuous stretch of rock, bare sandy ground and vegetation struggling against the landscape.

Finally, when he had decided there was no reason at all for their direction, the lead wagons drew to a halt. One by one, the rest of the line pulled up beside them, forming a wide arc halfway up the low rise. Individually and in pairs, the Atavists climbed down from their wagons and carts, from their paddlers, or strode up to join the broad semi-circle upon the hillside. Alise beckoned for him to climb down, and she led him forward to join the rest of them. The entire family grouping was here, now, arrayed before their vehicles and animals. They waited a few moments more, while one or another tethered their beasts to a wagon side, or moved quietly into position. Sandon frowned. He had absolutely no idea what was happening.

"Alise?" She put a finger to her lips and gently gripped his arm to still him. They stood there, unmoving, silent, the breeze blowing around them, stirring their robes, until from the arc's center, a five strong group of elders stepped forward and turned to face their brethren. One of them spoke, an elder that Sandon did not recognize.

"One more season, and we return to learn the lesson of our forebears," he said in a loud, clear voice. "One more season, and we see the legacy left to us by the First Families." He turned and headed up toward the crest. The other four elders fell in behind him and walked, slowly, solemnly up the rise. When they reached the top, they turned, and together, they gestured the rest of the large group forward. Sandon glanced at Alise, but she seemed to be totally absorbed in the proceedings. As she too stepped forward, he took his lead from her, falling in beside her slow, measured step.

As they reached the top of the rise, moving as one, the entire group knelt and clasped their hands in front of themselves. Sandon was left standing, staring down in front of him, his mouth open, barely comprehending what lay before him. Broad arced shapes stuck up from the dip in the landscape below. Curved like vast, rusted claws, they reached up to the yellowing sky. A flat area of wide flat metallic surface ran between these spars, clumped here and there with vegetation as it had pushed through in places, fighting against all resistance. Mounds of indefinable objects lay scattered across this surface, either below, or attached to the ribcage of the huge metallic beast that lay spread out before him. Halfway up one of the ribs, a vast sheet angled to the ground, forming an inclined plane to the sky. A ball of old dried vegetation rolled across the lower surface as the wind rose and plucked at his hair and clothes. He kept staring, unable to do anything else, finally remembering to close his mouth as Alise reached up and dragged him down to kneel beside her.

He could barely drag his eyes from the sight in front of him as finally understanding came to him. This was one of the landing craft that had come from the enormous colony ship that had carried their ancestors across the reaches. This was all that remained of one of the vessels that had made it down in that disastrous landing so many seasons ago. Here lay the skeletal remains of his heritage, of their history, of all of their history. Of course he knew that there were still remains of these craft, but he had forgotten about them, pushing the memory to the back of his mind. He hadn't really thought about them since he was a child. It was the sort of reminder of the Return that most of the population preferred to forget.

The elder was speaking again, but Sandon barely heard what he was saying. "Let us give thanks to the Words of the Prophet, that he has shown us the way. Let us spend a few moments in reflection, understanding what it is we have been shown. Let us thank the Prophet for these reminders of the goodness and rightness of our lives." He raised his hands and closed his eyes.

Beside Sandon, Alise bowed her head and closed her eyes. All along the line, the other Atavists did the same. Sandon stared at the picture in front of him, the decaying remnants of the vision that had brought them here and thrown them helpless against the whims of the twin suns above.

Thirteen

"Yosset, I don't care about that at all. You know what we have to do, but you're always so afraid of upsetting anyone."

The portly Guildmaster sat across from his wife, feeling harassed, looking everywhere but at her.

"By the Prophet, Yosset! Are you listening to me?"

"Of course I am," he said, staring down at his hands. He sniffed, tasting the scent of ozone in the air. More storms. More storms coming.

"Well, pay attention to me. I will not have him coming here trying to disturb our plans."

Yosset sighed and finally looked up at her. "But this used to be his place," he said simply.

"It used to be *one* of his places," she snapped. "He gave up the rights to most of his holdings when he passed the title to Roge. He hasn't personally *lived* in this house for years. He hasn't lived in any of our holdings for years. You tell me where he's been. Tell me. Either at that little farmstead out in the middle of nowhere, or at the Principate itself. Not here. Not at the place up at Yarik. Not anywhere. For all those years, he could have had virtually anything he wanted, but could he have cared less? No, not in the slightest. No, I don't want him here. I don't want him at any of our residences. And, I might add, it's because of him that we don't have enough room to deal with him and his cursed entourage." She sliced her hand through the air with finality.

Yosset sighed again. For all her wit, for all her intelligence, for all the support she gave him, sometimes his lovely wife just made him feel tired.

"But he's your father, Karin," he said pleadingly.

"I don't care if he's the Prophet himself. He is not staying here." She spun back to face him. "Do you understand me?"

He nodded mutely.

"And as for you, get this through your fat round head," she said turning away and starting to pace again. "Leannis Men Darnak is no longer Principal. You do not have to cower and fawn at his every breath. Remember who your position depends on now, Yosset, and remember it well. It is certainly not my father. Who controls the Guilds now, my dear, sweet husband?"

He rubbed his lips one over the other, moistening them. "Why no one controls the -- "

She cut him off with another impatient wave of her hand. "Who is Principal?"

He hated it when she got like this, speaking to him like a child, no, rather speaking *at* him -- he was not her idiot brother -- but he kept his mouth shut.

"Well?"

"You know as well as I do."

"Fine. And who owns Roge?"

He stared at her for several seconds. She actually believed that...

Finally, he buckled under the intensity of her stare, the confidence in her stance, and he looked away. She was right. Just in the same way that she owned their landholding, that she owned her husband and she owned their servants, she also owned her brother. And through him, she now owned the Principate. Yosset turned back to face her, and slowly he smiled. By the Prophet, he loved this woman. What had he ever done to deserve her?

"Karin, I still think you are worrying unnecessarily," he said. "We have no guarantee that your father will turn up here. Last time we saw him, he was off to the mines, and that was before we did the move. He could go anywhere from there."

She rolled her eyes and paced behind the chairs. "Whose holdings are closest? Do you think he doesn't know that we're here? Use that fat head of yours for once, Yosset."

"I cannot see why it is such a problem."

She sat opposite him again. "Because I don't want him here. Because he will only get in the way. I don't want his presence confusing anything else."

He nodded, reconciled to playing along. "My love, what do you think we should do?"

"Go and talk to the staff. Make sure that it's clear he isn't welcome. Let them behave accordingly. And if he asks for me, or you, we're nowhere to be found. That's it. I have too much to think about without having to deal with him face to face again."

"Karin, I don't see what -- "

"I don't care what you see or don't see, Yosset. Just do as I tell you."

He bit off any further reply, and pushing his chair back, stood to do exactly that. He looked at her sitting there for a few moments, but she was off in her own thoughts again. Such determination, such focus, such innate *power*. There was just so much to admire in her.

#

Images of the skeletal ship rode with Sandon for days after they'd left the crash site. He spent lengthy periods musing about how their history had shaped them, shaped the structure of their society and the existence of others, such as the Atavists themselves. The Atavist family used the ship as a reminder. All of their people used it as a reminder. Were they right? He glanced across at Alise riding beside him. She believed it. He knew there was no point questioning her about it. Every time their conversation strayed to areas of belief, she fell back on her standard phrases and responses. Could she be right, and he be so wrong? He fingered the burgeoning beard on his chin and turned back to watch the passing landscape. As much as he wanted to test

her beliefs, he knew there was little to be gained from the exercise. Perhaps some day, but not now. Not for a long time. There were other things he might like to test too, while he was about it. He turned to look at her again, but she was off in her own place.

Three weeks they'd been traveling now. Three weeks of interminable hours on a hard wooden seat on the front of the wagon, and gathered in temporary campsites at night. The time had given him many opportunities to watch and learn. He was at last really starting to understand the Atavist way of life, their routines, their ways of interacting with each other. Alise was always ready to explain when he had questions, and she did so without preconception, allowing his explorations, but yet never stepping over her own personal line. Over the days, he had learned where her boundaries lay, and knew where and when to avoid them.

The wagon train took its time getting down from the high Yarik plateau. After moving on from the crash site, they wound inland and then tracked a wide arc before heading down a rugged track that led down to the plains in a desolate unpopulated area with scant sign that any had even ventured that way. The only thing that told Sandon otherwise was the well-traveled path itself, barely marked by the instability of the area, or encroaching brush. As they creaked and rumbled their way down the mountainside, Sandon wondered how much else he didn't know. The Atavist community seemed to survive conveniently unobserved by the rest of the world.

The surroundings had changed over the last few hours. They'd passed through farmland, through open undeveloped countryside and through forested areas, deep with *ajura* trees, broad-based and shiny with their armored bark. Every few days, they'd seen one or two small groups of Atavists passing in other directions, but no party as large as their own. They exchanged brief greetings, and then went their own ways. If anything, their interactions had seemed almost perfunctory. What it was that held these people together? It had to be more than faith, didn't it? All these questions were accumulating in the back of his head. He needed to understand, to put it in a place where he could appreciate what made it work. One day, when he had the space, it would make sense, and then he'd be far better equipped to do what he needed to do. For now, he just needed to understand enough to be able to carry out the start of his formative plan.

Small squat plants dotted the surrounding fields, their broad, flat, fleshy leaves spread out from a central spine. Between the plants, dead grasses made a browning carpet, starting to rot and blacken with the ever-present moisture and soaking rain. He knew this landscape; they were nearing the mines, and somewhere close by sat a large Atavist community, a permanent community, from what he had been led to believe. It was a good base to start from, but then? The problem was, he had no idea how he was going to link up with Men Darnak and his party. If he even believed in the Prophet, he might consider some benevolent guiding hand. No, if there was going to be a guiding hand, it was the guiding hand of Sandon Yl Aris.

"Alise, are we getting close?"

She turned and gave him a half smile. "How did you know that?"

"Well, when I spoke to Badrae, he said we were headed for somewhere close to the mines. I recognize this area. If I'm not wrong, that's where we are, or close to it."

"Yes, there is not far to travel. But what then, Sandon? What will you do?"

"What will I do? That's the question all right."

She looked vaguely disappointed. "You are leaving us, aren't you?"

He gave a short half laugh. "If the Prophet wills it." He caught himself and responded to her frown. "I'm sorry," he said, lifting one hand. "I don't mean to mock. The truth is, I really don't know. All I know is that I

have to find the Principal and his party. There is something that doesn't sit right, and for some reason, I have a duty to see if I can do something about it. I don't expect you to understand."

Instead of protesting, she nodded. "I will be sorry to see you go."

He met her gaze, and was surprised to see that she really meant it.

"You know," he said thoughtfully. "I really will be sorry to leave. I do enjoy spending time with you."

She held his gaze, searching his face. "With me, or with us, Sandon?"

"With you, with all of you, I suppose. But particularly with you."

"I am glad," she said. She turned her face away again, but her slight half smile didn't escape his notice.

An hour later, the marks of settlement appeared ahead. Traces of smoke rose to haze the sky, and the road upon which they traveled became rutted and grooved with the passage of many wagons. Proper buildings huddled together across gently rolling fields. A large barn dominated, and beside it, another barn-like building. For a few moments, Sandon couldn't tell what it was that felt wrong about the structures in front of him, and then he realized. They were all made of a kind of mud brick, rather than the characteristic stone he was used to seeing, all except for the barn-like structures, which were built from wood. What advantage could they have from building out of such materials? It must be far more vulnerable to the vagaries of the shifting landscape. A profusion of wagons and carts sat between and beside the buildings, and between it all, in and out walked people, all decked in the traditional Atavist garb. He looked down at his own homespun. He could be at home here, just as much as any of them, except for a few fundamental problems that would be easily dealt with in time. He pushed the thought aside; he couldn't allow himself to forget why it was he was here.

The wagons fanned out, finding places out of the central roadway and the family members dismounted, moving to see to their animals and their equipment. Sandon sat where he was, watching, observing the greetings and keeping an eye out for Badrae and the other elders. They seemed to have moved to another area of the town, or they had pulled in somewhere that Sandon couldn't see. Alise disappeared into the wagon itself. He heard her moving about inside.

"What now, Alise?" he said back behind his shoulder.

"Well, we make ready. There will be a service, and then we will all get together for the evening meal."

"Uh-huh. And what can I do?"

"That depends what you want to do, Sandon."

"Hmm. I don't know. I'd really like to find Badrae, or at least someone who can give me some directions."

"But you said you were familiar with the area." She poked her head outside again.

"Yes, generally. But I don't know where we are now."

She shook her head and sighed. "Sometimes you are like a small child, Sandon."

She lowered herself from the front of the wagon, and then reached up a hand to him. "Come down. Come with me. We will find you what you need."

He looked at her blankly. "But...?"

"But what? You need directions, and no doubt some mode of transport. If you are determined to leave us here, there is very little I can do but help you in whatever way I am able. So, come."

He clambered down and stood before her as she pursed her lips, looking at him. Now she really was making him feel like a child.

"This way," she said.

Sandon tagged along behind her as she walked quickly in and out of parked carts and wagons, and between buildings. He barely had time to take in his surroundings as she led him to the front of a small mud brick cottage and knocked.

The door opened, and a grizzled old man stepped out.

"Alise, welcome," he said. "May the Prophet be with you."

"And with you, Manais. This is Sandon. He is in need of our help."

The old man looked at him appraisingly. "So, Sandon, if the Prophet wills it, I might be able to help you. What is it you need?"

"Um," Sandon said, not really prepared for this unexpected turn of events. Again, he was struck by the openness, the unquestioning acceptance. Alise had spoken, and the old man had simply accepted.

The old man, Manias, tilted his head to one side, waiting.

"I need to know how to get to Bortruz," Sandon said finally.

Manias looked at him speculatively, and Sandon instantly knew why. Somehow, what he had said had marked him as an outsider. After a pause, Manias scratched his head, then peered about himself. "Bortruz, eh? That is not difficult. It lies in, oh, that direction." He pointed off to his right. "It's about five days by foot. Less by padder."

"That is the other thing," said Alise. "Would you have an animal he could use?"

The old man looked from one to the other. "Yes, of course. I have one stabled in the community barn. If you wait a moment, we can go and fetch it." He disappeared back inside the cottage.

"Alise. I cannot ask that," said Sandon.

"You have not asked," said Alise flatly. "But you will receive."

Manais reappeared before Sandon had the opportunity to say anything else. The old man beckoned them to follow. A few minutes later, and they were standing inside the larger of the two wooden structures Sandon had seen from the road, Manais walking down between a line of stalls. The building's vast interior seemed to serve many purposes. Piles of wood lined one wall. Feed lay stacked in bales in an upper platform, and there were sacks and barrels spread throughout the building's length. The air was thick with the smell of animals, and dust and hay. The tang of wood undercut it all, overlaid by the damp smell of wet earth. A couple of other Atavists attended to their business within the barn, but paid the newcomers little mind.

After a while, Manais returned, leading an animal behind him. The padder had seen better days, but was still trailworthy, or so Sandon thought.

"Beware," said Manais. "He is a stubborn beast, but he will get you to where you need to go, if the Prophet wills it."

Sandon took the proffered harness, and thanked him.

"Come back to the house. You will need some supplies for your trip."

"But -- " Sandon started. Alise raised two fingers to her lips to still his protest. He followed mutely as they led the way back to the cottage.

Outside the barn, Sandon beckoned Alise closer and leaned in to speak in a low voice.

"Alise, I don't know how I can accept all this ... this generosity. You've already done far too much for me."

She gave him a slightly reproving look. "It is what we must do. The Prophet dictates it. Do you not know that already?"

The padder pulled against him, and he stumbled. Grunting, he pulled on the harness to bring the animal under control. "I know," he said. "But I don't expect it. When I talked about leaving, I didn't mean immediately. I ... well, everything is just so sudden."

"You need to follow what path you must, Sandon. I am just trying to help you on your road."

He sighed. "I know that, and believe me, I'm grateful."

She looked at his face for a few moments before speaking again. "You are a strange man, Sandon."

They reached the small dwelling and Manais disappeared inside, bidding them wait while he got a few things together. Sandon, left outside with Alise, the activity of the Atavist settlement all around them, suddenly felt awkward.

He reached up and stroked his chin, absent-mindedly toying with the beard while he watched her, suddenly realizing that he really was going to miss this woman. Somehow, she had taken the decision of his departure completely out of his hands, as she had seemed to be able to take many decisions out of his hands over the past few weeks. How was it that he had unconsciously allowed her such control? To break the awkward silence, he sought for something to ask her.

"Alise, so who is Manais?"

"Manais lives here. He is one of our family."

"Yes, of course. But why him? You came straight here."

She nodded. "Yes. It is hard to explain. Among your own people, I suppose you would call Manais my father. He is still my father, but all the elders are our parents, in the same way that the Prophet is our ultimate father."

He lapsed into silence. Her father? Yet she called him by name. There was so much still he did not understand.

Manais interrupted any opportunity for further questions by reappearing with a bundle in his hands. He strapped it firmly to the rear of Sandon's beast. Meanwhile, Sandon looked from father to daughter, searching for similarities.

"So, Sandon, remember what I said. Go that way," said Manais, pointing. "The road is not clearly marked, and what little there is may have been disturbed, but it is that general direction. You will either reach Bortruz, or the mines. Both lie that way. If you reach the Bodrum River, you will have gone too far." He turned to the pack. "There is some food there, some bread, some cheese, and a little to drink. It should keep you until you get to where you are going. And I hope the Prophet wills you success in whatever it is you seek."

Sandon nodded, thanked him once more, then turned to Alise.

"Again, thank you for everything you've done, Alise. And give my thanks to Badrae too. If it wasn't for him..."

She said nothing, merely fixed him with that steady gaze. Feeling even more awkward, he stepped forward and reached for her hand.

"I hope to see you again soon," he said.

She gave his hand a slight squeeze and returned his look with a gentle smile. "Oh, I am sure you will, Sandon if the Prophet wills it. Now go. Do what you have to do."

Just before mounting, he turned back to Manais. "But what about the padder?"

"What about it?" said the old man. "It is yours."

He glanced over at Alise, but she shooed him on. Without another word, he mounted and headed the padder out of the Atavist settlement and away in the direction Manais had given him.

#

Ideally, Sandon would have liked to spend more time getting to know the Atavist community, how it operated, to understand the way they worked together. Alise was right, though, he had things to do. He thought on this as the padder rocked beneath him across the dull ground, picking between the tall spines of the Storm Season plants. The animal grunted and snorted, flicking its tail back and forth, though there were few insects to trouble it. He looked back over his shoulder, but already the details of the Atavist township were becoming indistinct.

"Do what you have to do," she had told him. So, what exactly was it that he had to do? Though he had the skeleton of a plan, he had no details. More than three weeks had passed since Men Darnak had dismissed him from service, and in that time, he had no idea what had happened to the Principal and his party. He looked the part of an Atavist now, he could almost be an Atavist, but that didn't really get him closer to the Principal. For a start, he had no idea where Men Darnak might be. Heading toward Bortruz was merely the first logical step. There was a small office of the Principate there, and he could use that to find...

But no, he couldn't. In his current guise, he could barely gain access to Principate buildings, let alone access any information. None of the Principate functionaries in residence was likely to give him the time of day. In

fact, most of the population was just as likely to shun him as an outsider. Wonderful. His perfect disguise was going to be the perfect barrier to letting him accomplish what he needed. He shook his head. What precisely had he been thinking?

Up ahead, two figures were heading toward him. Both were men, Atavists. One carried a pack, and the other had a staff. Sandon watched them as they neared. They barely glanced at him as he passed. One of them, the one bearing the staff, looked up as they came alongside and gave him a brief nod, then they continued on their way in silence. Sandon returned the nod and looked back over his shoulder to watch them. As far as he could tell, not a word passed between them as they headed on down the poorly marked track into the distance. Sandon felt a sense of relief. Clearly, they had taken him for another of their own number. So that much was good -- at least he looked the part. Alise's constant words rang inside his head. "If the Prophet wills it." But it wasn't some long-dead Prophet that was going to make this happen for him. If the stellar alignment was right, if the heavenly influences were in his favor, then perhaps... No, this was nothing to do with planetary positioning. What he really needed now was a healthy dose of luck.

Fourteen

Tarlain huddled shivering in his burrow. Well, it was more like a cave really, a cold damp cave, but it felt like a burrow. Outside, yet another storm raged. The wind moaned through the tunnel complex and streams of water trickled through the vent holes dotted the length of the passageways that honeycombed the area. Despite the weeks of being here, he was still no closer to understanding the layout of the place. One tunnel looked just the same as any other and he had no idea how the Kallathik managed to find their way unerringly from one place to the next. At least he assumed they did. For all he knew they could be blundering around from chamber to chamber oblivious. It was not beyond belief, because despite his time here, here in the very heart of their lives, he was still no nearer to a true appreciation of how their minds worked. Either way, they seemed to have a faultless sense of where they were going in the confusing network of passages and tunnels, ambling slowly along with their customary unhurried pace, scraping along the metallic floors and walls. But then, he didn't know how they told each other apart either. There was quite a lot he didn't seem to understand.

He stifled a sneeze and pulled the blanket tighter around himself. Oh what he'd give for a warm room and a proper bed right at this moment. It hadn't been so bad before the storms had really set in, and they were nowhere near the worst of it yet. Curse his own impetuosity. It was all well and good to have ideals, but it was easier to have them when you were warm and comfortably dry. He stood and shuffled over to the shelves on the other side of the room, the blanket still draped around him. At least there was no vent hole above this particular room, so it didn't collect the run-off water directly. The damp still made its way in though, seeping into every crack and space within the entire colony. The Kallathik didn't seem to mind slopping through puddle after puddle, dragging trails of greasy moisture along the tunnel floors behind them. Muttering to himself, he reached for the small oil stove that sat on one of the shelves, set it down in the middle of the table, and pumped it a few times to get the oil flowing through the system. When he thought he'd primed it enough, he pressed the ignition button and the acrid, sharp smell of burning *ajura* oil filled the chamber as the pale yellow-green flame blossomed into life.

Tarlain wrinkled his nose, not that he was all that sensitive to smells any more. His own smell had ceased to bother him a couple of weeks ago. It was one of the hazards of being buried away here in the heart of the Kallathik tunnels. The Kallathik appeared to have no need of bathing. At least he'd seen no evidence of it so far. In the meantime, Tarlain had made a few brief trips to the nearby mining facilities to wash and clean up a little, pick up supplies and seek some word of his family. Now, with the weather, and the land's growing instability, he was forced to keep to the tunnels for days at a time, going out of his mind with boredom. And

all the while, he'd heard nothing. Nothing. Not from Karnav Din Baltir, not from Karin nor his father. Nothing.

He would have expected lack of contact from Roge, but he had had some hope that at least Karnav might have made some effort to contact him. After all their long discussions and the plans they had constructed late into the night, after everything they had spoken about, it was unbelievable that the Guildmaster had made no attempt. That lack suddenly made him wonder about Din Baltir and his motivations. What was it that had changed so quickly?

Shaking his head, Tarlain reached for the large water jug and filled a pot that he placed on top of the stove to heat. A strong, hot mug of tea might make him feel a little better, bring back some semblance of humanity. As he placed the jug back down, he noted that the water was getting low -- he must remember to refill it. He glanced up at the shelves. The food containers were dwindling too. Whether he liked it or not, he'd have to make another expedition to restock supplies before long. Another trip to the mining facilities, about half a day's travel from here would be a welcome relief from the claustrophobic oppression of the tunnels, but he would have to wait for the weather to lift and that was another thing over which he had absolutely no control.

As he sipped his tea, he thought over the past few weeks, the litany of failure. For the first few days after he'd arrived, Tarlain had started to try and build the vision that he and Karnav Din Baltir had spoken of together. The fire of that vision burning inside him, he had wandered the endless tunnels and passageways, seeking an audience for his impassioned words among the Kallathik. That had been the idea. And instead, he had met disappointment. Slowly, the fire had dwindled, fading to a guttering flame. Once or twice, he had become hopelessly lost and spent hours, even whole days trying to find his way back to his meager cubby hole. The Kallathik had been unhelpful at best, either ignoring him completely, shoving him aside with their large bulk as they ambled up the passageways, or failing to understand what he wanted when he finally managed to attract their attention for a moment or two. There were times he could have cursed the damned aliens for their stupid incomprehension. He caught himself and frowned at the strength of the thought -- his people were the aliens here, not the Kallathik. Hundreds of years, hundreds of Seasons, but they were still the aliens. And still this cursed world tried to reject them.

A creak and groan came from further down the corridor as something within the surrounding landscape shifted. He sat where he was, waiting to see if it was the herald of something new. They had had a brief quake about ten days ago, and the noise had almost deafened him, metallic booming noises pulsing through the entire complex, loud creaks and the sound of metal under stress. How the Kallathik lived with it Storm Season after Storm Season, he had no idea. He swallowed the last few drops of tea and placed the mug carefully back down. After a few more seconds had passed, he sighed and relaxed a little, feeling the tension go out of his shoulders. It looked like they were clear for now. He glanced around the chamber. This was no place for a person to live. No place at all. The Kallathik could have it.

Standing again, he shrugged off the blanket and bundled it onto the bed. He had either to achieve something here, or leave, find some other way to do what he needed to. Enough. Curse his father anyway. Sufficient time had passed. He could spend the rest of his life down here moping, but it would achieve absolutely nothing. And dammit, he would achieve something here. He had to.

Resolved, he moved to the high, roughly shaped doorway leading out from the chamber. He felt around the edge, searching for the scratched star shape he had scored into the metal on the other side. He didn't need to check that it was there, but it gave him a sense of comfort knowing that it was. He stepped out into the corridor's gloom and headed deeper into the complex. It was hard in the semi-dark avoiding the pools of water, and before long, his boots were damp, squelching with every step he took. At each intersection, he felt for his mark, tracing his fingers across the metallic surface, confirming that he was traveling in a direction he knew would actually lead him somewhere rather than around and around, retracing his own steps. It would do no good to get lost yet again and spend the rest of the day wandering aimlessly through the passageways

trying to find his way. Somewhere down in this direction, he knew the central meeting chambers lay. He'd been there once or twice, and if anywhere, that was where he was going to find his proper audience.

He found another mark at the entrance to a tunnel, and headed down that way. He'd not gone a dozen steps, when a vast shape loomed out of the darkness ahead of him, and he was forced to press himself flat against the wall or risk being scraped along beside the shuffling Kallathik. He stifled a curse and when he was sure the beast had no companion trailing along behind, peeled himself off the wall and stepped out into the passageway once more. He shook his head at the thought. Even he was starting to refer to the Kallathik as beasts in his own mind. That was not good. It was not good at all.

He sloshed down the corridor, heading toward a patch of light that he knew to be another randomly placed vent hole to the surface. There seemed to be no pattern to the spacing, but the murky shafts of light gave welcome relief from the gloomy dampness of the corridor's depths.

He reached the end of one passageway, and feeling around for the mark on each wall of the connecting branches, located his direction. This far in, the tunnels were slightly warmer, the atmosphere thick with humidity, and over it all lay the tang of damp metal. He hadn't believed before coming here, that metal would have such a distinctive smell, but it was everywhere around him, different from the smell of damp earth, or of wet wood. At least it didn't have the sharp unpleasantness of burning *ajura* oil, but it wasn't a smell he'd look forward to ever again if he finally got out of here. He had a sudden vision of a much older Tarlain, dressed in tatters and wandering through the darkened corridors muttering to himself. He grimaced and shook the thought away.

A scraping sound further down the tunnel alerted him to the approach of another Kallathik. Forewarned this time, he was flat against the wall before the creature was upon him. As it drew closer, it slowed. It took one more step, and then stopped completely. The vast head swiveled to face him directly. Several moments passed, and though Tarlain couldn't make out its features in the dim light, it was apparently regarding him. A moment more, and it seemed to make up its mind. It took another step closer, then stopped. Tarlain waited. To have been noticed at all was one thing, but to be worthy of such sudden attention was another thing entirely.

The Kallathik drew close to him. It tilted its head to look down on him. "You are lost," it said. It was a question.

"No, I'm just..."

"You are lost," repeated the Kallathik. This time it was not a question. "You should be with the others."

"Others? But--" Tarlain bit off the rest of what he had been going to say. Others? Who else could be here? Perhaps finally Din Baltir had come looking for him, or perhaps someone from his father. "Yes, of course," he said quickly.

"What are you doing here?" The Kallathik stared at him with its impenetrable gaze.

"I... I just needed a breath of fresh air. I went for a walk. I guess I lost my directions."

The Kallathik said nothing for several long moments, just standing there, peering down at him. Tarlain's unease grew. He cleared his throat. The Kallathik turned its head to look up the passage down which Tarlain had just traveled, then turned back to peer down at him again.

"Go back down this passage," it said. "Continue to the end. Turn. Walk more. It will lead you to the chamber with the others." It looked at him for several moments more, as if determining what it had just said had sunk in, then turned to face back up the passage and continued on its way.

Tarlain, still pressed flat against the tunnel wall, could barely believe what he had just heard. The sound of the Kallathik scraping up the passageway faded to dull, distorted echoes, then drifted away entirely. Tarlain was left alone once more in the gloom. He could not remember ever hearing a Kallathik utter such an extended group of clear, meaningful sentences. And it was about something apparently unimportant. He frowned. Strange. But still not as strange as there being someone else here. And the Kallathik had assumed he had been part of a group. What group? What group could possibly be here? Perhaps it was something to do with Roge, or maybe Din Baltir really *had* finally sent someone. But if that were the case, they would have surely come looking for him. He pushed himself from the wall and headed in the direction that the Kallathik had indicated.

At the junction, he found one of his marks on the adjoining wall. Thinking about it, he pulled out his knife and scored another, just below the first and parallel to it. This was a tunnel he needed to remember. He ran his fingers over the twin marks, making sure they were deep enough, then returned his knife to his belt. There. On the way back, he would make other, similar marks at all of the intersections leading to this particular part of the complex. He'd had quite enough of wandering aimlessly through this warren.

As he neared the chamber at the end of the last passage, the sound of voices drifted vaguely through the heavy air. He couldn't make out individual words, but he could tell there was more than one voice. A man's voice, followed by a different man's voice, and a Kallathik followed that. Then the second man's voice came again. Tarlain slowed, drawing closer to the wall, his sudden caution prompted by memories of the last time he and his father had spoken. He didn't know who these people were or what they were doing here, deep in the Kallathik network. His senses singing, he crept toward the yellowish glow issuing from the passageway's end.

Atavists! In the center of the vast meeting chamber stood an odd group--two Atavists and several Kallathik. They were clustered on a raised rock platform, typically used for the formal speaking of one or more of the Kallathik leaders. Lamps lit the edges of the chamber, probably as a concession to the Atavists themselves, though Tarlain had never quite worked out how the Kallathik managed to light lamps, or why they would use them in the first place. He moved as close as he could to the opening into the chamber, still pressed tightly against the wall. He strained to make out what they were saying, leaning as far forward as he felt was safe without risking discovery. The darkness of the tunnel itself, and the dim lighting should protect him from direct observation, at least from the Atavists, but of the Kallathik, he was not so sure. And yet, what if that particular Kallathik that had spoken to him were to return? He glanced nervously back up the tunnel, but there was no sign of any movement.

The burr and buzz of a Kallathik voice drifted to him from the chamber, working at his attention. It was completely impossible to make out what it was saying, despite straining forward to hear. Another Kallathik spoke, and it was the same. Then one of the Atavists spoke. He was an older man, bearded, but that was all Tarlain could tell at this distance. The Atavist's robes effectively hid any further detail. This one's voice, he could hear, though not all of the words. The man's speech was slow and deliberate.

"We are close, my Kallathik friend. Signs of the instability are ... sweeps down on us in the same way Storm Season grows with every day."

One of the Kallathik said something and the other Atavist nodded slowly in response. The other Atavist looked younger. The robes he wore were paler, his beard dark. He wasn't quite as tall as the one who had spoken. Tarlain got the impression that the older man was in control of the situation, the second Atavist subordinate. The sounds of a Kallathik voice again, and then the older man spoke.

"If the Prophet wills..."

Tarlain strained forward, trying in vain to decipher the Kallathik voice that followed. Nothing. This was next to useless. He ground his jaw in frustration. What were the Atavists doing here anyway? That was the big question. His caution had been worth it.

The older man was speaking now. "We have positioned our family in places that we can take advantage...as soon as the Prophet guides us." The buzz of a Kallathik voice, and he nodded, then continued. "No. You are right. We will be close enough to tell the signs. We have been close enough to tell the signs ... Seasons now." The older Atavist spread his hands. "They leave us to get on with our life. We are of no concern to them."

Another interruption, this time from another quarter, and the second Atavist answered. His voice was less deliberate, less controlled. He was clearly nervous in the Kallathik presence.

"Of course the trade is important. We understand your needs."

Tarlain frowned. The words made sense, but what they were talking about eluded him. Trade? What trade? He knew that the Atavists and the Kallathik had dealings from time to time, but like anything to do with the Atavist community, the details had more or less slipped right past his awareness, as it had slid quietly past the attention of most of the Guild community.

The older Atavist was speaking again. "When we are ready, we will pass word ... Yes, of course. They have no idea of ... numbers. And when they are struggling because everything they rely upon is no longer there, then, with the Prophet's guidance, we can step in ... finally cleanse the world of their evils for good."

A Kallathik who had been standing toward the rear of the group loomed forward suddenly, and the Atavists stepped back reflexively. Tarlain would have done the same. The movement had been so quick. It buzzed something, and the older Atavist, seeming to have regained his composure stepped forward again, moving close to the creature to say something lost to Tarlain, because now he was facing in the opposite direction. The creature's size dwarfed him.

After a few more moments of incomprehensible conversation, they seemed to have reached some agreement, because both Atavists stepped back, clasped their hands in front of themselves and together, inclined their heads. They turned, and with another Kallathik accompanying them, headed for a darkened entrance on the other side of the chamber. The remaining Kallathik clustered around each other on the central platform in a huddle, apparently discussing whatever it was that had just passed between them and their Atavist visitors.

Tarlain had seen enough for the moment. He started to withdraw back into the tunnel, sticking close to the wall and keeping one eye on the group assembled in the central chamber. He took one step back, two, and then...a large hand gripped his shoulder from behind. No, it wasn't a hand; it was harder, larger, more like a huge pincer. Tarlain felt his stomach drop. He turned slowly, swallowing, to look up into a broad Kallathik face, emotionless sets of eyes peering down at him from above. The Kallathik tilted its head to one side, its grip upon Tarlain's shoulder constant.

"This place," it said.

"But I -- "

The Kallathik looked up and peered into the chamber, before looking back down at Tarlain. It held the gaze for several moments, maintaining its restraining grip, as if processing something. It looked back into the chamber, and then froze. The grip on Tarlain's shoulder was starting to become uncomfortable. The Kallathik had ceased all movement. It might have been a statue standing there, and just as immovable. Tarlain swallowed again, then tried to slip out from beneath the creature's grasp. He was held tight. He could be stuck here like this for hours, and the pain in his shoulder was becoming unbearable.

"Please," he said. "Can you let me go? I am Tarlain Men Darnak, attached to the Guild of Welfare. I think you have made a mistake."

This, at least, invoked some reaction, for the Kallathik swiveled its head to peer back down at him.

"Welfare," it said.

"Yes, Tarlain Men Darnak. You know who I am. Guild of Welfare."

"Welfare," said the Kallathik again.

Tarlain sighed. Sometimes dealing with the Kallathik was close to impossible. "Yes," he repeated. "Tarlain Men Darnak."

There was another pause, an extended scrutiny, and then, without uttering another sound, the Kallathik released its grip on his shoulder, shuffled past him, and headed into the chamber, leaving him standing where he was as if he simply didn't exist.

Perhaps it had been a mistake telling the Kallathik who he was. It had obviously thought him a member of the Atavist party. He grimaced. All the same, it had produced the desired effect. Not wanting to push the matter any further, Tarlain slipped back up the corridor and away. Suddenly, he had a great deal to think about. A great deal indeed.

Fifteen

In the end, Sandon decided to give Bortruz a wide berth. There was nothing to be gained from attracting the attention a strange Atavist wandering around the town looking for Principal Men Darnak might warrant. That was the sort of thing people were bound to talk about despite the start of Storm Season. News of the changes in the Principate should have filtered down through the populace by now. The Principal's effective abdication would be on everybody's lips. He could hear the sorts of questions now. What were the implications? The older Men Darnak boy -- did he really have the makings of a Principal? And what of the Guilds? What did it all mean? For a mining town such as Bortruz, all these things would have significance. Any place with its major activities centered on the concerns of any of the greater Guilds would feel the impact of any such significant change within the Principate -- far more than any of the larger towns or cities that diversified their industrial base. No, Sandon wanted to find Men Darnak, but he wanted to do it without attracting notice.

The padder suddenly lifted its tail and gave a loud flatulent burst, followed by a satisfied grumble. Sandon screwed up his face and waved his hand in front of his nose. The animals really were unpleasant creatures, but at least it was better than having to walk, marginally better. He felt like he'd lost all of the feeling in his rear end over the past couple of days, and he wondered whether he'd ever walk properly again. As if to emphasize the thought, the padder stumbled, slamming its bony back into Sandon's rear for what seemed like the hundredth time. He gritted his teeth and growled deep in his throat. Cursed animals. Cursed Storm Season. That they were always reduced to this just wasn't right. He was reminded of the skeleton hulk they'd seen on the way here. The Prophet had played a cruel joke, stripping them of so much of their knowledge and technology on the way down to what had promised to be a potential paradise. Vast tracts of knowledge had been lost with the transport ships that hadn't made it. One of these days, the Guild of Technologists might finally come up with a real solution to the transport problems they faced in the midst of Storm Season, and for Sandon, that time just couldn't come soon enough.

Avoiding Bortruz had brought with it a new set of problems. He should have made the connection as soon as Manais had mentioned it. Ahead of him lay the Bodrum River, its vast flow growing as it made its way across

the plains down from the Yarik escarpment, fed by various tributaries and streams along its length. Bortruz itself used the river to good advantage, for in the depths of Storm Season, when travel of all forms proved more hazardous, the waterway provided another means of carrying produce across the face of the land. Long, flat ore boats plied its way, heading downstream to Darthan and other industrial centers, to return later bearing goods and supplies from the manufacturing complexes further downriver.

A network of man-made canals crossed Bortruz, allowing easy access for the transportation wagons. Across these canals, and across the Bodrum River itself were flexible bridges, built to withstand the land's instability, but easily reconstructed should they be damaged. Ahead of him, the river provided no such crossing, and with its body swollen by storm water, there was no way Sandon would be able to cross. If there were any ford ahead of him, it would be unusable now. He sighed and turned the padder around, heading it back in the direction of Bortruz.

Another couple of hours and the ramshackle collection of buildings that was the town of Bortruz grew ahead of him. He set his lips in a thin line. There was nothing else for it. He'd have to brazen his way through. He flexed his shoulders, feeling the stiffness of his arms and back, the reward for having spent most of the day astride the cursed animal beneath him. At least he'd have an excuse to get on his own feet again.

As he drew closer to the township, the path grew worse, not better. Deep ruts marred the surface, and with the consistent downpours, these had turned to mud. At least it wasn't raining. Sandon cast a glance upward, but the cloud cover looked unthreatening, and he looked back to concentrate on the path ahead. He tried as well as he could to steer the padder around the deeper pools and muddiest looking ground. He'd hate to come off the beast and land in that mess. Garbed as he was, he was enough of a sight, without being covered in mud as well. He didn't need to be taken for one of those wandering madmen that the Atavist community sometimes produced. Despite his best efforts, the cantankerous animal insisted on choosing its own path, and it sloshed through puddles, or squelched through muddy tracks regardless. Eventually he just gave up and let the beast have its head.

The first few buildings he passed were rudely cobbled wooden affairs, put together from planks of the prized ajura wood. Sandon shook his head at the evident waste. Still, he supposed they kept out the weather. Bortruz obviously benefited from its place within the trading chain. This close to a major Kallathik hive, plenty of the wood would pass through here. Besides, they probably used it for struts and beams within the mines as well. Here, at the outskirts, the town was quiet. Further in, he'd be sure to encounter local residents or miners returning from their daily work. It was getting late in the day, and the current shift would have to be nearing its end. He hadn't even thought about what he was going to do for the night, and that presented a whole new set of problems. He'd been through Bortruz a couple of times in the past, but paid it scant attention. He thought he remembered a bar and a store somewhere near the center of the town, but there were only vague impressions to drag up from his memory. He did recall, however, that Bortruz was not the most peaceful place in the world.

He crossed one intersection, then another. The buildings grew more solid, but it was hardly ordered. A few more cross streets, and he should be nearing the town's center. At last, he passed a group of miners, trudging wearily back from their day's work. Their grime-streaked faces were written with fatigue. Sandon held his breath, waiting for a reaction, but their gazes slid tiredly past or simply through him. They barely glanced up as he passed. Good. He let out the breath, and headed on by. The Atavist was nearly invisible in the world. Lower than the lowest, they were truly virtually beneath notice. It was just as he had hoped.

The smell of baking food wafted to him from one of the passing houses, and his mouth started watering. He was hungry, but for the moment, he preferred to hang on to the supplies that Manais had so kindly given him. He didn't know how long he'd have to travel before reaching his goal and the food might be precious. He could always scavenge from surrounding farmlands, but it was hardly proper food. The seasonal crops tended to be mainly root vegetables, reasonably tasteless and unpalatable when raw. Not his preferred method of

keeping his belly full at all. Thoughts of food put him in mind of the communal meals in the Atavist camp -- vast spreads of wholesome home-cooked produce--and the thought set his mouth watering again.

He passed two more groups of miners, and one or two townsfolk going about their business. They all ignored or simply failed to register his presence. Eventually, he drew into the center of Bortruz proper. He reined in the padder, which grumbled in response, and looked around the central square. More official-looking buildings ringed the open, muddy expanse. On the opposite side lay the official Guild and Principate office with its wide balcony and steps. Over to the left sat the bar that he remembered, and directly opposite, the main store where he could have picked up more provisions had he anything to pay for them. He fingered his beard looking from side to opposite side of the square and tried to decide his next step. One thing was sure -- here for the first time, he would have to start using his new name. Just as well to get into the habit now.

He pulled on the reins and steered the padder into a small side street that led back behind the row of buildings containing the bar, his most likely prospect for the moment. He certainly wouldn't be using the front entrance dressed as he was. The bar would likely give him his best source of information. If he could find a way to be inside, unnoticed, keeping his ears open, he might have a chance of picking up something useful. Sandon was good at listening without being seen; he'd had years of practice.

He eased his animal up the rear alleyway, wrinkling his nose at the waft of rotting garbage stirred up by the padder's feet. He found the back of the bar without any trouble. Large bins sat outside the rear door, uncovered, with piles of damp refuse trailing out of their tops. He drew the padder to a stop and looked around in vain for a patch of clear ground. Even mud would be better than the unidentifiable mounds of stuff strewn along the alleyway. Barely containing his distaste, he slid down and landed ankle deep in the putrescent mess. He found a place to cinch the padder's reins, and then stepped gingerly toward the bar's rear door, lifting his feet as high as he could with each step. Trying not to breathe through his nose, he crossed the intervening space. Bortruz. What a town.

Sandon hesitated a few moments outside the door. He had no idea how they would react. Still, there was nothing else for it. He had practiced the speech in his head several times. Lifting a hand, he gave a solid knock and waited. The sounds of shuffling came from inside, and then faded again. His hand still poised, Sandon knocked on the hard wooden door again. This time, there were steps, the sound of a bolt being drawn, and the door creaked slowly open. A big, square, stubbled face peered out.

"What is it?" said a gruff voice. Then a pause as the owner of the voice registered surprise, disbelief and then suspicion. The door opened wider, revealing a beefy man dressed in an apron, his hand reaching up to scratch the back of his head.

There was a long pause, then the man spoke again. "What do you want?"

"I am Tchardo," said Sandon. "I am seeking any honest work you might have. I can clean. I can carry. I can help with whatever you need. All I ask is some food, a place to sleep, perhaps enough to purchase some feed for my animal. I would be grateful of anything you can provide, if the Prophet wills it."

Confusion flitted across the man's face, and then he called back over his shoulder. "Hey, Milana. Come and look at what we've got here."

A moment later, and a short stocky woman with ruddy cheeks, also wearing an apron, poked her head around the man's broad frame.

"Would you believe it?" said the man. "It's an Atavist. Says he's looking for work."

"I can see what he is, Benjo. What's he asking for?"

The woman, Milana, seemed less flustered by his appearance than her companion, so Sandon addressed the next to her. "I can clean. I can carry. Any help you need. I am Tchardo."

"Says he wants a place to sleep, some food, maybe a little credit."

"Let him speak," she said.

"As he has said, Sister. That is all I want."

"I thought you people wanted nothing to do with honest folk like us," said Benjo. "What do you think, Milana?"

"Well..." she said. "I never knew any harm to come from their type, and from what I've seen, they work hard enough. It's not as if we couldn't use the help. How's it different from the other workers who come through here?"

The man called Benjo grunted. There was a pause.

"It's up to you," said Milana.

Benjo pursed his lips and scratched at one cheek. "I guess... yeah, why not. It's not as if it's going to cost us much. Here, but we'll have to find you something to wear. We can't have you getting around the bar in that outfit. You'll put the customers off. You never know, in that stuff, one of them might just take a disliking to you. We've had more than enough of your sort passing through here in the last couple of weeks. S'pose I really shouldn't be surprised to see you."

It was like a stopper had been pulled from Benjo's mouth. The words flowed out one after the other.

"Tchardo, you said your name was, right? All right, come with me." He beckoned Sandon inside. "I think I might have some old trousers and a shirt around here somewhere. They might be a little loose on you, but once you've got the apron tied on, nobody'll know the difference right? So, what brings you to Bortruz, Tchardo? You just passing through? Good idea trying to find somewhere to hole up. The storms are getting pretty bad this Season aren't they?"

Sandon nodded mutely and stood looking about the sparsely equipped kitchen. Benjo rummaged around in a storeroom and tossed some old clothes out to him, followed by an apron. He appeared moments later bearing a bucket, some old greasy rags and a broom.

"We're not busy yet. Won't be for another couple of hours, but until then, you can busy yourself with these. When the customers come in, you can help by collecting empty mugs and jugs. Bring them back here and wash them, then bring them out to the bar. After shift, things get pretty busy in here, so you'll want to be quick about it. And no matter what Milana says, I don't know you from the Prophet. So, don't go thinking of helping yourself to anything along the way. I'll know."

Sandon suddenly realized he had a problem. Alise's paste had worked on his face, hands and his arms. He'd also applied it to his neck, feet and lower legs, but beneath the robe he was as pale as the day he'd been born.

Benjo stood in the middle of the kitchen, his fists on his hips, watching. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Sandon cleared his throat, then seeing Benjo was not going to give him any privacy, he stepped into the small storeroom and behind the wall. Benjo gave a loud guffaw from where he stood. "All right then," he said. "You be like that."

Sure that he couldn't be seen, Sandon quickly slipped off the robe and clambered into the old clothes and then stepped out from concealment, wrapping the apron around himself. He held the robe, looking for somewhere he could hang it.

"No, no," said Benjo. "Give that here." He took the proffered robe, and holding it at arm's length in one hand, deposited it unceremoniously in the storeroom. Sandon still had been given barely a chance to get a word out.

"But what about my padder?" he asked.

"You've got it out the back there?"

Sandon nodded.

"Oh, it'll be fine. You can go out and check on it every once and a while if you want, but I don't think it'll go anywhere. Plenty for it to eat out there." Benjo gave a great belly laugh, then immediately sobered. "Take these and sweep the bar. Wipe down the tables, and when you're done there, we'll see about getting you something to eat before the crowd starts. Not much else to do in Bortruz, see? Everybody ends up at my place some time or other."

Sandon could easily imagine that was the case. And if so, Benjo had every reason to be jovial and full of his own importance. Sandon reached for the rag and broom and headed out into the bar proper, with Benjo still standing there, his fists on his hips watching him. Sandon caught him shaking his head as he left, muttering something to himself. "Strange times we're living in. Strange times indeed," Sandon thought it sounded like.

As he entered the bar, Milana looked up at him from behind the counter, pursed her lips, favored him with an assessing look, then nodded and gave him a smile. He returned it easily. If it wasn't for her, he might not be standing here at all.

The bar proper was a broad unpartitioned room. The bar itself, polished wood, stretched along one side and Milan stood propped at one end behind it. The only other thing that broke up the broad expanse of floor was a haphazard cluster of tables, both high and low. Stools sat around the high ones, and rough wooden chairs around the lower ones. Windows ran along the front of the room, currently shuttered, and the little light that remained struggled through the cracks. Broad double doors sat closed at the center. Sandon grunted to himself, tossed the cloth on one of the higher tables, then set to with the broom. Who would have thought it? Sandon Yl Aris reduced to wearing someone else's old clothes and wielding an old broom in a miner's bar. He smiled to himself. It was a far cry from life in the Principate and the Guild rooms, but then a lot had happened to change the way he viewed things over the past few weeks.

Milana stood watching him for a while, then pushed herself from the bar and started lighting lamps and setting them on shelves in the room's corners. She had obviously caught his smile, because she stopped in the middle of what she was doing and turned to face him.

"Tchardo," she said. "I have the name right?" When he nodded, not interrupting his progress across the dirty wood-stripped floor, she continued. "I don't know anything about you, and dressed like that, you could almost be a normal person, except for the beard of course, and your hair." She peered closer. "And that scar across your nose, but I just want you to know, we're simple people here and we don't want any trouble."

He stopped what he was doing and leant on the broom, meeting her gaze. "I don't mean any trouble, Milana," he said quietly, genuinely.

She nodded at that, then turned back to busy herself with lighting the rest of the lamps. Sandon went back to sweeping, once again struck by how much he had been removed from so much that went on in the world.

Milana finished with the last of the lamps and returned to her position behind the bar. She was joined a few moments later by Benjo, who giving an appraising look at the room and at Sandon's progress, nodded to himself. Within moments, he was in yet another conversation with Milana, who did little more than nod or make little sounds of agreement in response to the constant torrent of words.

As soon as he had finished sweeping, Sandon grabbed the old rag and started polishing the tabletops, moving from one to the other unhurriedly, all the time thinking about what he was doing here. Why had he come with the Atavist family in the first place? All right, in a way it made sense. The logical thing would have been to go straight to Men Darnak's private estates, but he couldn't have gone there by himself, and nothing would have been stranger than a lone Atavist turning up there. Here, reasonably close to an Atavist community, near to the mines, as Tchardo, he was at least in context. It was all about context, after all. An Atavist in the right setting was less likely to be recognized as something else. It still left the problem of the Principal's movements. He might just be relying on sheer luck that Men Darnak would be anywhere near the mines, but knowing him, knowing his need to insert himself into every problem personally, Sandon believed he had a fair chance that sooner or later, the Principal and his retinue would be paying a visit to the area. The other thing was Tarlain. Despite the banishment, despite the hot burst of anger that had sent the youngest son scurrying away, Sandon knew that Leannis Men Darnak cared for his children. He would have a double reason for visiting the area. The Kallathik disturbances, their impact on local mining activities and Tarlain's own apparent involvement with their cause would lead Men Darnak to have reasonable suspicion that his son might be somewhere nearby. The Kallathik hive not too far from Bortruz would be a logical choice for the boy to seek refuge, especially if he was committed to going ahead with his mysterious plans.

No, Sandon was comfortable with his reasoning; now all he had to do was find the opportunity. It might mean hanging around for a few days, but any news of a visit by the Principal would quickly pass through a town this small. He could keep an eye on the official building across the way quite easily from here. It would be the most likely place for Men Darnak to show up, if he made it as far as Bortruz. And if not, then Sandon would just find some other way to track him down.

"Tchardo, bring me some mugs from the back."

Benjo's call snapped him out of his thoughts. He'd been absent-mindedly concentrating on the stained cloth in his hand and the table surfaces beneath it and had totally missed the arrival of several locals. Already they sat around tables or clustered at one end of the bar, deep earthenware mugs or jugs propped in front of them. He quickly shoved the rag into his back pocket and headed out to the kitchen. The new arrivals had been so quiet. They were huddled in conversation, subdued. Not what he'd expect from a bar at all, but Storm Season did that to you. It dragged on the consciousness, taking you down and within yourself, away from the darkness and gloom -- away from the constant threat of what the weather or land might throw at you next. Perhaps the mood would pick up later.

He brought back a tray of mugs and started stacking them behind the bar, casually attempting to pick up as much of the conversation as he could. For the most part, these men would be supervisors or gang chiefs, overseeing work crews of the Kallathik miners. They'd have work to do themselves, but they should provide a good measure of the Kallathik mood as well. There was talk of water level in the mines, of trying to keep the pumps working to capacity. There was more than one passing reference to an Atavist presence in the area, and Benjo glanced at him meaningfully. Sandon pretended not to notice. All of it seemed the usual stuff a group of mine workers might talk about. Nowhere was there any mention of Men Darnak or his men. Then someone said something that caught his attention.

"Too much of that damn sleep-stand thing they do. Doesn't seem to matter when. Right in the middle of something, and you've got another bloody statue. You know what I'm saying?"

Sandon wiped diligently at the bar top.

Another spoke this time. "Sure, most of the time you expect one or two of them. But whole groups over the past couple of days."

"You've been getting it too?"

"Yeah. Damned right I have. Doesn't matter what you do. You yell at them, you ask them, try and prod them into action. Doesn't matter. They just stand there like a group of trees. I've had whole crews go at the same time. Why, just this morning..."

Sandon edged away. That was interesting. So, it seemed like there really was something going on with the Kallathik.

Noise levels were starting to pick up now as the bar filled and the patrons consumed more ale and wine. He made the rounds more frequently, collecting the empties and ferrying them back to the kitchen to wash and stack on new trays. As he passed, he managed to pick up snippets of conversation, but nothing further that gave him any hope.

By the time the last customer had wandered unsteadily from the bar, Sandon was tired. He'd spent the entire night on his feet running back and forth, and had found out little more than he'd started with. He wiped his hands on the cloth from his back pocket and stood staring at the now-empty bar. Benjo came up beside him and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Not a bad night's work, Tchardo," he said. "Help me clear away the last of these and put them away, and then you can bed down in the kitchen."

Sandon nodded without saying anything. He would be grateful for the stove back there, radiating heat throughout the small back room. During the busiest part of the evening, it had left him sweating, but during the still of the early morning, it would get cold. Any remaining warmth would help stave off the chill, safe and secure and out of the weather. No, he'd done well. For now, at least, fortune was in his favor.

#

It took nearly a week for Sandon to find what he wanted. During all that time, he worked for Benjo and Milana, growing to like the couple more and more, for couple they were. They were simple, good-natured folk with a direct, open attitude to life, no intrigues, no complicated schemes. Sandon had almost forgotten during his years in the Principate that such people existed, but the past couple of weeks, first the Atavists, and then this pair, had reminded him that not everyone had a hidden agenda. It was a refreshing change to not be constantly on his guard about what was said. He'd finally been forced to stable his padder on the outskirts of town, and Benjo had readily supplied him the credits to do so. He had offered more, but Sandon had refused. Benjo likely did fairly well out of his bar, but he'd been good to Sandon, and whether the bar owner could afford it or not, Sandon had no desire to take advantage. Besides, Benjo was serving him in other ways that he could hardly be aware of.

The first indication of what he was seeking came as a burst of activity over at the official offices. A solitary man arrived on a padder, bounded up the stairs and disappeared inside. Moments later, he had reappeared and ridden quickly out of town. The mere existence of the office building here in this sleepy outpost was probably more lip-service to the Guild hierarchy than anything else, and having any sort of visitor, messenger or otherwise, had to be an event in itself. Sandon had just caught the arrival out of the corner of his eye, but as

soon as he saw the man, he knew his patience had been worthwhile. The messenger had been wearing the Men Darnak colors. He strained at the window, watching to see what happened. Moments after the messenger had left, two functionaries burst from the front doors and headed rapidly down the front steps. Sandon was out the bar door in a moment, moving to intercept one of them. As he approached, he recognized the man as one of the bar's regular evening visitors.

As casually as he could, he called out. "Hello there. What's going on?"

The man looked over and clearly recognized Sandon. "Can't stop," he said. "Men Darnak's in the area. Asking all sorts of questions."

"Which Men Darnak?" asked Sandon.

Barely pausing in his rapid stride across the square, the man answered quickly. "The Principal. The *Old* Principal."

Sandon watched the man disappear up a side street. So, Leannis Men Darnak was nearby, and close enough to send these lower-station officials into a flurry of action. Sandon stood where he was, thinking, running his fingers through the beard at his chin. It was time to take his leave. Tchardo the bar help was about to disappear, to be replaced once more by Tchardo the Atavist.

Sixteen

He wasted no time retrieving the padder, donning the old Atavist homespun and taking his leave of Benjo and Milana. They appeared genuinely sorry to see him go, and in a way, Sandon himself was sorry to go, but he had more important things to spend his time worrying about than how these folk whom he'd known for a mere couple of weeks felt about his departure. Funny the last few weeks had been nothing more than a series of leave-takings, one after the other. Milana had fussed about, giving him a blanket and provisions for the journey, as well as a light wet-weather overcoat for him to take. He'd never seen an Atavist wearing anything else than their simple homespun robes, regardless of the weather, but he took it all the same. He had no idea how many days he'd end up on the road again, and there was no guarantee that he'd be able to find any decent shelter. Even if they had already moved on, the Men Darnak part would have a proper camp, and they'd be on one of the main routes leading into the town. He knew very well from his own experience how the Men Darnak entourage operated and he had seen the direction in which the messenger had departed. He quickly headed the padder out of town, dug his heels into its flanks, and winced as the animal broke into a bouncing trot. Such a short time and he'd forgotten about the jouncing, bony back and uncomfortable seat. It didn't take very long to be reminded.

He headed out of town, across the network of connecting canal bridges and on toward the main road. The padder was sluggish. It seemed that in having it stabled, it had received more of the good life than it was used to. Every now and again, the jouncing step brought bursts of gaseous odor in a rhythm that kept time with the animal's pace. Sandon pulled up his hood in a vain attempt to ward off some of what the padder was sharing. The day itself was still, and though clouds whipped across the sky far above, the air at ground level was calm. For once, he would have been grateful for at least a hint of a seasonal breeze. He passed a few travelers on the road, but most hurried past without even a glance. Once again, he had apparently slipped further into his guise as a wandering Atavist.

After about a mile, he neared the bloated, muddy flow of the Bodrum River. A wide masonry bridge crossed

from shore to shore, broad, flat stones forming its bulk, smaller cobbling stretching across the top. He wondered briefly how long it was since it had been rebuilt. It was one of the passing tasks of the Guild officials stationed in Bortruz. When the bridge shook loose, they had to organize the repair crews that would painstakingly lift stone after stone back in place. Meanwhile, Bortruz's trade would continue unhampered, serviced by the canals and the river itself. As he crossed the bridge, he peered warily down into the churning waters. Even plying these ways in the long oar boats must be hazardous. He was glad he was in no position to find out, but for those who relied upon it for their living...

Signs of true civilization quickly faded as he left the bridge behind. The long roadway stretched before him, flat land peppered with Storm Season vegetation stretching out in either direction. Off in the distance to the left, ahead of him, the ground slowly rose, leading up and away to the hills where another collection of mines and the major Kallathik settlement lay. Far across to the right, well out of sight from his current position, lay broad farmland and further on, the slopes bearing the thick, ancient *ajura* forest, the source of most of their timber. The ancient forests had grown for hundred, perhaps thousands of Seasons, but they were starting to thin at the edges as the Guild of Primary Production plundered the ready produce, used to such good effect in their furniture and their houses and in so many other things, not to mention the trade with the Kallathik.

Sandon turned his attention to the road ahead, noting that in places it was in sore need of repair. No doubt the Principal would have it recorded and passed back to those responsible with the appropriate words of disapproval. Very little escaped the old man's attention. If Sandon was ever again in a position to ... no, there was no point even thinking about it. The way things were developing, he might as well reconcile himself to the role of a wandering Atavist as regaining any status within the Principate let alone anything resembling his old life. Everything else, for now, was just wishful thinking. He gave a heavy sigh and scanned the landscape ahead for any sign of the Men Darnak camp.

After a couple more miles, set off the roadside in an open field, he saw what could be nothing than what he sought. There was a cluster of large tents and wagons. Padders lay tethered off to one side. At this distance, he could barely make out the detail, but the flashes of color spoke Men Darnak in a clear and unmistakable voice. More than once he had been in a camp such as that. He squinted, trying to make more detail. There should have been more tents than there were, more animals. Either the Principal was traveling with a vastly reduced retinue, for which he could hazard no reason, or this was a lesser encampment, and the main body was stationed somewhere else. He pulled the beast to a halt and sat where he was, observing. There seemed to be nothing unusual about the camp activities. Men went about their business, moving between the tents, or wagons, shifting things from one place to another. Sandon turned to scan the surrounding countryside, but there were no other signs of life. Nor was there anywhere to find cover. He chewed at one side of his moustache, considering. He couldn't really ride straight into the camp, so that still left him with a problem. He couldn't even tie up the padder if he was to wait around and observe, looking for his opportunity. Why, he hadn't even worked through a plausible story as to why he might want to join up with the party in the first place.

Sandon sat there watching for over an hour, the padder becoming restless and complaining more and more with every passing minute. Once or twice, he had to jerk sharply on the reins to stop it wandering off looking for somewhere to graze, not that it would find anything in the immediate area. The seasonal vegetation provided nothing fit for a padder to eat, and that suddenly gave him an idea. Thankful for the light raincoat Milana had given him, he dismounted, dug around in the bundle strapped to the padder's rear and wrestled it free, then spread it out on the soggy ground. Still holding the padder's reins in one hand, he sat, cross-legged, waiting for darkness to fall. The animal grumbled and complained, and once or twice, he had to tug firmly on the reins again to still it, but eventually it subsided and its head dropped as it dozed, standing in place.

Darkness fell earlier now that Storm Season was truly with them -- not that the daylight was more than gloom, day after day. Its oppression sat heavily in the back of his mind, like the discomfort, the drizzle and the constant orange-gray smudged coloration that lay over everything like a pall. He squatted watching the camp,

noting the way the men's movements were sluggish, lacking enthusiasm. Finally, one by one, lanterns sprang into life, and before long, the large central oil fire was set up in the middle of the tents. Men started gathering around it, huddling in groups. Others withdrew to tents, the shapes suffused with yellow glows lit from within. Pity the poor individuals set to duty outside, with nothing more than the comfort of the large central heater and their own company to keep them warm.

After he judged enough time had passed, Sandon stood, and gathering the waterproof coat into a bundle, shoved it back into the pack. He groaned as he moved; sitting on the cold damp ground for so long had left him stiff and sore. At least it was only a short ride to the camp now, and he'd only have a limited time sitting astride the damned animal's bony back. With a grimace, he mounted, and running his story over in his head, headed the animal toward the camp with a sharp kick of his heels.

Slowing the animal to a walk, he passed the first of the tents, looking around. He had been right, there were fewer here than he would have expected. A couple of the men -- how many were there, five? -- looked up as he neared, showing first a touch of confusion, then open hostility.

"What do you want here, Atavist?" challenged one, not even bothering to get up.

"I am seeking some food for the animal, perhaps some warmth for the night."

Another man laughed. Sandon recognized neither of them, not that he necessarily should. Generally, Men Darnak's traveling parties were taken from the administrative ranks, or some of his personal household. That was good too. Right now, he was immensely conscious that he might be recognized at any moment. He swallowed back his natural response to the laughter, and thought about his next words carefully.

"By the Prophet, I am asking for your help." He said it as clearly as he could.

Another man sitting across the other side from the first two glanced up and quickly looked away again.

"Please," continued Sandon. "I can pay."

One of the first pair was grinning now. "Do you know whose camp you're in? And since when did your lot pay for anything?"

Sandon met the grin levelly. "I have some credits," he said. "Or I can work. I have been doing what the Prophet wills."

"Go on. Get out of here," said the grinning face dismissively, the expression now becoming less amused.

"Wait, Jask," said another one. "The Principal wouldn't like it."

The man called Jask frowned. "What he doesn't know won't hurt him."

"Please, brother," said Sandon. "You must have plenty to feed all these animals. You must be able to spare a little."

"I said get out of here." Jask's voice had lifted a little, and he stood and took a step forward. "Now. Go on. Take your stinking beast away from here."

"And the rest of you, brothers?" said Sandon, turning to the rest of the group. Three avoided looking at him, but the one that had spoken before was chewing his lip, watching, and he too rose slowly to his feet.

"Jask?" he said quietly.

"Damn you, Fran," said Jask, glancing at his companion. "No, damn you. You can keep your stupid religious nonsense to yourself."

A hiss came from another of those seated about the heater, now openly watching the exchange.

A motion from one of the nearby tents, and the flap was shoved to one side revealing a tall, thin figure. Sandon would recognize that frame anywhere. Witness Kovaar. He lifted a hand to pull his hood further about his face. Kovaar strode across to the group.

"What's going on here?" he asked in his thin reedy voice as he approached.

One of the other men in the group muttered in a low voice as he neared. "Now you've done it, Jask."

"Nothing to worry about, Witness Kovaar," said Jask. "Just one of those Atavists looking for what he can get. We can handle it."

Kovaar drew up beside the man, and with merely a glance at Sandon, peered at Jask with narrowed eyes. He looked back at Sandon, seeming to both study him and be thinking at the same time. Sandon gave the barest of nods, hoping that the poor light and his changed appearance would be enough. Witness Kovaar, after a moment, returned the nod with the barest inclination of his head.

"This is one of the Prophet's people. Do you know what he wants? Have you asked?"

The man called Jask shrank back from Kovaar's gaze. "Said he wanted some feed for the animal."

"Well give it to him."

"Said he wanted to stay here the night."

Kovaar glanced back at Sandon, gave him another assessing look, then spoke. "Well let him."

"But..."

"Did you not hear me? Give him what he wants. It is our duty by the Prophet's will." He turned on his heel and without another word, strode back to his tent and disappeared inside.

The look on Jask's face was like he had swallowed something bad. "You'd better come with me," he said sullenly.

Sandon dismounted and followed, leading his padder back to the line of tethered beasts staked further behind the line of tents. It looked like he'd gotten away with it so far. There had been no sign yet that Kovaar had seen through his subterfuge. But then, there was something not right as well; it was Kovaar who had appeared from the tent to see what was creating the fuss. It was Kovaar who had ordered the men around. Where was Leannis Men Darnak, and how had Kovaar managed to gain such a hold on the Principal's affairs. Sandon was immediately more concerned than he had been before. Men Darnak's men were deferring to the odious priest. And what had that look of calculating assessment Kovaar had given him been about? Certainly, on the surface of things, they were both men of the Prophet in their own ways, and the teachings of the Church spoke of charity, but there was something more there. Sandon chewed this over as the grudging Jask set him up for the night. One thing was sure; the fates were shining his way to have allowed him to come even this far. He would have to wait and see exactly how long that good fortune lasted.

#

Sandon awoke to the sounds of the camp stirring about him, another cold, gray day and the noise of padders complaining. Men were grumbling along with the beasts as they went about their allotted tasks, and here and there, he caught snatches of conversation. He hitched himself to his feet and went to attend to his own padder. At the line of animals, he received one or two strange looks, but he assumed that news of last night's events had already made its way throughout the camp. From what he overheard, he quickly learned that they were nearing the end of their visit to the area, that Men Darnak had indeed been looking for Tarlain, and that there had been expeditions to the Kallathik hive. When he had seen to the animal, he went in search of the man who had offered support, Fran. He found him over the other side of the camp, carrying bundles and loading them onto the back of a wagon.

"Brother," he said.

Fran stopped, still holding the bundle he was carrying, frowned, and then slowly placed the bundle at his feet.

"I was wondering if I might have a word with you."

Fran nodded. He had clear, open features. His hair was light, and fell in waves about his ears. He looked at Sandon, waiting for him to continue.

"I wished to thank you for your words last night."

Fran shook his head. "It wasn't for you, especially."

"All the same "

Fran stood waiting and Sandon nodded. "I have heard that you might be leaving soon. The activity suggests you are about to break camp." He gestured about them with one hand. "Would you know where you are headed?"

Fran shrugged. "Probably back to the Men Darnak estates, but the way the Principal's been behaving lately, it's hard to say. We'll know soon enough."

"Ahh," said Sandon. "It would be good if that was the way. I too am traveling in that direction." He filed the comment about Men Darnak's behavior away without comment.

Fran leaned down and hefted the bundle again. "So, what is it you're saying?" He started off toward the wagon, and Sandon kept pace with him.

"Perhaps there might be a way I can travel with you."

Fran headed back to the pile of bundles and lifted one with a grunt. Sandon reached down and lifted another.

"What are you doing?"

"I am helping," said Sandon. "I can help. I can work."

"I don't know," said Fran, but the young man didn't protest as Sandon walked with him and tossed the bundle into the wagon's back with the others. "Someone would have to clear it with Witness Kovaar, but the Prophet knows, we're short handed enough." He grunted as he hefted a heavy sack. Sandon stooped to help him. Together they carried it back to the wagon and swung it inside.

Kovaar again. Sandon mulled this over as they walked back to the pile of supplies. Elsewhere, others were starting to break down the tents and pack them away. If it was going to be cleared with Kovaar, it would have to happen soon.

"Fran, could you...?"

The young man stopped, hesitating, looking back at the remaining pile of bundles and sacks, then back at Sandon.

"I'll keep loading while you go and see," said Sandon.

Fran was caught in a moment of indecision, but then he nodded. "All right," he said. "It can't hurt."

As Fran headed off to speak to whomever he had to, Sandon, good to his word, kept loading the wagon. The young man seemed simple and good-natured enough. He had no doubt that he'd put in a good word for the lone Atavist. Meantime, he had seen nothing of Leannis Men Darnak. In the past, the Principal would have been in the midst of everything, directing, passing judgment, making his presence felt, but there had been not a sign. He'd seen Witness Kovaar already once or twice, but still nothing of the old man. Then there was the whole question of how he was going to get close to Men Darnak anyway. If he was to be of any use, he had to get near enough to be able to observe, perhaps to influence, without giving the whole game away. As it was, he needn't have worried. He was nearing the end of the pile, starting to shift the last few sacks, when Witness Kovaar came striding toward him over the damp ground with Fran in tow. Almost out of habit now, Sandon reached up and pulled the hood further around his face, bowing his head.

"So, Atavist, what are you called?" said Kovaar.

"I am Tchardo."

Kovaar stood looking at him for several moments. Sandon felt the tension rising inside, but finally, the priest spoke.

"This man here tells me that you wish to travel with us. Is that so? Where are you headed?"

"Where the Prophet wills," said Sandon. "I go where the Prophet wills."

"Yes, of course," said Kovaar with a sigh. "Nowhere else but where the Prophet wills." Again the look of assessment. "So, it may be useful to have you along. Every reminder that we can give the Principal about the Prophet's teachings can only serve to the good." This time Kovaar looked around the camp before turning back. "Yes, you will travel with us. You will even sit with us tonight, I think. The Principal and I will have much to talk about with you." He turned to Fran. "You, whatever your name is. If any of the others give you any trouble about this, or if they start giving this man, Tchardo, any grief, you send them to me." He again fixed Sandon with that lingering gaze, then nodded and walked away. That last look had invoked a sense of unease, deep in Sandon's belly. He watched the priest's thin figure disappearing across the other side of the camp. Finally, he turned back, ready to load the last of the sacks. Fran looked at him and grinned. Together they lifted the sack and tossed it into the back of the wagon, then dusted off their hands.

Sandon nodded slowly, and just as slowly he said, "Thank you." He didn't speak the last words he added to the

thought, *I think*.

"Fran," he said, as they headed back to assist with other preparations. "You said something about the way the Principal has been acting. What did you mean?"

Fran looked troubled. "I'm not sure I can say. It's, just well, I don't think he's been himself. I wouldn't like to say any more than that."

The young man refused to be drawn any further on the topic, but it only served to make Sandon's sense of unease more solid.

Seventeen

Long after the encounter with the lone Kallathik, Tarlain stood within the passageway entrance considering his options. His first urge had been to turn and walk rapidly away from the central chamber, head back to his simple burrow and sit until the beating of his heart stilled. That had been the first urge, and then he thought about why he was there, why he was buried away in the heart of the hills in the darkness and gloom, amongst a species not his own. Not that he particularly felt a part of his own race, or any particular race at the moment, but he reminded himself that he was here for a reason. Steeling himself, he stood tall, tried to adopt the air that was proper for a Men Darnak, stepped back into the chamber and cleared his throat. Two of the Kallathik heads turned to face him. The others stood where they were, unmoving.

"I am Tarlain Men Darnak," he said, as clearly and as slowly as possible. "I am from the Guild of Welfare. I am here to help you."

He heard the words repeated, then the signing of amusement, but he was not going to be deterred. He tried again, speaking in a loud clear voice. And suddenly there was a Kallathik right in front of him. He gasped, took two steps backward and the Kallathik was with him again. He swallowed, looking up into the vast alien face.

"But how did you...?" He had barely seen the Kallathik move. He had seen the rapid motion when the Atavists had been in the chamber before, but even that had not prepared him for the creature's sudden presence right on top of him. He took another hesitant step back. No. This couldn't be happening. He had watched the Kallathik for weeks. He had observed them from a distance for seasons before that.

"We know who you are, Tarlain Men Darnak. You are with the Guilds. You are the Principal's offspring. You are part of the Principate."

Again, Tarlain was rocked. They knew exactly who he was, what his station and function in life were, and they had understood exactly what he was saying. He tried rapidly to regain his composure, but it was hard with an enormous Kallathik looming above him and several more clustered in the chamber's middle. Suddenly, he felt very much alone and very, very out of place.

"I...I...", he started, then paused, took a deep breath and started again. "Yes, I am Tarlain Men Darnak. I am attached to the Guild of Welfare, but I am no longer part of the Principate."

There was a long silence. He cleared his throat nervously, waiting. Finally, the Kallathik spoke in its sibilant, clacking voice. "What are you doing here?" it asked.

"I came to help you," he said again, his voice sounding unconvincing even to his own ears. *"Really"* He didn't know whether the last was to convince them or to convince himself.

"Why would the Guilds wish to help us? Why would the Principal's offspring wish to help us?" said the Kallathik. The amusement sign echoed all around the chamber, and Tarlain felt himself flush. He looked around the Kallathik's bulk, scanning the sides of the vast meeting cave, looking at the cleanly hewn ceiling, then back at the creature standing above him.

"I don't know why," he said. "I do. We do. The conditions in the mines..." His voice trailed off, its echoes fading back to him mockingly from the walls all around him.

He tried again. "In the Guild of Welfare, we care about the well being of all our inhabitants, all the parts of our society..." Once again, the amusement sign echoed from the hollow walls and his voice trailed away to nothing. He had been so sure, so convinced of what he meant to do.

The Kallathik lapsed into silence once more. There was a long, long pause. Tarlain suddenly had the impression that there was more than silence going on. Finally the one in front of him spoke. "We are patient," it said simply. "If you want to help, you should come with me now and you should understand. We have been ready for a long time."

Despite his confusion, Tarlain nodded, and then when that provoked nothing, finally spoke. "All right. I will come with you."

The Kallathik turned, and assuming it was what the creature meant him to do, Tarlain followed across the vast chamber and into a passageway across the other side. As he crossed, vague rustlings came from the other Kallathik. For some reason that he didn't quite understand, he was still amusing them.

The Kallathik led him down a long corridor. Several other passages crossed its length, and though he tried surreptitiously to feel for his own marks at each junction, his fingers met smooth metal. How could he have missed this entire section? He pressed his lips together and followed, further, deeper into the darkness of the complex. The vent holes became fewer the further they went, and soon Tarlain was forced to keep one hand outstretched, fingertips tracing the metallic walls to make sure of his way. He could sense the vast bulk of the creature leading, but its shape was little more than blackness upon further blackness. Suddenly, the Kallathik stopped, and Tarlain nearly ran right into its tail. It spoke.

"Here, on the floor, there is a lantern."

Tarlain knelt and felt with outstretched hands. He located the lantern, fiddled with it in the darkness, and after several attempts, managed to spark it to life. The yellowish glow guttered, then firmed and spread throughout the passage. The Kallathik stood nearby, watching him. The lantern light reflected from its dark, hard plates and sparked within its eyes. Tarlain's gaze was immediately drawn to the huge totem beside the waiting Kallathik. It was a standard, precisely carved example of the Kallathik art, but there was something deeper, darker about the burnished wood. He frowned up at it.

"This is one of our own places," said his guide, dragging his attention back. Tarlain wasn't sure what the creature meant.

The Kallathik turned and wrapped its twinned arms around the totem's body. With one effortless movement, it lifted the statue and moved it to one side. Tarlain gasped. The heavy, hard wood must weigh as much as a groundcar more. The Kallathik moved forward again, leading him past the totem and into a new passageway. Remembering to close his mouth, Tarlain followed.

This tunnel led to another chamber, but its entranceway was small, and the Kallathik bulk obscured the space from view until the creature had pushed its way fully into the long chamber. The air was musty, but somehow dryer than it had been before. Tarlain held the lantern aloft, and caught his breath. On every wall, spread across the floor, lying in bundles, lay what he could only presume were spears. They were long, straight, pointed on each end. Hardened and tempered, made from the wood that the Kallathik held so dear. There had to be thousands of them. Tarlain swallowed once, twice in succession, trying to regain some of the moisture that suddenly seemed to be missing from his mouth.

#

Jarid looked out with satisfaction from the Guild Room's windows. Yarik's streets were nearly empty now. The occasional wagon or cart, teetering with heavy burdens, made difficult progress between the vast squat buildings and across the city squares. The quake of two days ago had opened a vast fissure across the main roadway outside and tumbled one of the walls of the building opposite. Jarid grinned as a wagon driver tried to negotiate the boards crossing the break in the road, while his companion flapped around giving instructions. What a life. He snorted and turned away from their painstaking advance. He had better things to consider. Markis was on his way. Everything was in place. He had managed to delay his father's departure to the country estate just long enough with this detail or that detail that needed his attention. The old man had not suspected a thing. With Markis out of the picture, it had been easy to argue a lack of organization. And now ... now

He strolled the length of the table, tapping his hand on the chair backs, one by one, then moved to the head of the table and looked along its length, imagining in his mind's eye the faces gathered around. And there, right at the top, would be his place. He gave a quirk of his lips and closed his eyes.

"Jarid, there you are."

Jarid opened his eyes, struggling to suppress a grimace. Stupid. He had to be far more careful. Slowly, he turned to face his father.

Thankfully, Aron Ka Vail seemed not to have noticed. "I'm glad I found you here. I need you with me. Karryl Ky Menin is coming. It's lucky that you dissuaded me from leaving yet. Most fortunate. Apparently, Ky Menin has some serious matters to discuss."

"What does he want?"

His father crossed to his usual chair at the head of the table and sat, slumping a little as he did so. Jarid held his look in check. *His* chair. It was his chair. The timing couldn't be worse. Not here. Not today. Aron Ka Vail stared down at his hands before looking up.

He spoke slowly. "As far as I can tell, there is trouble between Ky Menin and Yosset Clier. We can't afford it right now. I suppose now, with everything in disarray, with Men Darnak off wandering the countryside, Clier believes Ky Menin is vulnerable. He could be making a play for more influence in the Principate. Perhaps he means to topple Ky Menin entirely. The Prophet knows, Technology is a pain at most times, but Ky Menin is a shrewd operator. I hardly think he's going to be an easy target."

"But that's ridiculous," said Jarid moving to rest his hands on a chair in front of him. "What is Clier thinking? We need to maintain unity at the moment. Besides, Clier is one of ours. Primary Production should be

standing together."

"Exactly. I would think that's why Ky Menin is coming here."

"But I don't see Clier doing this of his own volition."

"Agreed," said his father. "And who do you think might be behind it?"

"Why the wife, of course. The Men Darnak woman. She's always held a firm grip on Clier's, uh, assets."

Aron nodded. "Quite right. Yosset should know better. I suppose he thinks that with the Men Darnak boy newly installed, he has more room to maneuver, but the problem is ... wait, unless ... unless Karin believes she can control the Guild of Technologists through her brother. That would give her access both to Primary Production and to Technology. That would really only leave Welfare, and with the younger Men Darnak boy gone, they would have to be more vulnerable."

"Hmmm, I'm not convinced," said Jarid. "Surely she can't discount your influence."

Aron steepled his fingers in front of his face. "She would not be so stupid. No " he shook his head. "She never struck me as stupid. Anyway, we shall see when Guildmaster Ky Menin arrives. Whatever she's planning, we will be ready. You can learn from this, Jarid."

Jarid clamped his jaw shut, but his knuckles whitened on the back of the chair. Still the old man insisted on discounting him. Perhaps it would be his father that would be learning a few lessons soon. With that thought slyly insinuating itself, his grip relaxed.

"Yes of course, father," he said, dutifully. He could pander to the old man's sensibilities for now.

"Besides, isn't there something else we need to talk about?" said Aron. "Tell me what's happening with Markis. Anything further on his plans for world domination?"

Jarid pulled out the chair and sat. He leaned forward, his elbows on the table as he cultivated the right level of excitement and yet caution in his voice. "Not too much more, but I've persuaded him to return here before we finally close the buildings. It will give us the perfect opportunity to expose his plans."

His father narrowed his eyes. "And how precisely do you intend to do that?"

"I'm going to confront him. He'll have no option. I'll tell him I've heard about what he's planning and see how much he's prepared to reveal."

Aron sat straighter in his chair. "When? I want to be there."

"No father, it's best if I handle this alone. If he sees you, he might suspect. If Markis is smart, he'll try and convince me to join him. Better to be in a position of strength. That way I can be sure to find out more and we can stop him before he tries anything foolish. That's why I suggested we meet here. Once I have the truth of it, I can call for you and we can deal with the situation properly. You really do need to let me work on it first though."

Aron thought for a moment and then nodded, but he still looked troubled. "When is he due?"

"Soon, very soon."

"Good. Then you'd better go and be ready for him. Let's have this done with. Come back and get me when you've learned all that you need to, and then once we've dealt with that, we can prepare for Ky Menin and his little problems."

Jarid nodded, stood and left his father sitting there musing. He allowed himself just the vaguest smile as he strode quickly from the room.

#

He walked rapidly to the chambers, chambers that Markis had not yet properly vacated. He slipped inside the reception and looked around with a curl to his lip. That the difference between their allocations was so marked rankled. Here was Jarid Ka Vail, lesser son, lesser entity, destined to follow in the footsteps of his idiot older brother, and yet the halfwit was the one who got everything. He crossed to the broad couch and sat, letting his gaze rove around the wide space. Beyond lay the bedroom, the bathroom, the walk-in closets, the study, and these were just in the Guild building. Out on the country estates there was more. Certainly, as the successor to the Guildmaster, Markis was expected to live and work close to Guild affairs, but it didn't mean he deserved to be treated with so much favor, did it? His stupid older brother. If it weren't for Jarid, Markis would have had a hundred blunders exposed. More. It was true that his father had never made anything of the fact that Jarid was born in dubious circumstances that had caused the old man angst and potential humiliation, but, in the end, it had not cost the old man that much to keep Jarid's mother dutifully quiet. Jarid had never even properly met the woman.

Markis was due some time this morning, barring accidents or the trammels of the weather. It was a reasonable journey, especially without the use of a groundcar, but knowing his brother, Jarid thought he'd do everything to make sure he was here. He had been half expecting to find Markis already installed in his rooms, waiting impatiently for his younger brother's appearance. If he didn't show now, either something was seriously wrong -- and they'd receive word soon enough -- or there had been a delay. Perhaps the quake of a couple of days ago...

He sat for over an hour, running over what he wanted to say, occasionally standing and wandering around the room picking through Markis's things.

"Well, I'm here," said Markis as he flung the door open and strode into the room. He looked weary and travel stained.

"Welcome back," said Jarid. "How go things at the estates?"

Markis came and sat heavily in a chair opposite, passing a hand across his brow. "Well enough when I left. Everything is fairly quiet, and there's been no further word from the mines. Apart from that, well, the preparations have been going how they go. You know."

Jarid nodded, though inwardly he was thinking that he knew barely enough of how the preparations should go as far as the mines went. Jarid only got called in when his brother got himself into trouble. He hadn't expected anything out of the ordinary out at the estates. "No trouble getting here?"

Markis sighed. "A couple of areas forced me to take fairly lengthy detours. The quakes have been particularly nasty in a few spots. We'll be cleaning up for a long time after this one. But you don't really want to hear about that. We have other things to talk about. What progress have you made with Father? Is he ready to talk

to me yet?"

Jarid leaned forward, a sudden thought racing in his head. He needed time to work it through. "Don't you want a drink or something before we start? Get rid of some of the road from your throat."

"Yes," said Markis. "By the Twins I could do with one. Wait here."

He rose and disappeared into one of the side rooms. Jarid scratched thoughtfully at his leg while he waited. This new circumstance with Ky Menin had given him an idea. When Markis returned, he sat back in the large chair, and then looked briefly vexed.

"I'm sorry, Jarid," he said. "Did you want anything?"

"No, I'm fine." Nice of him to ask.

"So?"

"Well, first, let me ask you something. Have you been saying anything about the Guild of Technologists in public? To your friends, to anyone?"

Markis frowned and shook his head. "No, why should I? What opportunity have I had? I've been out at the damned estate. You know that."

"Father is convinced there's something going on. Karryl Ky Menin is on his way here this afternoon. Something about plans with Yosset Clier to undermine the old man's position."

"But that's ... that's just stupid," said Markis, his frown growing even deeper. "You said you'd be working on it, Jarid, that you'd help him understand all this was nonsense. And now this? We've got to go and see him now." He made as if to rise, but Jarid waved him down again.

"No. That's not going to do any good at all right now. He's in a foul mood. Everything was fine until this thing with Ky Menin came up. I thought I'd made some progress, but he can barely tolerate hearing your name at the moment. You know how he gets. I fear that going to see him now would only make things worse."

"But I've come all the way here to sort this out, Jarid. What am I supposed to do -- simply leave again?"

"Just sit there and stay calm for a moment," said Jarid, waving his hand in a stilling motion. "I need to think."

Markis sat there looking at him with a worried but expectant expression. Jarid sat trying to look as if he were considering possibilities. Soon. After enough time had passed, just enough to build the sense of tension, he reached behind himself and pulled out the object he'd been keeping concealed at the back of the couch and placed it carefully on the low wooden table in front of him. Markis's eyes grew wide.

"What in the name of the Twins is that for? Is that what I think it is?"

The small pistol was a rarity. It had cost Jarid a number of favors to acquire it. Oh, they existed in the right places, but you had to know those places and the people who had access to them. The technology behind projectile weaponry had only been rediscovered over the last few years, and to this point, there had been little call to develop it further. Mainly, they served as little more than a rich man's sport.

"I'm sure you know what this can do, Markis," he said. This, my dear brother, is to show you how serious I am about what I am about to say."

"I don't -- "

Jarid cut him off with a wave of his hand. "You soon will. I know exactly what you've been playing at, Markis. You may be greedy and uncaring, and concerned about nothing else but yourself, but I love our father and that you would even think to harm him just for the sake of your own position..."

The look of utter disbelief on Markis's face was beautiful. He first blanched and then started to flush.

"What in the Prophet's name are you talking about?" he said, slowly getting to his feet.

"Don't think you can fool me," said Jarid, narrowing his eyes. "I know about what you've been scheming and planning, and if you think for one moment that I'm going to join in, then you need to think again."

Markis was properly on his feet now. He had their father's capacity for sudden anger, and the color was high on his cheeks. "What stupid game are you playing now? I'm not one of your toys, one of your stupid games!" he spat. He held one fist bunched beside him. He started moving around the table edge, but Jarid reached quickly for the pistol.

"No, Markis." He said the words with deadly calm. He'd been playing this scene out in his mind for days. Markis stopped in his tracks, the anger warring with the shock inside him. He took a step backward. Jarid smiled. He lifted the pistol, and watching Markis with a steady gaze, he fired at the mirror on the opposite wall.

The loud report echoed around the room, and the sound of shattering glass tumbling to the floor crashed around them. Markis glanced behind him at the shattered mirror, then quickly back again.

"You're mad," he said in a low, quiet voice and took one more step.

"No. Far from it, my dear brother." Jarid stood and took a step forward. "Now, I suggest you get out before I do something I regret."

Markis needed no further encouragement; he dashed for the door, flung it wide, and sprinted down the corridor and away. Jarid smiled. And now, he thought. He lifted the pistol up above his head and fired into the ceiling, slightly off to one side. The weapon only held two shots. Markis had no way to know that, but it was enough. Here, clear to all who might care to look was the evidence of the struggle between the two brothers, of how Markis had tried to shoot his brother, of how he had fled from the scene. Tossing the pistol to the floor in front of him -- it had served its purpose -- Jarid reached up to mess his hair and tug at his clothing. Then he stood breathing heavily, waiting for the feet that were already pounding down the corridor.

#

Aron Ka Vail stood in the doorway of his son's rooms, unable to comprehend what he was seeing. There, on the floor in front of him lay a weapon, tossed aside. The glass shards all over the floor on one side of the room, the hole in the ceiling that his men had pointed to, Jarid standing there and looking clearly as if he'd been in a fight, he saw it all, but still he didn't understand. He leaned heavily on the doorframe reaching out his hand for support. Jarid looked out of breath, but right now, Aron was struggling for breath himself.

"What happened here?"

"It was Markis," said Jarid. "He told me what he planned, and then when I refused to go along with it, he threatened me. And then he ... he shot at me, Father! We struggled and then he escaped."

Aron, just for a moment, felt the will to live slipping from his grasp. He slumped even more against the door, and then the anger grew within him, hot, undeniable. "He will pay for this," he said quietly.

"Father, no," said Jarid, pleadingly.

Aron held his jaw tightly closed, and then turned to one of the others in the room. "You," he said. "See about getting this mess cleaned up. Jarid, come and sit over here. Tell me what happened."

Jarid's gaze flicked around, glancing at places all around the room, hesitating to meet his father's eye. The boy was visibly shaken. "Come," said Aron. He crossed to couch and sat, patting the space beside him. Screwing his lips tightly together, Jarid nodded and moved to sit beside his father.

"Are you all right?" asked Aron, peering into the boy's face, placing a hand on his thigh.

"Y-yes. I suppose so."

"So tell me."

Jarid started hesitantly at first, but then the words tumbled from his lips.

"Markis came as we had planned, just like I told you. He said that he had everything in place with the Kallathik, and as soon as everything was closed up here and Yarik was properly shut down, he planned to take over the estates. He gave me the choice, said that I could either join with him or face the consequences. He would give me position, title and we could share in the running of things. If not, I'd end up just like you were going to."

Aron sucked air through his teeth. "And what did he mean by that?"

"What do you think he meant? But there's more. He had it all planned out. With Yarik closed, communications out, the Return, it would be easier for him to seize control, and he could do it without word of it getting through to others in time. He was going to start with your seat, then move from there."

Aron felt the anger burning hotter inside him and he barely restrained himself from shouting. "What is this folly? The boy's an utter fool. By the Prophet... No, he cannot get away with it. Tell me. What else?"

"He didn't mention anyone specifically, but he said he had support within the Guilds."

Aron frowned. There was a possibility of collusion, but he needed confirmation. He needed to wait until they had met with Karryl Ky Menin, and then he would decide. "We can't let him get away, Jarid," he said.

"I know. I know. I'm really sorry, Father. I didn't expect "

"No, Jarid. I am sorry." He reached out a hand and patted the boy gently on the top of his leg. "Don't worry. I am going to make this right. Markis is clearly unfit to hold his position." He looked out into the distance, thinking. "But we have to stop him before he does any real damage. More than he's already done. Thank the First Families that he didn't manage to hurt you. We don't have the resources to track him down."

"No, you're right. But we're meeting with Ky Menin this afternoon. The Guild of Technologists has more at their disposal. We don't know -- perhaps they have something which will help."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Aron. The boy was always so quick. "We will speak to Ky Menin. You're right. In the meantime, I will send some of the men to see if there's any clue where Markis may have been headed. And no, I can't see Ky Menin now. Not now." He motioned to one of his men. "Send word to Ky Menin. Something's come up. I will meet with him out on the estate, the evening after next."

Aron was still staring into the distance. How could it have come to this? Why had he not seen it? He failed to notice the slight self-satisfied quirk to his younger son's lips.

Eighteen

As he eyed the churning muddiness that boiled between its banks, Sandon couldn't help thinking about the current state of his life, of all their lives. The Men Darnak party hugged the river for nearly two weeks en route to their destination before they struck out inland toward the estates of the great and good within the Guild hierarchies. Who could say where all this would lead? Getting close to Men Darnak had not been a problem. Witness Kovaar had soon sought him out personally and suggested, no insisted, that he join them for the meager meals they shared each evening. His constant fear that the priest might penetrate his identity still remained, but as time went on, it seemed less and less of an issue. Each night, Sandon would join them and Kovaar would talk long into the evening about the teachings of the Prophet and lessons to be learned from his words. More than once, he deferred to Tchardo, seeking support for what he'd said. It was just as well Sandon had kept the *Book of Words* given to him by the old Atavist, and he took to carrying it to their nightly meetings, ready to flick to one reference or another, knowing well by now the passages that Kovaar drew from. In a way, it was yet another proof of who Sandon really was -- Tchardo the Atavist.

The priest fussed around, helping with the preparations of their evening repast, brewing herbal infusions to see the Principal to his rest. There was nothing that gave Sandon any specific cause for alarm. And yet, despite everything, Leannis Men Darnak seemed to be slipping away from them. Gone was the spark; gone was the fire that lit his eyes, the certainty of action. Oh, there were flashes of it, but there were just as many times that Sandon caught the old man staring at him blankly, as if trying to grasp something he'd forgotten. The first time it had happened, Sandon felt the bottom of his stomach drop, but Men Darnak had eventually turned his gaze away, just as devoid of expression as before. He had had the urge, that first time, to blurt out his true identity, to reveal to the old man that he was here, ready and willing to assist, but he held it back. He had to know more, understand what was happening. It was time for Sandon to truly pay Men Darnak back. He would show the Principal that he had been worth the effort. So, he kept quiet and he watched, trying to divine as much as he could.

During the day, Sandon traveled on his cantankerous padder, complaining about the beast nearly as much as the beast itself grumbled about everything. He helped with the camp setup during the evening or its breakdown in the morning. Their progress across the vast, flat, featureless plains was quick enough, but the landscape was mind numbing, the low flat-leaved vegetation giving scant relief to the dull sameness made even duller by the fading orange light. He kept a constant eye out for Men Darnak, but the Principal had taken to riding in one of the more ornate wagons, shielded from view. He saw enough of Witness Kovaar, as the priest would appear throughout the day, riding his own animal, or striding rapidly issuing directions here or there. Once or twice, Sandon caught him watching him with a lingering gaze, but pretended he didn't see, pulling his hood closer about his face. Whatever was going on in the priest's head, he would have sorely liked to know.

As they wound their way past the curves and bends of River Bodrum, Sandon sought out the young man Fran and struck up conversation in order to pass the time. The boy was eager for the tales of Atavist life, of the

places far away, and he would listen, his blue eyes wide and a rapt expression on his broad, open face. He would pepper the conversation with questions, wanting to know more, for although he was in Men Darnak's retinue now, this was his first real journey outside his native homestead. Fran came from good farming stock, but had tired of farm life, eager for adventure as a young man often is. He had seen the call to Men Darnak's service as the perfect opportunity to expand his horizons.

Sandon found himself liking the young man, his simple honesty, and he wove him tales of the Atavist lifestyle, even of his time with Milana and Benjo in the bar in Bortruz and how their easy charity had shown them to be the good folk they were. He spoke of the miners too -- how beneath their grime-streaked exteriors, despite the hardships they faced, that they too were simple, honest folk. He had learned much in his time in the bar from the snatches of conversation and the passing arguments. Through it all, Fran listened, always eager, always wanting more. It did more than wile away the time.

As the party headed inland from the river's course, the landscape slowly changed. The broad flatness gave way to slowly undulating hills, and then croplands. The occasional homesteading stood off in the distance, surrounded by expansive fields, now with the primary thrusting shoots of root crops turning the soil and thrusting in long lines, questing for the paltry light from the dancing Twins above. Sandon could see their struggle, see the long, long weeks and months of growth, only to be torn rudely from the soil, stacked and stored in dank cellars all across the countryside.

Gradually, the seasonal fields gave way to more traditional croplands, the grain fields now for the most part lying fallow. His own estates would look like these. Sandon's own holdings could not be too far off. He toyed with his beard as he wondered what had happened to them now. He imagined the estates were still being tended, still functioning, but to whom did they belong? Some distant nephew or cousin would have done well out of Sandon's disappearance, for enough time had passed that clear assumptions would have been already made.

Two days out from their destination, a realization came to Sandon with Leannis Men Darnak's appearance riding in company with Witness Kovaar at the party's head. He noted with great interest that there seemed to be something more infusing the Principal's carriage; he was more erect in his saddle, more assured in his stance; something of the old spark and presence seemed to be back. The Principal looked about himself with an alertness missing over the last few weeks. So, what was it that had brought Men Darnak back to life? There was something plucking at Sandon's memory, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. When he could stand the frustration no more, he headed his padder in Fran's direction, having spied him trudging beside a wagon, keeping an eye on the wheels as he walked.

"Fran," he said.

The young man tore his gaze from the revolving wheels and looked up. "Yes, Tcharo, what is it? I think I was going mad here watching this wheel going round and round."

Sandon smiled. "Do you know where we're headed?"

"Sure. It's the Men Darnak daughter's holdings. Karin. She and her husband live here."

That was it! That was why the place looked so familiar. These farmlands used to belong to the Principal himself before he had ceded ownership to his daughter. Sandon found it interesting that Fran, like so many others spoke of Karin first and Yosset Clier more as an afterthought. Well, that was the way of it, wasn't it? So, it was plain; Men Darnak had not managed to see his youngest child, but he was returning to the middle one.

"But from what I hear, Tcharo, the Principal received less than a warm welcome last time he visited his

daughter," said Fran.

"How do you mean?"

"The way I hear it, she virtually threw him out." Fran shook his head. "Sent him packing. He used this trip to the mines as an excuse. Couldn't deal with the way she'd treated him so went off to do something else."

"Truly?" said Sandon.

Fran nodded gravely. "I hear she's a really scary woman."

Well, Fran had that much right. Just sometimes, he was grateful that he'd never been blessed with children, but then his marriage to the Principate had seen to that. He thanked Fran and moved back to his position in the procession, trying to slot the information into place.

Two days more and they entered the grounds of Yosset Clier's estates. After the weeks of travel, and the marks of that travel, Sandon was barely concerned about discovery. If everything he'd heard about Men Darnak's behavior since his own dismissal, everything he'd seen since joining the party was true, then no one was going to be very surprised that the old Principal had acquired a wandering Atavist as a member of his ragtag group. Sandon was actually looking forward to this visit. He expected it was going to be very revealing.

He glanced up at the sky. Deep ochre clouds swelled ominously above the skyline, flashes of light illuminating them from within, looking like glowing networks of veins where the cloud mass pushed together less densely. A sharp tang permeated the air, stirred by sluggish gusts full of damp, cold humidity. It looked like they were in for a pleasant night.

One by one, the wagons drew up outside a wide wooden barn set on the side of a low hill overlooking the main residence. Sandon dismounted and stood beside his padder, casting a cautious eye to the cloud-filled sky above. Another cold gust blew around his robes, flapping the hood around his face and tugging at his beard. He stood back, not wanting to interrupt, waiting till Leannis Men Darnak, Kovaar and a couple of the men discussed something ahead, standing close to the broad barn doors. Men Darnak seemed to be instructing one of the men to go down to the house and announce their arrival. Sandon glanced down the hill. It looked like the man was going to be saved the trip, for striding up the hill with two others in tow came Edwin, Karin's head of the household. This should be amusing, thought Sandon, because the way Edwin was bustling up the hill, he was a man on a mission, and Sandon had no doubt whatsoever from whom that mission had originated.

"You! You there! What do you think you are doing?" Edwin called as soon as he was in earshot. He strode officiously up to the front of the party and repeated his question.

"What do you think we're doing, you fool," said Men Darnak, regaining some of his composure and authority. "I have come to visit my daughter. We will require suitable lodgings and feed and care for the animals. "See to it, man."

Edwin spluttered. "You were told last time you were here. Was it not clear enough then?"

Men Darnak stepped forward a pace. "Do you know who you're talking to?"

"Of course I do. You are the Mistress's father and I am under her instructions. Either you comply with her requests, or I'm afraid you will have to leave." He stood firm. "There is simply no way we can accommodate this group of ... vagabonds and..." He scanned the assembled members of the entourage. "And an Atavist too!"

What do you think this is?"

Sandon had seen enough. Edvin was talking to the man who had fostered everything they had, who had guided and built their affluence for years, who had cared for the welfare of the people, made sure that the entire world ran smoothly. This pompous functionary was stepping well beyond his station. He stepped forward.

"In the Name of the Prophet, you should show some respect, man. This is not just your lady's father; he is the father of your people."

Edvin's jaw fell open, but he quickly clamped it shut. "You! You! Who gave you the right to speak? One of those loose-minded madmen wandering the countryside, no doubt, preying on the charity of others. Well, you'll get no free meals here. Get out."

Kovaar, glancing at Sandon and giving the faintest grin, turned back to Edvin. "It is I who gave him permission to speak, and I give it again, for what he says is right. Do you not understand the respect written into the Words of the Prophet? Have you forgotten your teachings?"

"I need no schooling from a priest, nor from a wandering Atavist," said Edvin dismissively. He turned back to Men Darnak. "If you will not do as instructed, you will have to take it up with the Lady."

"And I need no counseling from a puffed up bureaucrat such as you," growled Men Darnak. "Take me to see my daughter. Take me to see Karin. Now!" He turned to Kovaar. "You come with me, and bring the Atavist as well. Let it be seen that I will choose my own company."

Kovaar, the slight grin having faded, gestured impatiently to Sandon, who quickly fell into step behind them. And so, Sandon found himself striding down the hill toward Karin Men Darnak's estate house in the wake of Edvin and in the company of Leannis Men Darnak and Witness Kovaar. Had it not been for the circumstance, and his appearance, it could have been any other visit on any other day. The thought brought a wry smile to his lips. But it wasn't any other day. His expression quickly sobered.

All the way down the hill, Kovaar was muttering to the Principal. "See what you get, not listening to the rights of proper position in society? Out of proper order comes order. You reap what you sow by not following the words of the Prophet. Children are meant to respect those who brought them into the world." The monologue went on and on. "What had happened to him? By giving up control of the Guilds, he had given away control of himself. He had to show his daughter her proper place in things if he had any hope to save her from what he had already wrought."

Sandon frowned as he listened. What was it that Kovaar was trying to achieve? Surely there could be no good to come from such words -- ever--but he was in no real position to say anything.

Edvin led them into the main rooms and brusquely told them to wait. It had been a long time since Sandon had last visited this place and he stood uncomfortably looking around, seeking familiarity in the large square room. He noted very quickly that most of the furniture was the same as he remembered, a few of the decorations and details might be different, but Karin had kept it much the same room that it had been in her father's day. So little had changed, that when Karin burst through the central doors with Edvin in her wake, it was painfully clear there was something new in the Men Darnak house.

"What are you doing here, Father? Didn't I tell you last time you came to see me? Yet again you turn up with a bevy of clowns and fools." Her face was livid, her fists held in tight balls beside her. "And what's this?" She waved in Sandon's direction. "Edvin told me, but I thought he was joking. What are you doing bringing that in here."

"Karin..." Men Darnak took a step forward.

"This is not a circus!"

Men Darnak held out his hands. "I have reduced the number of my men. What do you want me to do? I still have the needs of one in my station."

"Your station?" Karin stepped close to him. "What station is that? You are my father, nothing more. You gave up the rights to anything else when you gave up control of the Principate, and you'd do very well to remember it. The only reason you have anything is because I permit it."

Men Darnak looked at her aghast. "What sort of daughter are you?" he said, stepping back.

Karin followed, matching his pace as he retreated. "The daughter you raised me to be, Father. Would you expect anything less?"

Men Darnak finally stopped retreating and stood eye to eye with her. "Do you know what you're doing, child?" he said in a low voice. "Do you really know?"

She stepped back and laughed, her hands on her hips. "Oh, I know what I'm doing, old man. More than I think you know. What are you doing, running all over the countryside on some fantasy sliding around in the inside of your head? Whatever you have, you've brought on yourself. You're the one who sent Tarlain away. You're the one who gave up the Principate. It's time for you to truly give it up, *old man*. We've had enough of your meddling."

By this time, the portly Yosset Clier had appeared in the doorway. He stood, hesitating, watching the scene in front of him.

"Karin?" he said.

"What is it, Yosset? Not now."

"But I think perhaps -- "

She spun to face him. "*You* don't think, Yosset. Neither do you speak unless I ask you too. I'm talking to the old man. Now either shut up, or leave."

Clier clamped his mouth shut and stood where he was. She whirled back to face Men Darnak. "If you've had enough now, *Father*, I suggest you gather your men and your strange companions together and find somewhere else to go. You're in the way here."

Sandon gasped despite himself. Men Darnak's shock was evident. "You're no daughter of mine," he said, shakily.

"Oh, I'm very much your daughter. What are you going to do now -- disown me like you did Tarlain? Well, it's a bit late for that."

Witness Kovaar took a step toward them, but Karin waved her hand. "And you stay where you are too, Priest. You've got nothing to add to this conversation."

Men Darnak spoke, the evident anger building in his voice. "I've still got one child left. Roge has better sense than to treat his father like this."

"Go! Go running to Roge! See how far you get."

Men Darnak grabbed for her wrist, but she wrenched it free. "Don't even try it," she hissed. With one last flash of her eyes, she spun on her heel and strode from the room, slamming the door behind her.

Leannis Men Darnak was left standing in the room's center, looking down at his open palms. Sandon could already see the tears starting to well in his eyes.

The old man turned, looking directly at Sandon. "You," he said. "You go to Roge. You tell him I'm coming." His face was white as a sheet.

"But, Principal..." said Sandon.

"Just do it."

"Can I wait at least until the morning?"

"You will leave *now*!"

"As the Prophet wills," said Sandon, spreading his hands and glancing at Kovaar who was staring at him with a strange expression. There would be no further argument.

He headed for the stables and then took his time getting ready. Already he'd spent the whole day on the back of that grumbling, bony beast, and it looked like he had hours ahead. All for nothing. All his carefully worked plans for nothing. He grumbled to himself, as he cinched the straps holding his pack to the beast's rear and checked everything was in place. Sometimes fortune worked in strange ways. He glanced up at the forbidding heavens. The storm had not yet broken, but he was sure it would before long.

Nineteen

Deep in Aron Ka Vail's estates, the old man paced the room. His heart was heavy. How could he have been so wrong about his sons? He paused before the panoramic front window staring out over his lands, but not really seeing them. Outside it was dark, the occasional actinic flash lighting the landscape. His reflection, lit strangely by yellow lantern light, stared back at him. A deep distant rumble sent a tremor through the glass, and the image danced then stilled. He tilted his head a little to one side, trying to imagine how he had looked as a younger man, but there were only traces left. He was tired -- so tired. Running the Guild of Primary Production, living, breathing it every single day, Season in and Season out. It had taken its toll. He turned away from the shadowed figure and sat heavily, staring off into the distance. Ambition was one thing, but for his own son to turn against him...

A reflected movement in the glass in front of him caught his attention. Jarid arrived at the bottom of the stairs and Aron turned to wave him over, giving him a weak, half-hearted smile. Jarid ignored the gesture and stayed where he was.

"They'll be here any moment," Jarid said. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, I'm ready," Aron said with a sigh. Despite everything, the business of the Guilds would go on. "As ready as I need to be."

Jarid entered the room before speaking again. "Let me talk. They're bound to have questions."

"No, no. I can handle it. I'll be fine," said Aron. He glanced back up at his own reflection, looking for certainty, but saw none. He pursed his lips and looked away. Old fool, he thought, you have brought this on yourself.

One of the household staff appeared announcing the party's arrival, but there was a surprise. Karryl Ky Menin was not alone. Roge Men Darnak was with him. Of course, the Men Darnak boy -- no, Aron corrected himself, Principal Men Darnak -- was attached to the Guild of Technologists, and so had every right to be here. Aron signaled to have them shown in, adjusting his position so that he was sitting a little straighter in his chair. It would do no good to have them see him looking slumped and defeated. Moments later, the two were ushered down the stairway. Jarid crossed to meet them and led them to the room's center.

"Please, sit," said Aron. "Jarid, you over there."

Roge Men Darnak wore his uniform. He sat stiffly at the edge of one chair, looking slightly uncomfortable. Karryl Ky Menin took the other seat, relaxing easily into its bulk and stared across at Aron, a question on his face. When Aron refused to be led, Ky Menin spoke.

"So, Aron, tell me. Is it true about Markis?"

Aron hesitated before answering. "Yes," he said reluctantly. "I fear it is."

Ky Menin shook his head. "Who would have thought?" He folded his thin hands in front of him, fixing Aron with a pale stare. "That a son could show such disrespect to his father..."

"I really don't wish to discuss the details of it, if you'll understand," said Aron. "Karryl, I may need your help in finding him before he does any more damage. Your people have ways of communicating, ways of tracking things. We don't have the resources in Primary Production. But it is in all our interests that Markis is found."

Ky Menin nodded.

Roge, who had continued to sit stiffly, occasionally tugging at the ends of his sleeves, suddenly leaned forward.

"I can guess why he did it," he said.

Ky Menin gave him a glance clearly meant to still the outburst, but Roge either failed to notice it, or was simply oblivious to it; Aron could not hazard which.

Roge continued, clearly caught up in what he was saying. "He's been out at the mines, hasn't he? Out at the mines where my father's people have been. They're continuing to make trouble. Ever since he stepped down, he's been unable to leave things alone in the Principate, interfering here, stirring things up there. It would not be beyond him to set his people to rallying some sort of ridiculous support. I bet Markis has been talking to my father's people, letting them influence him. Why, only this afternoon I received a messenger from Karin saying that they'd been over at her estates making trouble. He can't leave well enough alone. It's just not right."

Aron glanced at Ky Menin who gave a brief frown. "Roge I should say Principal," he said. "I'm sure that there are other reasons for Markis's behavior."

"But still, I'm just saying..."

"Yes," said Aron. "We understand. You obviously have your own concerns. We understand, Principal. It still doesn't stop us working to solve the question of Markis himself." He thought briefly, quickly, but his options were few. He shook his head and sighed. Now it was out, he had little choice. "I could barely believe it, Karryl. I still have real difficulty coming to terms with what the boy's done. After all I've done for him, he turns around and betrays me. Not like Jarid here. Jarid has tried to defend me, to support me, and for what? Jarid stands to gain nothing special from this. We all know the rights of succession."

Jarid's face was devoid of expression. Aron looked over and gave him a half smile. "I do not know what I would have done without you, Jarid."

Roge leaned forward again. "The Guildmaster is right, Karryl. Such loyalty is something we should value. It's something we need within the Guilds."

Ky Menin gave Roge a slightly curious look, held it for a moment, and then turned to address Jarid.

"Principal Men Darnak is right in what he says. Such loyalty is to be commended. Perhaps you would benefit from some time within the Guild of Technologists. We can always use those who know where their true loyalties lie. I'm sure we could find an appropriate place for you." He inclined his head in Aron's direction. "Of course, with your father's support."

Jarid shook his head slowly. "Thank you, Guildmaster Ky Menin, but my proper place is here, supporting my father. Primary Production needs its own strength, particularly now."

Ky Menin nodded and sat back, folding his hands once more across his lap. "Speaking of Primary Production, Aron, we have some other matters to discuss. Of course we'll do everything we can to assist you with the boy, but we have another problem right now. Word has come to me that Clier is planning to build a voting block against me in the Principate. Roge and I have spoken about it, but until I brought it up with him, he had no knowledge of what was going on."

"Do you think Clier could be linked with Markis?" said Aron. He was far more inclined to trust Ky Menin's analysis of the situation.

"It's possible, but I don't think so," Ky Menin responded. "The action seems too undisciplined. The Prophet knows, Clier has never been one to act without Karin's instruction, but that's what's strange. If Karin had been planning something, normally she would have at least *told* Roge, if not simply confided in him. No, there is something that doesn't feel right here."

Roge stood and started pacing around the room. Aron tracked him as he walked. Finally, Roge stopped and turned. "It is because of Father that Yosset Clier is where he is. He always said that. Always said that if he needed anything in Primary Production that Clier was his way in. Yosset has to feel some sort of debt to him. I can just imagine..."

"Roge, be calm. Think about what you're saying." It was Ky Menin again. This time his frown was getting deeper. Aron himself could barely believe what Roge had said.

Roge started pacing again. "No, no. That's it. They're trying to destabilize things. They know that things within the Principate aren't firm yet."

Aron echoed Ky Menin's frown. He wished the boy would stand still. This was simply no way to conduct business.

Ky Menin finally stood. He stepped in front of Roge and held up his hands. "Roge. Principal Men Darnak.

Don't you think Karin would have told you if that was the case? Do you really think Clier would act without Karin's knowledge?"

Roge stopped, thought for a moment, and then frowned. He tugged at the ends of his sleeves, and then glanced around at all the faces looking at him. Finally, he took a deep breath. "No," he said. "Of course you're right." He nodded and allowed Ky Menin to steer him back to the chair with a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"So, what are we to do?" said Ky Menin once he was comfortably seated back in his own place.

"It seems clear to me that we need to counter any threat within the Principate itself," said Aron. He looked pointedly at Roge, then back at Ky Menin. Karryl nodded slowly.

"Yes, I see what you mean," he said quietly. "And you're quite right of course. Primary Production and Technology will have to work very closely together to deal effectively with the situation, without causing too much upset."

"I agree," said Aron, avoiding looking at the Men Darnak boy.

Jarid, who until this time had remained quiet, stood and moved from his place in the background. He crossed behind Roge's chair and placed his hand lightly on its back.

"So, what are we going to do to deal with the problem, Principal Men Darnak?" he said, looking first at Ky Menin, then across at Aron.

Aron had to admit, the boy was good, very good. Perhaps he really had been wrong. Tradition could dictate only so much.

Roge glanced up at Jarid standing over him. "I don't know yet. I have to think."

"I agree with Father, though," said Jarid as he wandered slowly back to his chair. "We will have to work very closely on this."

Roge nodded. "I should speak to Karin."

"Yes, of course that's the answer," said Jarid from his half-shadowed chair. "And the sooner the better, don't you think?" He leaned forward so that Aron could see his face, a question clearly there.

Aron considered the question, and hesitated. What they were thinking of was not right. It couldn't be right. Jarid quickly looked over at Ky Menin. The Guildmaster returned the look and barely nodded his head once.

"Principal?" said Jarid.

Roge, currently lost in thought and still intermittently tugging at the ends of his sleeves, looked up and smoothed the front of his jacket. "Yes?"

"If you want to make the journey tonight, I will go with you. I know it's late, but you're right, the sooner we get this resolved, the better for all of us. The way will pass more quickly if you have company. I don't mind."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Roge standing. "It gives me an excuse to see Karin anyway. In her message, she said that Father might head my way with his -- what did she call it? That's right -- with his performing troupe. It's better if I'm not there at all. He can barely make a case if I'm not there to greet him. I'd rather not see him now, anyway. If you really don't mind, Jarid ?"

Jarid also stood. "No, I don't mind at all." He glanced at Ky Menin, and then looked over at Aron. "I am glad to be of service."

Aron looked at the calm expression on his son's face, at the easiness of his stance, and he swallowed. Was he in a position to stop this now? He looked over at Ky Menin, but found no answers there.

"So," said Roge. "Let us go then. And you're right, the quicker the better."

Finally, Aron looked at the eldest Men Darnak child, knowing that there was no other solution if they were going to maintain true order within the Guilds. And in the words of the Prophet, order came from order. He bowed his head feeling the helplessness of the inevitable. As the new Principal left the room with Jarid close on his heels, Aron could not bring himself to look at him. Keeping his head lowered, he lifted his eyes enough to watch the shadowed reflection retreating up the staircase behind him.

"Now that is dealt with," said Karryl Ky Menin, "let us talk proper business."

Slowly lifting his head, Aron met the Guildmaster's eyes. The pale stare met his own without a flicker.

"Yes," Aron said with a sigh. "I suppose we really should, shouldn't we."

#

Jarid walked with Roge out into the darkness, heading for the stables and garages.

"This way?" asked Roge.

"Yes, and I've been thinking, Principal. It may be better if we take a groundcar don't you think?"

Roge stopped, looking troubled. "I'm not sure if that's a good idea."

Jarid stepped closer and took him by the upper arm. "It's this way, Principal. You said yourself, the sooner we took care of this, the better, and if we take padders, then we won't be there until the early hours of the morning. We're hardly likely to get anything settled then, are we?"

Roge was still frowning, resisting Jarid's gentle pressure on his arm. "But what about my men?"

"They can follow. We'll send word."

"Yes, you're probably right. Anyway, Karin will know what we should do. We should get there quickly before things get further out of hand."

Jarid nodded and smiled, leading Roge gently to where the groundcars were parked ready for Storm Season. He had no doubt about the implication of Guildmaster Ky Menin's words, nor of his father's complicity. He just had to work out what he was going to do.

He slid the garage doors aside as Roge stood and watched, not even bothering to lend a hand. He stepped inside, pulled a dust sheet from one of the flyers and bunched it into a ball, shoving it to one side on a nearby bench. Glancing around, he saw the tools there, some for vehicle maintenance, others for general work around

the estate.

"What are you doing, Jarid?" said Roge from outside.

"I'll be with you in a moment, Principal." He reached up, snagging a solid screwdriver from one of the racks and dropped it into his pocket.

Slipping into the groundcar, he started it and backed it slowly out of the garage, waiting while Roge opened the door and got in the other side. Jarid slipped the screwdriver out of his pocket and rested it gently down beside the seat.

"I'll just shut the doors, Principal," he said, opening his own door and stepping out to do just that. He was back in a moment, his door sliding shut behind him.

"Because of the Season, I'm going to have to use manual control."

"Yes, of course. Do what you have to," said Roge.

"Oh, I will, Principal. I will," said Jarid, glancing at Roge Men Darnak's impassive face. He headed the groundcar out toward the hills and away.

Twenty

Sandon grunted as the padder stumbled and made yet another misstep. Damn the animal, damn the weather, damn the Season. And damn Men Darnak and his whole cursed family. A gust of wind slashed rain into his eyes and he tried in vain to blink the water away. When that failed, he tried wiping at his face with the edges of his hood, but all that succeeded in doing was spreading the greasy moisture around some more. The padder grumbled again, and for once, he felt some empathy with the beast. For the past hour, he'd been running over the message he was to deliver to Roge Men Darnak. Well, that had been the plan. As soon as he'd reached the Men Darnak estates -- strange to think of them like that, belonging to a different Men Darnak -- he found himself headed back out into the blustering wind and sharp-toothed rain...again. Roge had not been in residence. One of the local landmen, once he'd gotten over the shock of dealing with a bedraggled and shivering Atavist, had pointed him in the direction of the Ka Vail estate. Sandon had taken the news with a deep sigh and headed back out.

Aron Ka Vail. He mulled over the last time they'd met. How different would this meeting be? It was strange how things played out.

Blinking away yet another watery skein from across his eyes, he tried to make out something of the way ahead. A sudden white-orange flash, and immediately thunder rumbled not too far away. The wind tugged at his beard, at his clothes, staggered the animal beneath him and plucked at his temper. He couldn't take too much more of this. The occasional lightning flash only served to confuse the landscape in front of him, turning it into a meaningless smudge while his vision had to continually readjust to the variations. He leaned forward, gripped the front of his saddle and attempted to pierce the gloom. There. Was that a vague light up ahead? He wiped at his eyes. Yes, there was a definite light further down the valley. Right then, the padder chose to stop dead in its tracks, its feet disappearing into muddy pools in what was left of the roadway beneath it.

"Damn you, animal. Not now!" he shouted through the wind, digging his heels into its flanks. "Don't do this to me. Haven't you already done enough, you --?"

He picked a few more terms, but the padder simply refused to budge. Sometimes Sandon really, really hated the Return. Muttering to himself, he slid from the animal's back, his feet landing heavily in a puddle and splashing muddy water all the way up his calves. Gritting his teeth against the wind that buffeted him from every direction, he sloshed around the padder's front and started to pull. It almost had the desired effect; the padder shifted, but only enough to face its back to the driving rain. Sandon rolled his eyes, looked up at the sky and immediately regretted it. Oh, damn Leannis Men Darnak. If only he could see what he had wrought. Shaking streaming water from his nose, he went back to trying to shift the truculent beast.

Again, the animal refused to budge. He tugged and pulled, cursing it, but all he managed to do was land flat on his back in a mud puddle. If he hadn't known any better, he might have thought that the padder was grinning at him. He climbed to his feet, his teeth bared, and retook the reins. There was something about leading animals that he'd forgotten. Someone somewhere had told him something. What was it? He gritted his teeth and uttered a growl at his own stupidity. You were supposed to face away from them. Looking at their face was like a confrontation, and of course, they'd resist. He turned around and tugged gently as he took a step forward. Reluctantly, the padder took a step. Sandon took two more, and the beast started following. They were underway again, Sandon's sodden robes slapping about his legs.

He peered through the curtain of rain, trying to make out any more detail. He'd never actually visited the Ka Vail estates before. The continuing rain made it virtually impossible to determine anything clearly, but he did note something strange. Down and off to one side, something snagged his attention. There was a sudden flash of brightness. It was too bright for a lantern, and it was made indistinct by the sheets of water refracting the source. The light blinked out, then appeared again. It seemed to fade, grow strong, and then disappear off behind the buildings. Sandon frowned. If he didn't know better, he would have said it was a groundcar heading off into the night. But that was impossible. Nobody used groundcars this far into Storm Season. Curious. He put it from his mind. Who knew what he was seeing in the midst of all this. Shaking his head, he continued his trudge down the hill. When he was about halfway down, the rain eased, sputtered and trickled to a final halt. Typical, he thought. He couldn't even claim shelter, as was his proper right.

He led the padder through the outer gates and up the broad roadway across tufted seasonal grasses. Further ahead, it divided into two smaller paths, one leading off to the left to the clustered stables and storage garages, the other leading to the house proper. He thought for a moment about stabling the beast, but the less time he spent here the better. He could find the Men Darnak boy, deliver the message and be on his way, back to locate the Principal and resume his observation. He'd worry about when he was finally going to get some rest later.

The pathway split, and he took the right bend. Shortly after the paths divided, he found a broad railing. He cinched the padder's reins and headed for the house.

He hoped he'd not spent all that time riding through the downpour for nothing. Another thing he really hated about the Return. If you wanted to deliver messages to anyone, then someone had to make the journey. Storms, wind, rain, quakes, tremors -- none of it mattered, and Principate business was all about communication of one form or another. He reached down and flapped his robes about his legs, trying to shake some of the moisture and the weight from the cloth. He would have loved nothing better than to be able to pull off the homespun, ring it out and get into something dry, but he couldn't even afford that small luxury these days.

The back section of the house sat in darkness. Some scant light seemed to be coming from around the front, so he headed that way. As he rounded the corner, a figure strode up toward him out of the gloom in the direction of the garage buildings.

"What are you doing here, Atavist," said a pompously familiar voice. Sandon stopped and turned to face the figure. What was Edvin doing here? The stocky and officious little functionary from Karin's household was the last person he'd expected to see. Edvin bustled up to him and planted his hands firmly on his hips. "Well?"

Sandon just stared at him.

"You will get nothing here, you know," Edvin continued. "The rain's stopped. You can't call for shelter. Guildmaster Ka Vail wants nothing to do with your sort. Now I suggest you take your mangy excuse for an animal and get out of here."

Edvin seemed not to have recognized him, and why should he?

"And I suggest you hold your tongue," said Sandon quietly.

"What?" Edvin's jaw dropped. "You have no right to be here. If you know what's good for you, you'll be on your way." He stepped forward and put his face right up close. "I know all about your sort, and nothing would give me greater pleasure than to help you."

Sandon had just about had enough of the self-important idiot's bluster. He was tired, he was wet, and he'd been running all over the countryside on some mad errand to deliver a simple message. He reached out and grabbed a fistful of Edvin's shirt.

"And I told you to hold your tongue little man. You'll shut your mouth, or by the Prophet, I'll shut it for you."

Edvin struggled to break the grip, but Sandon had a good handful of cloth, and he drew him closer. "Do you understand me?"

Edvin blanched, continuing to struggle. "Help! Out here!" he screamed in a high voice. "There's a mad Atavist out here. He's got me."

Sandon leaned in closer and shook him. "Shut up, I said!"

A commotion from the front brought running feet. Two more household staff appeared at the corner. They quickly assessed the situation and raced to Edvin's aid. With a deep weariness, Sandon suddenly realized how stupid this was. He released the handful of cloth and stepped back.

"He's mad. Get me free," said Edvin. The staff members closed in on Sandon, one on either side and grabbed his arms. Edvin fussed about with the front of his clothing.

Sandon sighed. The man was going to make everything of this that he could.

"What are you doing here?" asked one of the men restraining him, tightening his grip.

"I have a message for Roge Men Darnak."

The man's grip loosened slightly.

"From the Principal."

Edvin pointed at him. "See! What did I tell you? He's mad."

Sandon tried to shrug free from the two holding him. There was nothing that would have given him more

satisfaction than grabbing Edvin by the throat and shutting him up properly.

"What's wrong with you, you idiot?" he said.

"What's wrong with me? What's wrong with me? Roge Men Darnak is the Principal you fool. Get rid of him," he said. Now he was even ordering around the Ka Vail staff.

"Wait," said Sandon. "Not *that* Principal. Principal Leannis Men Darnak. His father. I have a message for Roge from his father."

Two more figures appeared at the side of the house. "What's all this noise out here? What's going on?" Sandon recognized the voice of Aron Ka Vail. Beside him was another figure. Was it Roge? No, too slightly built for Roge.

"Guildmaster," said Sandon. "I have a message for Roge Men Darnak."

"Message?" said Ka Vail. "Who is that?" He wandered forward, peering through the gloom. "Who has a message?"

"There is no message, Guildmaster," said Edvin. "This Atavist has clearly taken leave of his senses. You've seen the sort."

Ka Vail came closer. "You," he said to his men. "Let him go." He stepped closer, his head slightly forward, eyes narrowed. "An Atavist, hey? And why would an Atavist be bearing a message for Roge Men Darnak?"

"Send him on his way with a well-placed foot, Guildmaster," said Edvin from the side.

Ka Vail whirled. "You shut up." He turned back looking at Sandon suspiciously. "I may be old, but I'm no fool, Atavist. I've seen one too many of your people recently. And none of it has led to any good. Now, what are you doing here?"

"I come with a message for Roge from Principal Men Darnak."

"Who?"

"Leannis Men Darnak."

Ka Vail seemed to consider this for a moment. At the same time, the other man stepped forward. Karryl Ky Menin! What in the name of the First Families was the Head of the Guild of Technologists doing here at the Ka Vail residence? There could only be one reason. There was about to be some sort of action within the Principate.

"Leannis Men Darnak. Speaking of old fools," said Ky Menin. "Well, Roge, or should I say, Principal Men Darnak is no longer here. He has left."

Sandon gave a growl of frustration. "By the Prophet," he muttered.

Ky Menin peered at him suspiciously. "You're a very strange Atavist. And why would Men Darnak have an Atavist running messages for him?" He continued looking suspiciously. Sandon felt suddenly very uncomfortable.

"I was sent with the message by the Principal. I am called Tchardo. And as the Prophet willed it, I was taken

on by Witness Kovaar to the Principal's party."

Ka Vail turned to his fellow Guildmaster. "Men Darnak has been known to do stranger things, Karryl. And that Kovaar's a strange enough bird. I see no real reason to doubt it, but it leaves us with a slight problem."

"Well, perhaps," said Ky Menin. "So what is this message?"

Sandon looked at Ky Menin and back at Ka Vail, knowing that he had no choice. Slowly he recounted the tale of the Men Darnak party's ejection from Karin's estates and the disrespect with which she had treated the old man.

"And so," he finished. "The Principal has sent me to inform Roge that he will be traveling to his holdings and to make ready. That man over there," he said, pointing to Edwin, "can confirm everything I have told you."

Ky Menin turned to Ka Vail. "It rings true. The old fool doesn't know when he's done. But then you would never expect him to."

Sandon felt the seed of anger start to grow within him. "And you would do well to show some respect for your Principal."

"He's not my Principal any more, Atavist," Ky Menin said quietly and calmly. "And you should learn your place."

"And you know yours?" Sandon hissed.

"That's enough," said Ky Menin. "You will speak when I ask you to or not at all."

"What gives you the right?" said Sandon. "The Prophet will see to proper order."

"I have more right than you will ever know," countered Ky Menin with a slight sneer.

Ky Menin's attitude, Edwin, the whole thing suddenly became too much. Sandon barely restrained the urge to reach out a hand, ready to wipe the sneering smile from Ky Menin's face. He had to remember who he was supposed to be, to retain control. The Guildmaster stepped quickly back, noting the tension, and gestured to the Ka Vail staff. "Hold him." No sooner had he said it, than Sandon was grabbed firmly again from either side.

"No!" Sandon said through gritted teeth. He struggled, trying to break their grip.

Ky Menin watched him with a slightly amused expression. "So, Aron," he said. "It appears we have another problem. I suggest we lock him in one of your garages until I work out what we're going to do with him. Let him sit and be intimate with all of the technology he despises so much. He might learn a lesson or two in there."

"We simply can't do that," said Ka Vail.

"Of course we can," said Ky Menin. "Who's going to stop us?"

"But we risk offending Men Darnak, and in the current circumstance..."

"And so what?" Ky Menin's voice had become firm. "Leannis Men Darnak is the past. What do we care if we offend him? Go," he said to the other men. "Take him. Lock him up. Let him think upon his blessed Prophet

and what he truly believes."

Sandon glared back over his shoulder as he was dragged away toward the storage sheds. Ka Vail and Ky Menin were returning to the house. Edwin was standing there watching, a smug grin on his face. Finally, all the fight just went out of him; he was just too tired to struggle any more.

#

The groundcar stuttered once or twice as they pulled out of the holdings and headed into the open countryside. Jarid, one hand hanging beside his seat, fingered the tool thoughtfully. He knew exactly what he was going to do now, but he had to find the right moment far enough away from the estates, but not too far along their journey. He needed to get back, to warn them of the terrible thing that had happened .

Roge was concentrating on the way ahead, thankfully not talking for the moment, though occasionally lapsing into brief mutters to himself. Jarid watched through narrowed eyes. He traced the side of Roge's cheek, his neck in his mind's eye, looking for the spot, testing the action in his head. He kept part of his attention on the surrounding landscape, what little he could make out in the darkness and the rain. Water spattered against the front screen, running in rivulets and waves, blurring the dim smudged image of the outside.

There! There was what he was looking for. A stand of trees lay off to one side. Mostly, the surrounding countryside had been cleared of trees, but a few remained here and there. Here was his opportunity. Taking a grip on the tool's handle, Jarid took a deep breath and slowly let it out. Then, in one quick motion, he lifted his hand, slamming the tool into Roge Man Darnak's neck.

Roge's eyes went wide. A strangled cry and his hands flew to his throat. Jarid pulled back, wresting free his makeshift weapon and plunged again. As Roge scrabbled at his neck, trying to dig the shaft from his neck, Jarid leaned across and slapped the controls, bringing the groundcar to a halt. There was blood. Blood all over his hands, all over his clothes and the smell of it filled the confined space. Roge was struggling, bucking, making strangled sounds in his throat. Once more for good measure. He gripped the tool, yanked it free and then plunged it back into Roge's chest, burying to the handle. Then he sat back and watched as the last of Roge Man Darnak's life left him.

It didn't take him long to set the controls, pointing the groundcar toward the cluster of trees. As he watched the vehicle plow into the heavy ajura wood trunks, the rain beat down upon him, sluicing his face and hair, washing the Men Darnak blood away. With one last look at the crumpled groundcar, Jarid nodded his satisfaction, slipped the tool, the evidence away, and turned, starting the long trek back to the estates.

#

Markis looked around at his companions and around at the camp in which he now sat. A few wagons, the small canal with the longboats moored in place with thick ropes, the shed, cobbled together from bits of old metal and wood providing some sort of shelter from the weather; all of it so unfamiliar. Nothing seemed to make sense any more. All he really knew was that he had to keep low for a while. Maybe with time, all this strangeness would simply blow away.

And speaking of blowing, he'd been heading back to the mines when the most recent storm had descended on him with a vengeance. Desperately seeking somewhere out of the elements, he had stumbled upon this camp, this small way station used by the population of itinerant workers that roamed the countryside.

"Hey, Marky. What you doin' 'ere, staring at the water, eh?"

"Hmm? Oh, hello, Abaile. Just thinking I suppose."

"Well, thinking too much never did no man no good, Marky. Come get something to eat and something hot to drink."

Markis pushed himself to his feet, brushed off his thighs and glanced over at the shelter where the rest of the men were clustered around a fire. His companion, Abaile seemed to be the main speaker for this small group of half a dozen travelers. He was a tall, rangy man, bordering on the edges of middle age. Everything about him exuded an aura of unkemptness, and the same was true of his fellow workers. They were currently on their way to some of the larger estates, looking for whatever employment might be on offer. Abaile had already made it quite clear that they were not particularly fussy about what they managed to get. They'd do anything if it paid. Bands like this roamed the countryside, working the factories in Clear and migrating to farm work in the less-forgiving Storm. There were always tasks in the weather's height that groups like this were eager to do for little pay, some food and a place to sleep when the day was done.

"Thanks," said Markis. "Have you worked out where you're going yet?"

As they wandered back to join the group, Abaile explained again. "No, Marky, as I told you, we don't make no plans like that. We take what we get. We'll head on up to the big houses, ask around. That's the way it works."

"But what about your families?"

They hunkered down around the fire together and Abaile looked around the faces of his companions and grinned. "Our families," he said. "Yes, well. I have a woman or two in a couple of the bigger camps around the place, and I'd be sure there's offspring there with a couple of them." He shrugged, still grinning, and one or two returned the grin.

Markis scratched his head. "But I don't understand how it works. How can that be right?"

Abaile reached for a bowl and spooned himself some of the hot mess bubbling away in a pot over the fire. He tossed Markis a bowl and said, "There, help yourself."

"There ain't nothing to be right," he continued. "It just is. It's about the work, and that's it. We get it where we find it. We can't be going around tied to one place, now can we? We got to follow the work, and the only way sometimes is to be there first, or we don't get it. Rather be sweating and tired than hungry." He frowned at Markis, crouched there with an empty bowl in his hand, and gestured at the pot. "Hey?"

Markis reached over and spooned himself a bowl of the nondescript stuff, hesitantly lifted some to his mouth and blew on it. Cautiously, he tipped the very end of the spoon between his lips. It actually didn't taste too bad.

"But how do people come to do that?"

"How do you mean? Some of us are born to it. Others, well, you know. There's a bit of trouble here, a problem there, they have to find somewhere to go. I'd say more on that, but it wouldn't be right. Just like we're

not going to ask why you're here, Marky, if you see what I mean."

He did see. He still couldn't really understand what such a life must mean to these people. How could anyone just drift from place to place on the hope they could earn enough to feed themselves? Of course, he had known about these bands of itinerant workers, and even employed them himself on a number of occasions. There were many opportunities within Primary Production for groups such as this. And now, he might as well just be one of them.

As he lifted another spoonful to his mouth, he came to a decision. If he stayed with Abaile and the others, then he would be out of the public eye. Here he could wait for things to calm down, find out something more of these people at the same time, and when it was right, he could seek out his father and put things right. Just maybe, he could learn something that would assist the Guild and its work. He would show his father his worth, despite what Jarid might have said to turn the old man against him.

Twenty-One

"What do you mean they've taken that Atavist -- what was his name -- and locked him up? That's unbelievable, Priest. You cannot truly believe that."

Leannis Men Darnak frowned sternly at Witness Kovaar, testing the man's seriousness. It was all so wrong, but then, there was so much wrong at the moment. He and the remaining men had been stationed at one of the smaller holdings over the past couple of days, since Karin had sent him away. Since the... since...

What was happening?

At least the sky was clear. There was a chill wind blowing outside, but the rain had eased. Where were the rest of his people? Something had happened. Perhaps he'd sent them on some errand. He'd have to find out what it was. Maybe he would remember later.

"Principal," said Kovaar. "It is true, it seems. One of your household had it from one of Karin's people. That man Edvin returned from the Ka Vail estate gloating about it all over the house."

"Edvin? Edvin? Who is that?"

"You remember, Principal. He's the Head of Karin's household."

"Head of...? Remember? Oh yes. Odious little man. Why are things becoming so hard? Things seem to be slipping away from me every day. This cannot be right, Kovaar."

Kovaar came over and rested a hand on Men Darnak's shoulder. "There is much that is not right, Principal. You have a lot on your mind. It's only natural."

"What? Yes, that's it. They've confined Tcharido. I will not have it. That man went there carrying a message for me. There is no reason for them to hold him. Although it's strange that he was at Ka Vail's place, don't you think? Ka Vail has always been an ally, if not a friend. Why would he do such a thing?"

"Apparently Roge was there too, Principal."

Men Darnak walked away from Kovaar, dragging himself from beneath the hand on his shoulder. He needed to think.

"We will go there then."

"Principal, would it not be easier just to send someone with orders to have him released? You could send a couple of the men."

Men Darnak whirled. "No! We will go, Priest. Roge is there. Ka Vail is there. I will be there. I will see them both and have that man released at the same time. That way we will work out what's going on."

Kovaar sighed. "Are you sure, Principal?"

Men Darnak stalked across the intervening space toward him. "Don't you start questioning me too. Don't you dare! It's time to fix this mess. Go and see to the preparations." He turned away again, ignoring the priest. He wandered around the edges of the room, touching vaguely familiar things. He frowned as he walked. Vaguely familiar. That was the problem. His memory used to be so good. He was not that old yet. Well, yes, he was old, but not so old that he should be losing parts of his memory. He turned back, and Kovaar was still standing there.

"Well? What are you waiting for?"

"But, Principal -- "

"Just see to it!" he shouted and turned away. If the man was still standing there by the time he turned around again, by the First Families, he would know about it, priest or not.

#

Three men and a priest -- that was no way for a Principal to travel. Still, there was nothing to be done about it now. He seemed to remember just one of the men. The rest were unfamiliar, new faces. He must remember to ask Witness Kovaar what had happened to the others. But that could wait for now; the Ka Vail estates were ahead. At least this time it had been mere hours, and not days.

As they drew up the main entrance road, there was already someone there to meet them. Two of Ka Vail's household staff stood at the main gate, watching as the party approached. One of the men clearly recognized him, because he stepped forward, his arms wide.

"Principal Men Darnak," he said. "This is indeed an honor. Welcome to Guildmaster Ka Vail's estate."

"Thank you," Men Darnak said, nodding in response. He slid from his animal and stood waiting for the man to approach. The rest of his party sat where they were, awaiting his instruction.

"Principal," the man said, drawing close. "I was in attendance with Guildmaster Ka Vail on a number of occasions, both at your estates and at the main Guild House in Yarik. Of course, I don't expect you would remember, but really, I mean it when I say it is an honor to have you here now. What can we do for you? Should I fetch the Guildmaster?"

"No," said Men Darnak. "That won't be necessary yet. Just tell me. I have heard that one of my men has been confined here. Tell me it's not true."

The man looked suddenly uncomfortable, shifting where he stood, his gaze slipping away. "The Atavist? Surely not, Principal. How could a simple mad Atavist be one of your men? That is the only -- "

"Yes, the Atavist. What of him? Where is he?"

The man stammered his response. "Principal, we had no idea. If we had known... He's being held over this way." He waved in the direction of the outbuildings.

"Take us there now."

"Aleks, do you think that's a good idea?" said the man from the gate.

"Do you know who this is?" said Aleks. "This is your Principal."

"But -- "

"But nothing, Malik. We will show them the way. Now!"

Malik ducked his head and beckoned them to follow as he turned toward the outbuildings. Aleks gestured for Men Darnak to follow and also headed off up the path branching away from the main house. "This way, please, Principal."

They reached a set of garages and barns. The old next to the new, thought Men Darnak. Always the way all over Aldaban. He waited while Aleks fiddled with a lock then slid back a broad door. Beside him, Malik muttered to his older companion.

"Shouldn't we inform the Guildmaster? Do you really know what you're doing?"

"Of course I know," hissed Aleks. "This is Principal Men Darnak. Now don't question. All in good time."

The others had now slid from the back of their animals and stood clustered around him. He turned and motioned the three men to stay. "Witness Kovaar, you will accompany me," he said.

Somehow, this open expression of his status, his authority seemed to have stripped some of the fog away from his thoughts.

"Aleks, is it?" The man nodded. "Who was it that ordered my man locked up?"

"It was Guildmaster Ky Menin."

"Ky Menin? What was he doing here?"

"I do not know, Principal."

"Hmm, perhaps he arrived with Roge. You," he said to the one called Malik. "Go and get Ky Menin and my son. Have them come here while I talk to Tchardo. Then they can explain themselves. Go!"

Malik scurried off to do his bidding.

Inside the garage sat two groundcars buried under broad sheets. There was a space for a third, but it lay empty. Around the walls were shelves, covered with servicing equipment. Further back, in the darkness, there was a dividing wall and a doorway off in one corner.

"Get some light in here," he said.

Aleks crossed to a shelf, retrieved a lantern and lit it. Men Darnak nodded, walked briskly between the two dormant groundcars and headed for the back doorway with Kovaar and Aleks in tow. He tried the door, but it was locked. He motioned Aleks to attend to it. Aleks fiddled with the door, and it swung open. He held the lantern above his head, casting a dim yellow light through the doorway and into the back room. Hunched on a pallet in the far corner sat a miserable bedraggled figure, blinking at the sudden brightness.

"Tchardo, what are you doing here?" said Men Darnak.

"I'm afraid I had little choice in the matter, Principal," said the Atavist.

Men Darnak stepped into the room followed by the other two. "What have you done, Atavist?" he said.

"By the Prophet, nothing, Principal. I came here to deliver your message as you requested." He swung his legs from the pallet and sat, pushing his hair back from his eyes.

There had to be more. "And?"

"Nothing, Principal. Your son was not here. Instead, I spoke with Guildmasters Ka Vail and Ky Menin. That man Edvin was here too."

Men Darnak was suddenly furious with the man's temerity. This was unbelievable. "Why are you concocting tales, Tchardo? What do you hope to gain? The Guildmasters would not do this to any of my people. What have you tried to do? Was it something with Roge? I know that he's quick to anger. Tell me!"

Tchardo stood. His robes were streaked with dried mud, and there was a dark smudge on one cheek, which could have been more mud, but it could conceivably have been a bruise.

"I'm telling you the truth, Principal. As the Prophet is my witness."

"No. Inconceivable."

Further discussion was interrupted by the reappearance of Malik who cleared his throat before speaking. His discomfort was evident as he delivered his message.

"Guildmaster Ky Menin is otherwise occupied. He cannot be disturbed right now. Principal Men Darnak has left."

Men Darnak turned on the man. "What! Did I hear you correctly?" The man swallowed. "Go back to the house. Get Ka Vail. I will not stand for this any longer. Do it now!"

He stepped out of the room and crossed to one of the covered groundcars, placing his hand flat upon its roof. He had to think. None of this was real. It couldn't be. Kovaar was suddenly behind him.

"Principal, I think that you should -- "

"Go away, Priest," he hissed. "I need to think." He sensed Kovaar hovering behind him for a moment or two

longer, and then the priest withdrew. He ran his hands over the top of the covered groundcar. His life was slipping away from him, covered by a blanket of things that no longer made sense. He grabbed the sheet with both hands and tore it from the roof of the groundcar. It took him three separate attempts before it was fully free. He dropped the ends at his feet and ran his palms over the smooth, hard, vehicle's roof. Everything, everything stuck between what was meant to be and what it was. He had to see Roge, try and work out what was really happening. Roge wouldn't treat him in the same way Karin had -- curse her. And now the Guilds themselves were conspiring against him. He thought he had been doing the right thing, stepping back, letting the children come into their own. They had lived in his shadow for too long already. It couldn't be his fault that Karin had turned away from him. That didn't make sense either, unless there had been things about her that he hadn't seen. Perhaps his attention had been diverted because of his preoccupation with the Principate and the Guilds. Perhaps he had not paid them enough attention after all. But it was a father's duty to --

"Principal Men Darnak." He looked up. There stood Aron Ka Vail, and beside him, the tall thin figure of Karryl Ky Menin. Ky Menin was watching him with a wryly-amused expression. Ka Vail, on the other hand, was looking distinctly uneasy.

Men Darnak straightened, smoothed the front of his clothes and waited for them to approach.

"What are you doing here, Principal?" said Ka Vail.

"I came looking for my son, and I find this. What is the meaning of this, Aron?"

"I'm not sure what you mean, Principal."

"I mean I arrive here, I'm told Roge is not here, and I find my man locked up and mistreated. Who's responsible?"

Ky Menin's wryly amused expression remained. "I ordered him put away, Leannis. Some mad Atavist comes around with no warning, starts making claims, pretending to be a messenger from the Principal, threatening violence, what would you do?"

"You have no right!"

Ky Menin slowly shook his head and smiled. "I have every right, Leannis. You forget. You gave up your own rights when you stood down as Principal. Any rights you have are by virtue of your children now. Mine, however, are my own."

Deep within, Men Darnak understood the truth of what Ky Menin was saying, but for him to take it and use it like that was simply too much.

"Perhaps we should come up to the house," said Ka Vail.

"No, Aron, we will resolve this here," he said. He turned on Ky Menin. "What do you think I'm supposed to do? My daughter sends me from her estates with my men and turns me out into the storm. What sort of behavior is that? Haven't I given her everything?"

Ky Menin leaned in close. "Perhaps you have no idea what you have given her, Leannis. It's simple, and just for your education, I'll tell you what you've given her -- a fat useless husband and two brothers who have barely an idea what they're doing. Roge Men Darnak, Principal. Ha!"

"But tradition dictates..."

"Nothing," said Ky Menin pointedly. "It dictates nothing. We are here because of our own efforts, no other. All your holy tradition does is keep us in ignorance. It's because of the First Families that we have to go through this stupid nightmare every Return, every Season and all you've done is perpetuate it."

Men Darnak turned his back. "No, I won't listen to this."

Ky Menin stepped up close behind him and spoke quietly into his right ear. "You should listen to this, Leannis. For years, for seasons, we've had to listen to your blessed tradition, to your hollow mouthings about Order. Well, I'll tell you what your Order gives you. Stagnation, like everything else in this place. You used to have respect. You used to have good sense. You lost it along with your wife, and finally it has led to this. Now you've lost your children as well as your respect."

"No!" He turned to face the Guildmaster. "I cannot listen to this. I am going to find Roge. He won't turn me away. He'll listen to me."

"Roge has gone," said Ka Vail, looking troubled.

"I don't believe you," said Men Darnak. "He's here."

"Principal," said Witness Kovaar from the background. "Why don't you -- ?"

"Shut your noise, Priest," he said. Kovaar was becoming like an annoying drone in the back of his head. "No. I'm going to find Roge." He pushed past Ky Menin. Ka Vail reached out to stop him, but he shrugged off the hand and pushed past. He left them standing there in the garage. He would find Roge. If he found Roge, he could make this right. Karryl Ky Menin had gone too far. He was Principal, dammit. The man had no right to say those things.

A voice was crying out behind him. It sounded like Kovaar. No, damn Kovaar. Damn them all. Ky Menin might have been right about Karin, but he had absolutely no right to say it.

#

Back in the garage, Sandon leaned heavily against the doorframe of the small rear room. Two days stuck in darkness with limited food had done nothing to improve his fatigue. It looked like things were worse than he thought. Men Darnak's behavior was like nothing he expected from the old man. Gone was the reasoned rational discussion; gone was the command and authority. Ky Menin had stood over him and made him quiver. It was almost as if Men Darnak had shrunk under Ky Menin's verbal assault. The refusal to listen was not so unusual, but the flight to find Roge, it was irrational. What had happened to the man to change him so much?

He turned to Witness Kovaar. "Where are the rest of the men," he asked in a low voice.

"What rest?" said Kovaar, still staring out the garage door. "The three we came with, and that's it."

Sandon frowned. That wasn't right either. Leannis Men Darnak always traveled with a full entourage. The two Guildmasters after a brief discussion wandered out, seeming to have forgotten that Kovaar and he were even there. Sandon pushed himself upright.

"We should see where the Principal has gone," he said.

Kovaar seemed to remember where he was. He turned to look at Sandon, frowned, gave him a long look and then said, "Yes, of course, you are right."

"So what happened to the rest of the men?"

"The Prophet dictates the place of things and the rights of Order. When the storms approach, those who fear the Prophet's wrath run and hide."

It was Sandon's turn to frown. The man was talking nonsense. "What are you talking about, Witness Kovaar? What happened to the men?"

"The Prophet guides all men to be in their rightful place."

Sandon gave another weary sigh and headed for the open door. A moment more, and Kovaar caught him up with a brisk step. As he passed the groundcars, Sandon paused. There was space for three. Only two were there. He could see the marks of where the other had been parked. A dust sheet lay bundled on one of the side benches.

"What is it, Tchardo?" asked Kovaar.

"I don't know," he answered. "Something strange. These machines."

"Think only on what you should," said Kovaar. "Leave your hate of technology behind for a moment or two. We need to find the Principal."

Together they headed toward the house, Sandon feeling stiff and sore from sitting for too long in the same position locked in the cramped back room. Of Men Darnak and the two Guildmasters, there was no sign. The three men who had come with him now stood near the gate, holding their padders' reins and talking among themselves. Sandon headed in that direction.

"Have any of you seen which way the Principal went?"

"Tchardo! What happened to you?" It was the boy, Fran.

"Hello, Fran. It's good to see you again. It's a long story and we haven't the time at the moment. I'll tell you later. We need to find the Principal."

"He headed up to the house. The Guildmasters followed not much after."

"All right, Fran. You wait here. I'll go and find the Principal."

"No," said Kovaar. "You had best wait here, Tchardo. I will go."

Sandon hated to admit it, but Kovaar was right. He was hardly likely to get easy access to the house now. The priest stalked off and Sandon was left watching him. He pulled his robes tight about himself against the chill. At least it wasn't raining. He looked about, but the clouds were light fists, scudding across the sky, trailing plumes behind them. If he wore these robes long enough, eventually he might even get used to the seasonal cold. He looked at Fran and gave him a brief smile. He was a good-hearted young man. In Sandon's former life, he could have used someone like him. He analyzed that thought. Strange, he was already thinking of it as his former life, as if it had gone forever.

While they waited, he recounted the tale of his confrontation with Edvin and the two Guildmasters leading to his confinement.

"So, did you hit him?" said Fran eagerly. "I would have."

"Look who you're talking to, Fran," said one of the others with a laugh.

The boy looked confused for a moment, then blushed. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"Don't be," said Sandon. "The Atavist has no proscription against violent action; we just don't tend to find a need."

"Is that so?" said the other man. "Hmm, well who would have guessed?"

He turned to the one who had spoken. "How much do you really know about the Atavists?" he asked.

The man's answer was cut short by the reappearance of Principal Men Darnak striding back toward them from the house, his long cloak flapping about him, his hair streaming back, his hands waving. Witness Kovaar was racing behind him trying to keep up.

"Principal, wait!" called Kovaar.

"Where's my padder?" called Men Darnak. "Quick, quick, bring it here, man."

Within an instant, the Principal was on his animal, digging his heels into its flanks and was charging off up the hill.

"Principal," called Kovaar, attempting to mount his own beast. "Wait!" Kovaar fumbled his footing, and on the third attempt, finally found his seat. In a second or two, he too was charging up the hill. Looking flustered, the three men mounted and headed off after them. Sandon was left standing where he was, watching them disappear rapidly up the roadway.

"Dammit," he spat. His own padder was probably still in the stables somewhere. At least he hoped it was. He dashed back toward the barn, pain shooting through his joints with every hurried step.

Twenty-Two

"No, by the Prophet, they cannot all desert me. I will not allow it." Men Darnak dug his heels once more into the padder's flanks, ignoring the fact that he was already at full gallop. He was Principal. He had been Principal since...

The ground whipped past him, large fleshy plants and bare patches of muddy ground. A whitish scum marked the bare patches in places, and he paused in his considerations, just for a moment, to wonder what it might be. Funny that he'd never noticed it before. The wind rushing past him was cold, tinged with ice. He hunched against it and urged his mount on faster, faster. The padder crested a small hill, then started to slow to a canter. He was on the down slope now. A small valley ran between the two hills, obscuring his vision of any of the surrounds. Rising, blasted ground hemmed him in on all sides. Gently he slowed the animal to a walk, and looked around, but there was nothing, nothing but the same, unchanging landscape. The padder was

breathing heavily beneath him. He could feel its ribs moving in and out between his legs and with noticing it, he realized that he too was panting. Up above, the clouds were thickening, filling with anger and the hate this world had for its people. But they weren't its people, were they? Why wouldn't it try and reject them? He pulled back on the reins and drew the animal to a complete halt. Yes, he could understand the world trying to reject him, but his own people, his own family. What was it that he had done?

He growled at the uncertainty as it flitted around him with the strengthening breeze. Karin, of all people. Karin was meant to support him, to love him, to stand by him as he moved into the infirmity of advancing years. Roge had too much to occupy him now, but Karin...

And then there was Tarlain. He had always been a good boy. A little naïve, a little idealistic, but that came with youth. You grew out of that, in time. He had thought that sending him away was an act of responsibility, that making him truly work for his position would have hardened him, given him the strength he would eventually need to play in the machinations of the Guilds. Perhaps he had been too harsh. And now there was nothing for it. Tarlain was gone, he knew not where, Karin had thrown him to Aldaban's unforgiving landscape, and Roge was somewhere. Roge was somewhere. Roge was where? He had to talk to his eldest son and find out what was happening. Where was Yl Aris when he needed him? Sandon would have helped. But he had he had what had he done?

"Principal!" The shout came from over one of the slight hills behind him, far away, distorted by the wind, but it was definitely someone calling for him. He knew the voice. It was ... it was ... Priest. Kovaar. Witness Kovaar was looking for him.

"Principal!" the shout came again.

He sat where he was, looking down at the patchy ground, feeling the padder shift beneath him. Let them find him. Or perhaps it wasn't a 'them' after all. He shook his head. Kovaar. What did he want?

"Principal Men Darnak!"

He looked back over his shoulder. There, silhouetted on the hilltop was the Priest's figure astride his padder. Behind him, breaking through the clouds, the Twins' merged disks, struggling to force their way through the heavy blackness that roiled about them. Shafts of ruddy light broke through, disappeared, and broke through again, framing the solitary figure atop the hill with a continuously changing pattern of red and orange light. The Priest's robes stirred in the wind, adding to the unreality of the picture, shifting light, shifting shadow, the world turning around him.

"There you are. Stay there, Principal. I will come to you."

The Priest's reedy voice drifted and whipped away. Men Darnak snorted and turned away. Yes, let him come.

Kovaar cantered down the hill and drew his mount up beside.

"Principal," he said, a tone of admonition in the voice. "Where did you think you were going?"

"Did you not hear me? I'm looking for Roge."

"But what made you think you would find him out here? There's nothing here, Principal. Roge will have returned to his estates, or perhaps gone to Karin's. Would it not have been better to find out where he'd gone before charging out into the weather, especially so close to the end of the day. It will become dark soon, and I am sure the Prophet would not will you to be out here in this weather."

Men Darnak turned to face him. "So, you know the Prophet's will now, do you, Priest? You speak for the Prophet, do you? And I suppose you can tell me where my son is too. Perhaps you can explain to me his mind as well?"

Kovaar shook his head. "There is no point, Principal. You have already seen what's happened with your daughter. Why would you expect the others to be any different?"

Men Darnak sighed heavily. "I expect something. Something. I don't know what I expect." He looked up at the sky. The weight was growing in him, building darkly like the cloud mass above. He looked back at Kovaar. Reaching out with one hand, he grasped a handful of the Priest's robes. "You're a man of the Prophet, Kovaar. Tell me. Tell me what to do. Tell me what the Prophet wills. Let *Him* make this right."

Kovaar reached up and gently removed his hand. "It is not our place to demand of the Prophet. He guides us. He shows us the way. You can listen to his wisdom, deep inside. His will shapes things into what they must be."

"Pfah! No, no more. Damn you Priest. Where is Roge? We have to find Roge." He turned away, scanning the empty hills as if to find his eldest son sitting waiting for him. Kovaar sat watching him and he turned back to face him. "Damn you, Priest."

He dug his heels in and whipped the reins savagely. He headed the padder toward the hillside in front, urging it faster.

"Principal, wait!" yelled Kovaar behind him.

#

Sandon walked quickly past the still-open garage and headed for the stables. The broad door was closed, presumably against the weather, and he pulled at its edge, trying to ease it open far enough to slip inside and find his padder, if it was there at all. He'd have to saddle it, find the rest of his belongings. Who knew what they might have done with them? Inside, he was still cursing fate. Every time he seemed to get anywhere near the Principal, something conspired to wrest him away. There had to be a reason for that. There was a reason for everything. He was putting his weight behind the door, heaving against its bulk when one of Ka Vail's men appeared around the corner, looking pale.

"You," he said. "Where's my padder?"

The man stopped, looked blankly at him and shook his head. "I can't help you, Atavist," he said. "Such terrible news." He shook his head again.

"What is it?" asked Sandon, pausing in his efforts.

The man stared into nothing. "Principal Men Darnak. The new Principal."

"What? What is it?"

"No, of course you couldn't have heard. There's been an accident. He's been killed."

Sandon felt the ground move beneath him, but it was no quake. "What do you mean? How could he...?"

The man kept shaking his head. "For some reason he took a groundcar when he left the other night. What possessed him to do that, I don't know. The Guildmaster's youngest son was with him. It must have failed. The storms. Jarid Ka Vail has just managed to get back with the news not a few minutes ago."

Sandon's mind was running in confused circles. None of this made sense.

"What are you talking about? Tell me what happened."

"I told you. An accident. The groundcar. Jarid is unhurt, thank the Twins, but Roge Men Darnak didn't survive. According to the boy, there was no chance for him. I don't know what we are going to do. The Guildmaster has sent out a group to try and help, but there's nothing to be done, apart from retrieving the body. We need a firm hand in the Principate, not this. To lose him so young, and so soon into his time as Principal, it's shocking."

Sandon felt himself unable to move. He was barely able to close his mouth. He had to do something. The Principal. The *real* Principal -- Leannis Men Darnak. He couldn't possibly know.

"Has anyone been sent to tell the old man?"

"Which old man?"

"Principal Men Darnak. The boy's father. What old man do you think?"

The man looked confused. "No, no, I don't think so."

"No, of course not," muttered Sandon, then to the man. "Quick, help me find my padder."

The man didn't seem to register that he was suddenly being ordered about by a bedraggled looking Atavist, and he moved to help Sandon with the door. "This way," he said, leading him toward the back of the stables. All the while, Sandon's mind was racing. The Principal had not been acting himself for some time. His headlong flight into the countryside in search of Roge, the insistence upon coming here himself, none of it made sense. The implications for the structure of the Guilds was enough on its own. How was Men Darnak going to take the news of his son's death? It really didn't matter now; he had to be told. Sandon had a duty to tell him.

Sandon's padder was in a stall right at the end. It looked up at their approach and grumbled, then gave a mighty snort. His belongings had been bundled unceremoniously into one corner. He was thankful, at least, that the padder had not seen fit to use the things as a place to leave a nice reminder about its digestive processes.

"Here." Ka Vail's man had disappeared and returned shortly after with Sandon's saddle. He assisted getting it on, then tying the pack to the animal's rear. Sandon led the padder out of the stall, thanked the man, and then headed outside, an empty hollowness ringing inside him. Roge Men Darnak dead. What could be worse? The Principate and the Guilds would be in chaos. The old man would have to step back in if they were going to restore some sort of order.

Which way would he go? He looked around, remembering the path that Men Darnak had taken and grimaced to himself. Where would he be? The men had taken off after him. Witness Kovaar was in pursuit, but the landscape, full of rolling hills and valleys, stretched for miles about. He had no idea where the Principal might be. "Where the Prophet wills," came unbidden to his mind, and he gave a wry, humorless grin. All right. It

was time for the Prophet to start doing some good. It was all he had left to hope for. He mounted and urged the padder into a brisk trot. A glance at the heavens revealed thickening cloud, pregnant with heavy moisture, and the light was fading fast, what little there was of it. So, here he was, yet again on a fool's errand, and liable to be soaked to the skin before the evening was out. Were the Twins really in such poor alignment at the time he was born?

#

Inside the house, Aron Ka Vail watched the lone Atavist heading up the road and away, presumably in search of the others including Men Darnak. Poor fool. If only he knew. He turned to face Jarid, who stood behind him, apparently waiting for something.

"What is it, Jarid," he said. "Haven't you done enough?"

"I don't know what you mean, Father."

Aron sat heavily and sighed. "No, no, I suppose I have no right to blame you. It isn't right though. None of this is right."

Jarid took a chair opposite. "How can it not be right, Father? The Guild needs stability and a firm hand. You know we had no choice in it. To do nothing would have left us exposed, and with the situation as it is, we cannot afford such exposure."

Aron raised a hand to his forehead and closed his eyes. He didn't really want to hear what the boy was telling him.

"What with Markis, and Roge, Yosset Clier," Jarid continued. "Things were simply becoming too unstable. You had no choice. You've simply helped to introduce some stability into the equation, as is your duty. I've heard you talk often enough about Order."

Aron slowly withdrew his hand from in front of his eyes. "That doesn't justify the treatment of Leannis Men Darnak and his people. Or perhaps you think it does, Jarid? The old man was a fine Principal. He saw us through difficult times more than once." He sighed, then hardened his expression. "I know well enough what it's like to have your children turn against you."

Jarid was looking down at his hands clasped in front of him. Aron wondered. Had he used those hands to do what he had done? "No, Jarid. We have another duty. Leannis Men Darnak has been good to me over the years. We need to give him at least something, even if it's mere refuge from the Season. He needs our support. With what's happened now, we may need more from him in the weeks and months to come. Leannis Men Darnak has always known what is right for the Guilds, understood the intricacies of their workings better than anyone else. Now that we have this void "

Jarid looked up quickly. "But you heard what Ky Menin said. We should leave him be. He'll hear about the accident soon enough one way or another. Didn't you see the way he was acting?"

"Of course I did, but by the First Families, that doesn't excuse what's happening to him, what we're doing to him. I'm not going to continue on this path. Regardless of anything else, whatever else is happening, if Leannis Men Darnak needs help, then he will get it from me."

Jarid stood, now frowning as well. "I don't think that's a very good idea, Father."

"Jarid, I don't care whether you think it's a good idea or not. I have my duty, and as the Prophet wills, I will perform it. Men Darnak deserves that level of respect, and so damn it, do I!"

Jarid stared at him, saying nothing, his jaw working slightly. Without another word, he turned and stalked from the room. Aron watched him go. Such anger. Perhaps the boy would learn.

Karryl Ky Menin had a lot to answer for. Now, with Roge no longer there, the choices were distinctly limited. Karryl Ky Menin. No, damn him. He would not have the Guilds. He would not have the Principate. If that meant bringing Men Darnak back, then that's what they'd have to do, but how they'd do it was another question, particularly now. He glanced outside, and barely registered another sole figure riding out from the estate. It looked like Jarid. Briefly, just briefly he wondered where the boy might be going.

Twenty-Three

"Now you see," said the Kallathik.

Long lines of the creatures clustered in the central chamber. Each held two double-headed, sharpened spears in their twin sets of arms. Lanterns had been lit, out of some bizarre concession to his presence that he still did not understand. The yellowish light seemed as if it had sparked a glow in the serried ranks of scaled bodies and in the deep shine of the polished *ajura* spears.

Tarlain swallowed. "But no, I don't see," he said one more time.

The Kallathik went motionless, but it only lasted for a moment. It swiveled its vast head and looked down at him. The scrutiny was expressionless. How could it have an expression? He had thought he was starting to understand these beings, but that was before.

"Is this all?" said Tarlain.

"We gather in all our places," said the Kallathik finally.

Tarlain had no real idea how many of them there might be, but if all the cave systems around the area bounded by Yarik and Bortruz held gatherings like this, then the Guild hierarchy was in real trouble. The traditions of the First Families dictated harmony and order. There had never been resolution by direct action. Never. Even the way they had left the homeworld. Rather than fight, they had spent years maximizing their resources, and when the time came, they simply packed all they needed and left. They had nothing to combat this, nothing.

"There has to be a better way," he said. "Can't you wait?"

"We have waited long enough. These creatures are here to stay. We will change it now."

Tarlain frowned. His heart was beating rapidly and his mouth was dry. He had no idea how much he dared, here in this, their place.

"But you must wait. We have to work out a way to make this right. Can't we discuss this?"

The Kallathik face turned away from him, seeming to ponder the ranks of its own kind. There was another long pause. It clacked low in its throat, or where its throat should be, and in a sudden rush that again took Tarlain's breath away, there was another standing beside them.

"We have discussed," said the first Kallathik. "Tell this Tarlain Men Darnak, Guild of Welfare."

Another pause, and then the new Kallathik swiveled its head to face him. More and more, Tarlain was starting to suspect that their communication went well beyond anything he, or any of his kind understood.

"The forests are not for us or of us. Still, they take the wood. They use the wood. They make us do things. More things every season. These animals, these creatures want more than they need. They take the wood."

Tarlain frowned. "I don't understand."

The new Kallathik continued. "There are two new creatures on our world. One wants what it needs, like us. The other wants more. They are one but they are two. The mines. The holes in the earth. The forests. Their cities." It stopped. Tarlain was about to ask it to explain one more time, but then it started speaking again. "The creatures will not go away, though we have waited. Now the Kallathik must make this change. We will find the ones that cluster in their own hives and drive them out and then we will be rid of them." As if to emphasize its point, the Kallathik thrust downward with its sharp wooden spear. Tarlain took a step back.

The first Kallathik lifted its head to gaze up at the ceiling. "We watched them come. We watched the tiny caves that flew through the sky. We watched the ones fall and break. We watched the others."

The other Kallathik continued. "Such tiny animals that emerged." It gave the amusement sign, and the one standing next to him echoed it. "We thought they would go soon. We would go back to our places. Keep to our mines. Not let them see us. We could watch them. They would go away."

He wasn't quite sure, but Tarlain was starting to understand what the creature was saying. Over five centuries. That was a long, long time to wait. How long did these creatures live? Whatever it was had something to do with the *ajura* forests and their monopolization by the Guilds. He knew the wood was sacred. But the creatures had seemed so compliant, so passive apart from the irregular restive periods that came with the approach of Storm Season.

The first Kallathik made another clacking sound, and just as suddenly, the second creature was gone, rejoining its fellows in the ranked mass filling the chamber's center. Tarlain shivered.

Humanity could not be so ignorant. Tarlain's memory was full of motionless statue-like individuals, or a low shuffling gait through corridors and outside the burrows. He chewed at his bottom lip. Or perhaps these creatures were just much, much smarter than they seemed.

There had to be some way to reason with them.

"What do you mean there are two sorts?"

This time the reaction was instantaneous. The vast head swiveled to face him. Two sets of eyes fixed him with a gaze that pinned him to the spot. "You saw the others," the Kallathik hissed and clacked. "You saw us joined together, here."

Tarlain frowned. The Atavists. It had to be referring to the Atavists. Whatever they had planned, they had planned together. Sudden intuition dawned. The Atavists had every reason to want to see the structure of the Guilds tumble around them. And now it appeared the Kallathik had reason as well. He wondered how long

they had been planning together, how long they had been holding these discussions, and more, he wondered how much the Atavists knew. The Kallathik had been waiting over five centuries, over one-hundred-and-fifty full seasons. He closed his eyes and let out a slow breath. All of this had been happening beneath their very gaze, beneath the gaze of everyone in the Principate and the Guilds, and it had gone unnoticed, or had it? What a fool he'd been. What a fool to think that he, small insignificant Tarlain, could have done anything.

A deep grinding sound came from the Kallathik beside him and one by one, was caught by the others in the chamber. The vast hollow space filled with sound echoing from the walls, issuing from hundreds of Kallathik throats and chests. It bounced from the flat metal surfaces, growing and deepening in intensity. Wincing at this new assault, Tarlain covered his ears with his hands, but the sound poured over him and through him, pulsing in vast waves through his body and being and deep within his mind's lower reaches. One by one, the files of Kallathik started leaving the chamber, shuffling up the side corridors with an unhurried gait. The low animal rumble was now joined by the sound of hundred of thickly plated hides scraping along metal-clad walls. Tarlain clamped his jaw tight shut, watching as the chamber slowly emptied, the sound pounding at him, till eventually it faded, leaving him standing there alone, unsure of what he was going to do next, the echoes of the cacophony still ringing within him. Slowly, he lowered his hands from his ears, staring at the empty chamber.

There was nothing he could do to halt what the Kallathik planned. He could try and warn the Guilds, but that wouldn't achieve anything. It was unlikely they'd even listen to him. He'd already seen what happened when he'd tried to discuss the Kallathik. It was, after all, why he had ended up here in the first place.

He closed his eyes. "Prophet guide me," he said silently. Slowly he opened his eyes and looked around the empty chamber. He turned for the tunnel leading to his own burrow and headed out of the chamber, reaching automatically to find his mark on the tunnel entrance. There were a few things he needed before he left. And he was leaving, he was sure, of that much if nothing else. Perhaps there would still be time.

Twenty-Four

Sandon struggled forward. The darkness had teeth, but they were teeth made of air and ice. The wind tore at the air around him, billowing under his hood and pressing his beard flat against his chin. He squinted through the rushing gale, his eyes tearing, blinking with each new blast, trying in vain to pierce the all-encompassing gloom.

"Principal Men Darnak!" he called, knowing it was useless. Even if they were close enough to hear, the wind tore the words from his mouth and scattered them across the barren slopes. Daggered shards of cold chilled through his robes, helping the ice touch creep into his body and bones. Sandon worked to pull the robe tighter about him, trying to find some way to guard the coarse open-weave holes from the wind's probing fingers. The Atavists couldn't live like this. He shivered, and then suddenly remembered the weatherproof coat the he had gotten from Milana and Benjo. He turned in the saddle, reaching behind to fumble in the pack. After several struggling attempts with fingers made numb and aching with the cold, he managed to pull the coat free and then pull it on over his head. It snapped about him with the wind, but at least it offered a little more protection.

"Principal Men Darnak!" he called again. "Witness Kovaar!"

He must really look a sight -- a bedraggled Atavist in homespun and weather coat screaming into the wind. He gritted his teeth. How had he, Sandon Yl Aris come to this? It was mere weeks ago that he had been sitting

calmly in the main Guild room of Primary Production in discussion with Ka Vail, talking about the horrors of the Return. He steered the padder up the next slope, cresting the hill and drew it to a halt. Up here, the wind was worse, but at least it gave him a vantage point.

Over there, a vague flickering in the darkness. There was someone out there carrying a lantern. He grunted and kicked his padder into motion. It might not be Men Darnak, but at least it would be someone. Whoever it was might just have seen the Principal and his men.

He caught up with the two men in just a few minutes and breathed a sigh of relief. It was a pair of Men Darnak's men. They were riding against the wind, their lantern held high, shielded well enough to withstand the worst of the onslaught, but still fluttering and flaring with the occasional strong gust. He was pleased to see that one of the pair was the young man, Fran.

"Fran," he shouted against the wind.

Fran leaned close to him and shouted back. "Tchardo, what are you doing out here? We thought we'd lost you."

"Fran, I have to find the Principal."

"So do we!" Fran shouted back.

"What do you mean?"

"We found a lodge. We were going to hole up against the storm." He screwed up his face against the wind and leaned closer. "The Principal took one look and headed out into the night. The Priest went after him."

"Come on. I'll help you look. We have to find him."

Fran clearly saw something in Sandon's face. "What is it?" he said.

"Later, Fran. Later," he yelled, trying to make himself heard above the wind.

Fran nodded and kicked his padder into motion.

It took them another hour battling against the winds before they came upon Men Darnak and Kovaar huddled in a small decline. Witness Kovaar was standing over the old man, holding the reins of both their animals while Men Darnak sat hunched over, grasping at handfuls of the scant vegetation and tearing them from the ground, then tossing them into the wind. Kovaar was clearly trying to get him to stop and return, presumably back to the lodge.

"There!" Fran yelled, pointing.

"Yes, I see them," said the other man.

They spurred their animals into a quick canter, and Sandon quickly followed up behind.

"What's he doing?" Fran said over the wind as Sandon drew abreast. Sandon shook his head. He didn't know, but it didn't look good, he thought grimly. He needed the Principal at full strength right now.

Something alerted Witness Kovaar to their approach, for he looked up, an expression, half concern and half relief on his gaunt features. As soon as they slowed, Sandon slid from his animal and stepped up beside

Kovaar, still buffeted by the wind, but less so in this half shelter.

"We need to talk to him," he said as quietly as he could, virtually impossible with the rushing noise.

Kovaar frowned at him. "What is it?"

"I have news."

Kovaar fixed him with a querying look, frowned, turned back to look at Men Darnak, still sitting at his feet apparently oblivious to any of them, and chewed at his bottom lip. "We need to get him back out of this weather. I'm going to need help," he shouted, turning back to look at Sandon.

"Fran, help me get him on his padder," yelled Sandon.

Together they moved to lift Men Darnak from the ground, each of them with one hand in an armpit, and the other holding an arm. The Principal was like a dead weight between them, but he didn't resist. Sandon noticed how frail the man's arm felt, as if he were a mere shade of what he'd been just a few months before. Men Darnak had never been a big man, but he was tall and wiry, with compact muscles. The Principal wavered between them, staring out into the darkness, his beard and long hair flying in the wind. They were out of the direct force of it here, but it was still enough to flap his cloak about him. The flying hair, the vacant expression, none of it augured well for Sandon. Together, he and Fran managed to guide him onto the back of his padder, with Kovaar still holding the reins.

"Which way?" asked Sandon.

Fran pointed back in the direction they had come, and his companion led off. Fran followed closely behind, and then Kovaar, leading Men Darnak's padder beside him. Sandon brought up the rear.

It didn't take them long to reach the small lodge. As it hove into view, Sandon doubted whether he'd ever seen a more welcoming sight. The lantern light from within was almost friendly, and inside, there would be heat and shelter. These lodges, province of the more well-to-do Guild functionaries were simple, but usually adequately enough equipped. It would be sheer luxury compared to anything he'd had to put up with for the last few weeks.

As the five of them stepped inside, slapping their arms and huddling into their clothes, the remaining member of Men Darnak's party greeted them. He had been busy, attending to the facilities inside. A wave of warmth washed over Sandon. There was a wide, open common room with a broad table. Several rough-hewn chairs lay scattered around the room across a broad stone floor scattered with rugs. It had all the rustic appeal of the current fashion. Sandon presumed this was part of the Ka Vail holdings, but there was no way of being sure. In the darkness and the weather, he had lost any concept of direction. In the corner sat a large stove, already blazing. Atop it sat a large steaming pot and nearby a low table with the makings of a fine brew already laid out. Oh, what he'd give for a hot, strong mug of tea right now, but there were other priorities, and he knew it.

"Bring the Principal in," said Kovaar. "Sit him over there."

"What?" said Men Darnak. "What are you doing, Priest? Am I a helpless child that I need to be carried and pushed about?" He shrugged off Fran's guiding hand and drew himself to full height, his eyes blazing. "Know your place, Witness Kovaar. I am your Principal."

"Yes, of course, Principal," said Kovaar, bowing his head slightly.

Men Darnak turned on Sandon. "Do I know you, Atavist?"

Sandon felt a sudden chill.

Men Darnak peered at him, held the gaze for a few moments, then shook his head and proceeded to look around the room. "Over there," he finally said, pointing to a chair near a wall covered by a tall set of shelves. "Bring me tea."

The other man scurried over to see to the brew and Men Darnak strode across the room and sat, his fingers clasped in front of him. Witness Kovaar sidled over and muttered to Sandon, still keeping an eye on the Principal.

"What has happened? What is the news?"

Sandon chewed at his top lip, and then cleared his throat before answering in a low voice. "It's Roge Men Darnak. He's dead. Some sort of accident."

There was a sharp intake of breath from Kovaar, and he turned to look at him with disbelief on his face. "Is this true?"

Sandon nodded.

"By the Prophet," said Kovaar, turning back to look at Men Darnak seated across the room. Sandon caught something on the man's face, almost a look of satisfaction, and then it was gone, leaving him wondering if he'd simply imagined it.

As if prompted by the look, Men Darnak spoke. "What is it? What are you two muttering about?"

Sandon took a few steps toward the Principal, and Kovaar gave a sharp hiss. "No," he said.

"I must," said Sandon, back over his shoulder. He approached the seated man and crouched in front of him.

"Principal," he said. He fought for the words, finding none that were easier than any others.

"There is no good way to say this. There's been an accident. Your son, Roge ... I'm afraid he was killed in the accident."

All other movement in the room abruptly stopped. The only sound was that of the wind, rushing around the lodge outside, buffeting the walls as if seeking entrance. Inside, the silence dragged on.

There was a flicker of a frown, then Men Darnak continued to look at him blankly, his face completely expressionless. "Is that so?" he said. "But I was looking for him." A slight shake of the head. "Accident. My wife was in an accident, you know." He motioned to the man by the stove. "Is that tea ready yet? Hurry up, man."

"Principal ."

Men Darnak looked up at him suspiciously. "Who asked this Atavist here, Priest?"

Sandon returned the look with concern. "Principal, your son's dead. Did you understand what I said?"

"I sent Tarlain away. Something about the Kallathik, I think."

"Not Tarlain. Roge."

The blankness continued. "Ah yes, Roge. I was looking for him. He left. I had to find him and talk about Karin. Did you have children, Atavist? Be careful if you do. Be very careful."

"My name is Tchardo, Principal." He bit down hard on his next response, but he was rapidly running out of things to say. "Roge is gone. He was killed in an accident."

"Yes, yes," said Men Darnak, and glanced back over at the man who was suddenly fussing with the tea preparation. He turned back to Sandon and gave him a long hard look. He lifted one hand. Sandon noted a slight tremor in it. "I do know you. I've seen you before. You remind me of there was someone who worked for me once, a close and trusted friend, I think " He continued peering at his face, as if trying to worry the memory from the depths of his consciousness.

Sandon got slowly to his feet.

"Principal, I " he said.

"Enough. I can't wait for this tea. You're too slow, man. There's too much to do." He shook his head.

Just then, a sudden furious gust shook the entire lodge. Sandon drew air through his teeth and looked over at Kovaar, who was slowly shaking his head. He caught Sandon's scrutiny, held his look for a moment, and then tilted his head in Men Darnak's direction.

The Principal was on his feet. Outside, the wind had finally been joined by rain. Large drops were beginning to spatter against the windows and the roof. Sandon glanced outside, but all that was there was blackness. A gust threw a sheet of rain against the side of the lodge, and it drummed against the side wall and roof like hundreds of sharply pointed fingers. A sudden flash lit up the outside, followed a few moments later by a deep rumble, clearly audible over the sound of the wind and rain. He turned back to Men Darnak. The old man was standing there staring into space. His mouth was working. Sandon frowned, leaning slightly forward, trying to make out what he was saying.

It was one word, over and over. "Roge," he was mouthing. "Roge."

Without any warning, Leannis Men Darnak dashed for the door. He flung it wide, and stood there, his arms outstretched as a blast of wind and rain whipped against and past him. Sandon, Kovaar and the others shied away from the sudden intrusion of the elements. Then just as quickly, Men Darnak was gone.

"Principal!" called Sandon, but it was too late.

"Damn you, Kovaar," said Sandon. "Go after him!"

Caught suddenly off guard by Sandon's outburst, rather than questioning, the priest ducked his head and raced out the door, forcing it shut behind him. It shouldn't take him long to find the old man and drag him back.

The brief respite against the weather was giving Sandon time to think. A suspicion had been growing, and now, he thought, might just be the time to put it to the test. He believed he could trust the young man, Fran. There was nothing wily about the boy at all. It was about time that Sandon came back. The Atavist, Tchardo, had just about served his purpose.

"Fran," he said. "Can I talk to you?"

The young man broke off from his worried observation of the door. He was looking as if any moment, Kovaar and the Principal might burst back in and he'd have to deal with some fresh onslaught. Come to think of it, he

was looking decidedly shaken. He nodded. Sandon looked around. There were several bedrooms leading off from the wide common room, and he inclined his head in the direction of one of these. Fran gave a brief frown, rubbed his hands on the back of his trousers and then headed for the room that Sandon had indicated. Sandon looked at the other two, but they were now sipping on mugs of tea -- how Sandon would have loved one -- and peering out the thick windows. He grabbed a lantern, followed Fran into the room, and closed the door.

There was nothing fancy in the room, a bed, some shelves, a cupboard, a lantern on a low table, but it would suit his purposes. What he needed now was privacy. He placed his own lantern down, looked Fran full in the face, and pulled back his hood.

"Fran, I'm going to ask you something, and then based on what you tell me, I might have to ask you to do something for me."

The boy nodded, his broad features guileless.

"Does the name Sandon Yl Aris mean anything to you?"

Fran thought for a few moments. "No, I don't think so."

"Good. But that's not important for the moment. You've seen Principal Men Darnak. You must feel the same way I do. There's something not right there. He needs help. Do you agree?"

Fran nodded again. "Yes. He's not good is he? He's been strange for a while now, and it doesn't seem to be getting any better. If anything it gets worse every day."

"We saw him just before he tore off into the night, Fran. The news has taken him badly. We need to do something to help him. And now with Roge gone -- "

"I know. I still can't believe that."

"You have to believe it. Anyway, I'm not convinced he's getting the help he needs from Witness Kovaar, and I think we're going to need him to be strong over the next few weeks and months."

"How do you mean?" Fran was looking puzzled.

Sandon paused before continuing, assessing whether he could take the risk. Fran was still looking at him expectantly. "I'm not an Atavist, Fran. I never have been. The Principal was close to it for a moment in there. I thought finally, perhaps, he had seen through those clouds in his head and recognized me. Once upon a time, I was very close to Principal Men Darnak. I used to work for him. I used to work very closely with him. I don't want to go into explanations now, but you have to believe that."

Fran was nodding slowly. "Yes, you sometimes acted pretty strangely for an Atavist, I guess. But -- "

Sandon lifted his hand to Fran's shoulder. "I can't explain all that now, but I think there's one way we can help the Principal, but it's going to need you to do something for me."

"What's that?"

"I think the Principal's other son, Tarlain is somewhere near the mines. Maybe Bortruz, maybe somewhere closer. I don't know for sure, but you have to find him and tell him what's happening to his father. You have to tell him about his brother too. You've been close enough to the Principal now for Tarlain to believe you. We

are going to need Tarlain's help if we are going to make this right, and I think we have to. Kovaar's not going to help. Karin is beyond hope. It's up to us."

As much as he had gleaned from the past few weeks told Sandon that he was right.

"But how will I find him?"

"He's the Principal's son, Fran. People will remember. He has to get supplies; he has to become visible. He's not going to hide in a cave somewhere."

Fran nodded, trying to take in everything Sandon was telling him.

"Bortruz?"

"Yes, I think so. It's a good starting point. Just as a suggestion, there's a bar in the center of the town. You could ask around there. The people who own it, Milana and Benjo, they're good folk. If you need to, then trust them, though I wouldn't trust any of the Principate or Guild official there, despite what you may think. Oh, and one last thing. When you find him, tell him that Sandon Yl Aris sent you."

"But -- "

"That's my name, Fran, but I need you to keep that to yourself for now. Can I trust you to do that?"

Fran's eyes got a half vague, wide look about them for a moment. "I never expected anything like this."

"I don't think any of us expected anything like this, Fran. Can you do it?"

"Of course I can, Tcharado, um ... what *do* I call you?"

"Tcharado's fine for now. Nobody else needs to know at this stage. I guess you should wait for the storm to ease. Set off in the morning. It makes no sense to go out in this. You know how to get there from here, don't you?"

Fran stepped back for a moment, looking down at his feet. "Listen, Tcharado, I want to do it, really. But what am I going to say to the others? I can't just leave."

"Don't tell them anything. Let me look after that. It all depends. Do you want to truly serve your Principal?"

He looked up with a touch of slight offence on his face. "Of course I do."

"Then you'll do what I'm asking."

The boy still looked troubled, but he nodded slowly.

"All right," said Sandon. "We should go out and join the others. I really need some hot tea and I would think you could use some too."

#

Sandon was starting to become truly concerned. Three hours had passed, and still there was no sign of either Kovaar or the Principal. Outside, the storm still raged, lashing rain against the sides of the lodge, and intermittently blasting the landscape with huge crashing sheets of light. Sandon was starting to eye the others nervously. They surely couldn't be content to just sit here. Everything seemed to be in turmoil: the weather, the Guilds, the Kallathik, even Men Darnak himself, not to say anything of Sandon's own existence. But all that was of lesser importance right now. What mattered was what had happened to Men Darnak. He pulled himself to his feet.

"Shouldn't someone go and try to find them?"

"You can have it, Atavist," said one of the men. "I'm staying right here. If the old man wants to go wandering off into the night, then that's his business. I'm staying by the fire. We've done enough chasing him all over the countryside."

His companion nodded. Meanwhile Fran looked up, a slightly guilty expression on his face, but clearly about to leap to his feet. Sandon waved him down. "I'll go," he said.

"Do what you want," said the first man, with a shrug and not without a touch of resentment.

Sandon moved to the door, found his coat and pulled it on. He couldn't remember seeing whether Kovaar had taken a lantern with him or not. He looked around, located a spare one, lit it and headed back to the door.

"Tchardo..."

"No, you stay, Fran. I'll be fine."

Outside the door, the wind threatened to throw him up against the wall. He pulled his coat around, trying to shield the lantern, pulled his head down against the wind and rain, and headed out. He had no idea where they might have gone. He only hoped they might see the lantern, if he didn't see them first, though seeing anything in this tempest would be like a miracle. The wind howled past his ears, and despite the coat, within moments he was soaked through, streams of water running down his neck and beneath his clothes. Witness Kovaar and Men Darnak had been out in this for hours. What state must they be in by now? Head down, buffeted from every direction, he stumbled forward.

Twenty-Five

Jarid scanned the grounds as he rode in, taking note of the characteristic fingerprints of a man devoted to precision: Neatly sculpted hedges, straight lines everywhere. Ky Menin had stamped his presence all over the grounds. The stables were placed well behind the house, hidden partially by the building, but still visible, not enough to be intrusive.

The household staff would not have been expecting anyone, but a neatly liveried groomsman met him at the stables all the same. Just as quickly as he had appeared, the man relieved him of his animal. That's what you got being head of the Guild of Technologists -- a box of tricks to play with. Jarid should have gone into Technology. It would have suited him, suited the way his head worked. It just offered so many playthings to explore. Primary Production wasn't too bad. It had its own positives, one of which was the fact that Technology was reliant upon Primary Production to source everything it needed. That was going to put Jarid in a unique position once everything was dealt with, but still sometimes he wondered if he might not have

made a better choice. He headed out from the stables, crunched up the pebbled drive and headed for the main door. He was a mere step away when the door swung open and lights came on around the entrance. Jarid frowned, a little surprised despite himself. How could there still be lights?

Guildmaster Ky Menin stood in the doorway, a superior half-smile on his face.

"I see you like my little welcome, Jarid."

"Welcome? But how could you...?"

Ky Menin waved his hand. "No matter. Just one of the advantages of being in the Guild. Call it a benefit of the trade." The smile turned into a self-satisfied smirk.

Jarid nodded slowly. "So," he said. "The trappings of power, eh?"

"Oh, more so than you could imagine, Jarid Ka Vail. So appropriate." His face grew serious. "But enough play. You must be here for a reason."

Jarid looked around, then back at the Guildmaster. "Yes, I am, but it would probably be better if we discussed things inside."

Ky Menin stepped back, held an arm wide and waited for Jarid to pass before closing the door.

Inside, the house was in much the same style, neatly defined, almost utilitarian, not a thing out of place. Jarid hated to think what it would be like after a quake. He could just imagine the people running from place to place, desperately trying to get things back in order, Ky Menin looking on with a chill gray gaze. Jarid didn't have time to take in much; Ky Menin led him immediately down the entrance hall and into a large study. A broad screen dominated the room and despite everything, the lateness of the Season, it appeared to be still active. Ky Menin noticed the direction of his gaze, and the slight smirk reappeared. So, this was to be the game the Guildmaster was going to play. Jarid hid his own smile. Already he was starting to tell how the man worked.

"But how?" he said dutifully, the appropriate level of awe in his voice.

"That's unimportant, Jarid. We in Technologists have our needs. We haven't the numbers to support the entire population. You must understand." He waved his hand around the room. "Much of this is foraged, or kept or copied from what survived the original landings. So much was lost then, but there is still the odd thing we manage to maintain. But, as you can imagine..." He shrugged. "There is only so much we can do."

Jarid nodded, making sure he looked suitably impressed. It seemed to work, because Ky Menin turned away.

"So, tell me. What is it that brings you here? The news about Roge Men Darnak, I suppose. I'm afraid you've had a wasted journey. I've already been informed."

"No, Guildmaster Ky Menin. Agreed, it was simply terrible news about the Principal, but I'm afraid I've come on other business." Jarid kept his wondering thought to himself. Ky Menin had already been informed. That didn't make sense either, unless the Guildmaster was trying to intimidate him with more secret knowledge -- stuff that may or may not exist.

Ky Menin turned to face him slowly. "What 'other business' are you talking about? As far as I'm aware, we have no other business. All our business was concluded at your father's estates."

"It's my father I've come to talk about."

Ky Menin narrowed his eyes. He fixed Jarid with a lingering look, then turned and sat, folding his hands across his lap. "So tell me."

"I'm afraid my father is going to be difficult."

"Go on "

"He's talking about assisting the old Principal however he can. He's made it quite clear he's not happy about the events of the last few days. Last thing he mentioned, was giving aid to Leannis Men Darnak. I think he means to try and bring him back to influence the other Guild members."

"You'd better sit." Ky Menin got a faraway look in his eyes. "Does he, by the Twins?" he said. "Yes, indeed, that would make sense. Ka Vail has always understood how the Guilds fall."

Jarid located a chair across from the Guildmaster and sat as instructed. He waited patiently. Finally, the man's attention came back to the room, and again he fixed Jarid with that cold, gray gaze.

"We've come too far for that already," he said. "I'm afraid we can't risk it, even only as a possibility. There is no room for error here. I thank you for coming to me with this, Jarid, but I'm not entirely sure why you would do so."

Jarid had been expecting the question. "I wish that I hadn't been the one to discover my father's intent, Guildmaster. It saddens me that he should let his superstition and his reliance on the Church's teachings influence his thoughts, but that's what's happened. The power the Church and tradition both have over him have been more apparent over the last few months. We in the Guilds need more vision, more forward thinking. This is a time of change. More than that, it's a time of opportunity. I'm here for just that reason." He watched carefully as the words sank in.

"You're right, Jarid Ka Vail. This is a time of change. That change could go either way, and we need to be aware of the implications of everyone's actions within the Guilds. I'll be honest; it saddens me to hear that your father is not as forward thinking as some of the rest of us. That is going to present us with more than one problem, unless we can do something about it. I fear the conclusion is unavoidable." Again, his focus changed. His hooded gray eyes stared off into the middle distance again as he processed.

Jarid watched and he assessed. This man announced far too readily when he was thinking, unless this was a performance too, but he didn't think so this time.

"But if that is the case," Ky Menin continued. "We are going to need a solution. From what I've seen so far, you seem to be a capable young man." He leaned forward. "We cannot have Primary Production falling to the likes of Yosset Clier, can we?"

"I don't think that's likely to happen, Guildmaster, but yes, we have to put the right things in place to ensure that doesn't happen."

"Certainly," said Ky Menin, with a brief tilt of his head. "I'm inclined to agree with you. I think it unlikely that Clier himself will be a real problem, however. All the same, we have to be sure of everyone."

"What do you propose?"

"I don't know yet."

"Well, when you have thought about it, let me know Guildmaster. I may be able to assist,." He looked meaningfully at the various pieces of equipment scattered around the room. Ky Menin narrowed his eyes again, and then sat back, uncrossing and re-crossing his hands, never letting his gaze waver from Jarid's face.

"I know what you're thinking, Guildmaster," said Jarid, holding firm beneath the scrutiny. "It's my father we're talking about. You know this is hard for me, but I have to face the reality of what's needed for the future of the Guilds and the future of this world, of our people. We must move on. It doesn't matter whether it's Yosset Clier or my father; ultimately, the answer remains the same."

The Guildmaster nodded slowly. A slight smirk played across his lips. He reached over to something on the table and then sat back. Jarid waited, wondering what trick he was about to see now.

"What is it Karryl?" A woman's voice from the doorway.

Jarid turned his head. He blinked twice, and gave a slight shake of his head. Jarid felt his mouth fall stupidly open, and then shut just as stupidly, as he tried to regain his self-possession. The person in the doorway was Karin Men Darnak, wife of Yosset Clier himself.

"As I said, I don't think we really have to worry about Yosset Clier," said Ky Menin.

Jarid struggled to regain his composure, and during that time, Karin entered the room and found herself a place to sit. Ky Menin meanwhile performed the formal introductions, which passed over Jarid as if none of it were happening. Karin Men Darnak. He restrained himself from shaking his head again with some slight effort. Up close, she was every bit as impressive as she had been from a distance, and he found himself watching her every gesture intently. Once or twice, he glanced at Ky Menin. This was the last thing he would have expected. Karin Men Darnak with Ky Menin? He could barely believe it. But it was more than that; the Guildmaster had simply outplayed him, and he'd managed it so easily.

As Ky Menin recounted their conversation, Jarid watched Karin as unobtrusively as he could. She had a lot that was worth watching, Karin Men Darnak. That hair, those refined features, the way she held her head. Finally, Ky Menin turned back to him. There was a flicker of something as he noticed Jarid's gaze, and then he went on.

"Is there anything else you should tell us?"

Jarid frowned in concentration. He had to at least make it look good. "You heard about the trouble with my brother, Markis?"

"Yes. I could barely believe it."

"We could barely believe it ourselves," said Jarid. "But there's more. He appears to have become involved in some sort of dealings with the Kallathik."

"What have they got to do with it?" asked Karin. Her voice was deep and rich. Not how Jarid had imagined it at all.

"I don't know. I think it's some means of upsetting the stability of Primary Production, weaken father's hold. You know how reliant we are upon the Kallathik presence."

She nodded thoughtfully, and then turned to look back at Ky Menin questioningly.

"Yes," said Ky Menin. "I can see that. A clumsy attempt, but it would certainly add to the equation. What do

you think, Karin?"

Karin stood. "It's certainly plausible. But the creatures would have to be ripe for it, wouldn't they? Destabilization in Primary Production, and now with Roge gone, everything could so easily slip away from us." She plucked at her lip, thinking. "We can't let that happen, Karryl." There was an insistent tone to her voice.

"And it's not going to," said Ky Menin. "Karin, sit back down, would you? We need to approach this rationally. There are a number of logical choices. Let's explore them."

Karin took a deep breath, then slowly lowered herself back to her chair. "No, you're right. I'm just so used to dealing with Yosset."

Ky Menin looked at Jarid for a long time before speaking again. When he finally did, he kept his gaze fixed, his eyes barely narrowed as he spoke. "If we can rely on Jarid Ka Vail here, then we have the means. You and I both know Yosset has never had the makings of someone to take control. From what I have seen so far, just perhaps, this young man here may be able to take a useful role."

There was a pause, and then Karin answered. As she spoke, Jarid refused to break the Guildmaster's gaze, though her rich voice was drawing him.

"So, if you truly believe that, Karryl," she said. "What do you suggest we do?"

"We should discuss this further," he said to Karin, and then turned back to Jarid. "For now, we can continue as we are. I will trust you to keep me informed if there's anything new."

Jarid rubbed his hands together, and then stood. "Don't underestimate me, Guildmaster," he said, shooting a quick glance at Karin. "I'm not my brother, and I'm not my father."

Ky Menin nodded. "No, I can see that. I have seen that." He too stood and stepped forward to place his hands on Jarid's shoulders. "For now, I think we use this Kallathik thing to our advantage. You, Jarid, will stay here tonight, and in the morning, you will accompany Karin to her estates. There you will tell Yosset Clier what you've told us about the Kallathik and your brother. That will focus Yosset's attention, and with Karin as your witness, it will add extra weight to the argument. If Yosset becomes distracted by anything, Karin is more than capable of steering him on the right path. He would be affected by instability within the Guild too, and none of us can afford that right now."

"And you?" said Karin.

Ky Menin dropped his hands from Jarid's shoulders and moved back to his chair. "I need to deal with Aron Ka Vail. The old fool has obviously lost his true focus. Sadly, I think we are going to have to teach him the error of his ways. How he could possibly consider bringing back the old man, I do not know. The truth is, it's far too dangerous a prospect just now, and he has to be made to see that." He paused.

"It's a pity. I rather like Aron. A real pity."

Twenty-Six

Sandon felt tired, exhausted, but still the storm battered him. More than once, he had almost dropped the lantern, not that it was doing much to pierce the strobing darkness. No sign. No sign at all of the Principal and

Kovaar, though he'd been out here for what seemed like hours. They couldn't have gone too far, he kept telling himself, but with Men Darnak's frame of mind, that wasn't a certainty either. Pretty soon now, he'd have to give up and return to the lodge, as much for his own self-preservation as anything, although he seemed to be spending half his life in the rain these days.

"Principal Men Darnak!" he called, and though he knew it was futile, he called again.

Something made him look over to his right, narrow his eyes and peer through the sheeting curtain. A flash of light and a rumble, and there, a clump of deeper darkness against the dark. He started in that direction. Twice he slipped, and once he almost lost hold of the lantern again. As he neared, he saw he had been right. The dark patch was a pair of figures huddled against the sodden hillside. Another flash illuminated the scene, and Sandon gritted his teeth at what he saw. The gaunt frame of Witness Kovaar was hunched over the old man, vainly attempting to cover him with a robe. Men Darnak pushed away from him, flailing against the sodden fabric and rolling on the muddy ground. As he got nearer still, Sandon understood what the priest was trying to do. Men Darnak had slipped out of his clothing, and lay naked, his emaciated frame completely exposed to the elements. Sandon swallowed back the shock of what he was seeing. It was as if the flesh had slewed from the Principal's bones. The strong wiry frame looked strong no longer. It was all angles and joints, looking nothing more than brittle. How could such deterioration have happened so quickly?

He was about twenty paces away when he felt the first rumble beneath his feet. Witness Kovaar had noticed him, was beckoning him over, shouting something, but the wind whipped the words away. It didn't matter; the man's meaning was clear. Again came the feeling, and then the world lost solidity. It began slowly, shaking, trembling, subtly growing. Sandon's feet went from beneath him, and he lost the lantern. It tumbled back down the hill, and he was left clutching at the scant vegetation, gripping with his hands at something that gave no purchase but sodden liquid earth running through his fingers. He pressed his face flat, hugging at ground that was suddenly trying desperately to buck him off. He had to ride it. There was nowhere else to go. He scrabbled forward, half crawling, half sliding, heading toward the Principal. With the old man in the state he was, Kovaar might need help. Sandon spat mud from his mouth, and scrambled forward again. And then the ground was still.

He struggled to a crouching position, crawled rapidly forward. He was almost on top of them when it came again. With one mighty heave, the ground tossed him up and away. Despite the violent shaking, he struggled forward again. Kovaar was trying to hold Men Darnak down, and it looked like he needed help. The ground was bucking and writhing beneath them, denying them purchase, denying them anything they could clutch on to.

Men Darnak was shouting, oblivious to the huge drops spattering against his face and body. Finally, Sandon was close enough to hear.

"Let me go, Priest! Leave me! The world wants to throw me off now. Let it. My son, my daughter. All gone. They cast me off. And now the world would do it too. Let me be! I have no place here. We should have known! Why didn't we see it?"

"Principal, stay -- " Another shaking pounded the priest's words from his mouth. " -- still! You have to stop moving!"

Sandon slithered desperately forward, fighting against the slope, fighting against the water, fighting against the heaving earth.

"Help me!" cried Kovaar.

Sandon thrust himself along the ground, stretched out one arm and clutched at Men Darnak's shoulder,

pinning him on one side. The old man tried to struggle from beneath his grip, but he was effectively pinned on the other side by Witness Kovaar. Still the ground tried to shake them off. Another violent spasm, and they were sent slithering down the slope that Sandon had just fought so hard to cross. Sandon could only think of what might be happening to Men Darnak's naked skin as they slid across spines and rocks beneath the soggy ground surface. He felt behind him, trying to dig his free hand beneath the mud to find something solid to anchor them.

"Kovaar, we have to stop this slide," he shouted across Men Darnak's body.

Kovaar flung out an arm as well, trying to slow their descent. Somewhere below them lay the shards of a broken lantern, and Sandon was expecting at any moment to feel the razor edges sliding through skin. And still the ground bucked and heaved, trying to throw them free.

Men Darnak was laughing, his mouth open wide to the rain. The laughs were punctuated by coughing, but still he laughed.

"Do it now!" he screamed into the air. "Throw us away. Now you can. Now you can! Send us back to where we came from!" He subsided into spluttering laughter.

And just as suddenly, the ground was still, but the rain still beat down upon them, making pools and rivers on their exposed flesh. Sandon wiped his free hand on his robe, trying to get rid of some of the mud, so he could wipe the rain and hair out of his eyes. The other hand he kept firmly on Men Darnak's shoulder.

"We have to get him back to the lodge," he yelled at Kovaar.

The priest looked almost in as bad a state as the old man. He looked gray. He nodded again, water sluicing from his smooth head, and then, still holding one of the Principal's shoulders, he managed to get his feet under him and stand in a semi-crouch. Sandon followed suit. Together, they lifted the old man to his feet.

Men Darnak's head swung this way and that, his eyes round and dark like a terrified padder. "Who are you?" he said, making as if to push Sandon away, but apparently not having the strength. Sandon held tight to the old man's shoulder.

"You!" shouted Men Darnak into Sandon's face, above the noise of the wind, through the sluicing rain. "You will be cast off too! The Prophet knows your sins, like he knows the sins of all of us." He pushed his face forward, looming white in the darkness, strings of soaking ice-colored hair hanging around his cheeks. "You will be judged just as I have been judged. The Prophet will strike you down!"

Sandon tried to ignore him. They had to get back to the lodge before the ground lost solidity beneath them. He didn't believe they'd seen the last of it yet.

"Kovaar," he yelled. "Help me get him back."

The Priest nodded.

"But first we have to try and cover him." Sandon, still trying to maintain a grip on Men Darnak's shoulder, struggled out of the raincoat, releasing his grip once just to change hands. The Priest helped him pull the coat over Men Darnak's head. This presented them with a new problem, for the material was slippery with the rain, and it made keeping a grip on the Principal's shoulders all the more difficult. Holding as tightly as he could, Sandon tried to steer Men Darnak in the direction of the lodge. Kovaar appeared to understand his intention and moved to help.

"I am cold," said the Principal. "Aren't you cold, Priest?" Still his head swung slowly from side to side. "We can't have you getting cold, now can we?" The old man's feet shuffled through the mud. He laughed, and then his face became serious again. "The Prophet knows you have enough to suffer with. We need to get you warm. Where are we going? What are you doing out here? This is no sort of night to be out."

Sandon frowned. The old man had no concern for himself at all apparently. All he seemed worried about was the priest's well being. There were echoes there of the man who had once been, the patriarch of their entire world. Men Darnak cared about others, not himself. Sandon grimaced. He couldn't afford to think about that now. The sooner they got the old man out of the rain and wind the better. Then, at least, Sandon might be able to talk to him and get some sense. He tried to pierce the gloom to make sure they were heading in the right direction, yet still maintaining his grip on the old man's arm. Any explanation could wait, at least until they were inside the lodge.

Struggling against the wind and rain, wary that at any moment, the ground might start to shift beneath them, they finally made it back to the lodge, sodden and dripping mud as they stepped through the doorway.

"What is this, Kovaar?" hissed Sandon. "How could you let this happen?"

The priest waved his hand, forestalling discussion as they maneuvered Men Darnak to a chair and stripped off the raincoat. The old man sat huddled, naked and shivering, his pale flesh with a slightly blue-white tinge to it. Deep scratches marked his skin in places where the inhospitable ground had done its work. Fran leapt up from his place to join them, a horrified look on his face.

"Witness Kovaar, what can I do?" said the boy.

"You attend to the fire," said Sandon. "Here, Kovaar, help me shift him closer."

They struggled and managed to scrape the chair over to the fire. Sandon motioned to one of the other men. "Get some towels. Now, man! What are you waiting for?"

The man scurried across the room to do as he was bid. And yet, Witness Kovaar had still not said anything since they'd emerged from the storm.

As the men worked on getting Men Darnak dry and warm -- someone had found some clean robes -- Sandon turned to the priest with narrowed eye and set jaw.

"What's happening, Kovaar?"

The priest looked at him impassively. "The world turns as the Prophet wills."

"Do you not see the state he's in?" hissed Sandon.

"There is a cycle within the world and outside of it. The Prophet's will dictates our place in that cycle. The Church of the Prophet has waited a long time." The priest's voice was low and quiet.

"You're not making sense." Sandon glanced at the Principal. A touch of color was coming back to the old man's features. Sandon grunted his satisfaction. He turned back to the priest. He could not have this conversation here. He gripped Kovaar by the arm and drew him to one side, out of earshot of the others.

"I don't know what game you're playing, Kovaar, but the Principal's condition is not anything I would expect from a man like him. I warn you, if I think you have any part in the way he is, you'll pay for it."

"As the Prophet wills," he said impassively, apparently unmoved by Sandon's threat.

Sandon growled in frustration. "Damn you. You *will* talk to me. You can't hide behind your blessed Church any more."

"We all have our place. As the seasons change, so does the order of things. The season has changed." Kovaar shrugged, turned and simply walked away to the other side of the room.

Sandon ground his teeth and closed his eyes, struggling hard to resist the urge to grab the man and shake him. He couldn't afford a confrontation now. The priest would wait. His priority was Men Darnak and making certain he was all right. He crossed back to the fire and crouched in front of Men Darnak's chair.

"Principal?"

The old man tore his gaze away from the fire, where he seemed lost in thought. "Ahh, my children around me." He reached out a hand on either side, taking Sandon's hand in one, and Fran's in the other on the opposite side. "But you're not my children. I know you. Where are my children now?" he asked, looking blankly, pleadingly, into Sandon's face.

"Principal, you know. We have lost Roge. Tarlain has gone. Karin is who knows where. Probably at her estates with Yosset."

"Lost." He nodded slowly. "Yes, lost. Everything. They are gone, all of them." He leaned forward. "And you. You have left me too."

Sandon frowned. What he was saying didn't seem to be getting through to the old man. He shifted position. His robe was still dripping water on to the floor beneath him, but that didn't matter now. The fire's warmth would soon have him dry. He looked across at Fran, clearly uncomfortable with his hand gripped firmly by the man he knew as his Principal. Sandon gave him a slight shake of his head, but the young man just returned the gesture with a confused look. Trying not to let the gesture be seen, he motioned Fran to rest still.

"Principal, you need to listen to me. We need to get you somewhere safe. Your estates. We will have to stay here tonight, because of the storm, but we will have to move as soon as we are able."

Men Darnak frowned. "I have no place. Those that have everything become those that have nothing. Everything gone. Roge. Tarlain. Everything. Karin is not my daughter. How can she be, eh? What did I do? No, I will stay here. There is nothing for me anywhere else."

Sandon tried to keep his voice calm. "Principal, this is no place for you."

"There is no place for me," he spat in response. "The Prophet has shown me. He would cast me from the world. I have failed. I don't care. I don't care." He withdrew his hands, closed his eyes and shook his head. "No. There is nothing left to hear."

Sandon stood and looked down at a frail, confused old man. Kovaar sat on a couch at the other side of the room, watching Sandon. Fran still crouched beside the old man's chair. Sandon sighed, a deep emptiness welling up within him. How could this be the man to whom he had devoted his life? He had to try and make this right. He ran his hand across his forehead, through his hair and then rubbed the back of his neck. There had to be something he could do, something to alleviate the Principal's condition. The hollow within him was a weakness he couldn't afford. The old man needed him, needed him to be strong.

He ran the possibilities through his head, and the only answer he could come up with was Tarlain. With Roge

gone, Karin being Karin, and all other support having faded away like the light of the Major Twin, there was no other choice. Briefly, he toyed with the idea of the Atavist community, but that was no real answer. No, it had to be Tarlain. Tarlain, young, impetuous, and hiding out somewhere near the mines. It wasn't much of a choice. He glanced at Fran. The boy would leave in the morning and try and find him, depending on whether the storm had broken by then. That, at least, was a start. Perhaps with Sandon's help, the Men Darnak boy might be able to do something to help his father. And meanwhile, the storm still howled and grumbled around them. He glanced across at Kovaar, and the priest was still watching him. He looked away again. Just for a moment, he wondered, was it Kovaar or the Church that had the agenda?

An insistent pounding on the door cut Sandon's thoughts short. Without waiting for an answer, the door was flung wide with a sudden blast of moisture and cold air. In the doorway stood a figure, covered in wet weather gear and holding a lantern. The man stepped inside, leaving the door open behind him, oblivious to the weather that followed him into the small space.

"Where is the Principal? I come from Guildmaster Ka Vail."

Fran got to his feet. "Bilard! What are you doing here?"

The man lowered his lantern, taking in the scene in front of him. "The Guildmaster sent me and a couple of others out to look. He was worried about Principal Men Darnak."

Here perhaps was Sandon's answer. "Come in, man. Close the door behind you."

Bilard gestured behind him. "But what about the others?"

"They'll be fine for a minute or two. Just come in and close the door."

Twenty-Seven

Karryl Ky Menin sat drumming his fingers on his desk. His usually placid face was troubled. He reached out to turn on the screen and scan the grounds, but hesitated, his hand halfway across the desk. Slowly, he drew it back and neatly folded both of his hands back in his lap. A detailed search of the grounds was simple displacement activity. He hadn't been blessed with intellect for nothing. He would get to the root of what was sitting like a thorny burr in the back of his mind without trying to pretend to himself it wasn't there.

One by one, he turned the players over in his head. Karin Men Darnak. Yes, she was worthy, but he didn't think the problem lay there -- at least not yet. And her husband, Yosset Clier, could be discounted altogether? Tarlain Men Darnak? No. The boy was young, idealistic, and besides, he was nowhere to be found. It might be worthy to find out exactly what he was up to, but whatever it was, it could easily be contained. There was no point being unprepared though. It was lack of preparation that always turned around to bite you. He would set some of his people to find out what the youngest Men Darnak was doing. The youngest Ka Vail had warned him about the father's intent to help Leannis, but Ky Menin had to discount it. It was clear that the boy was simply trying to position himself to take over his father's role.

He ran one palm back and forth across the surface of his desk. Back and forth, back and forth. He watched the motion, still thinking. That was it! Vacillation, uncertainty, he hated uncertainty. It *was* Aron Ka Vail. He'd sensed the man's unease, his lack of commitment last time they'd been together. He drew his hand back toward his lap, but now it was closed. Slowly, deliberately, he leaned forward and switched on his screen. The

boy had been right after all.

"Faran. Yes. I want word about what's going on at Ka Vail's estates. I don't care. Just find out. Do it now. Yes. I'll be here." He withdrew his hand from the screen. The frown was gone. A slight smile played at the corner of his lips. Preparation, anticipation -- these were the things that made existence run smoothly.

He leaned forward again and pulled open a drawer. There, lying neatly in a long, narrow box, sat another of the results of his careful preparation. For many long months, his teams had been working on the thing that lay there, perfecting, refining. He ran his fingers over the sleek surface, restraining himself from actually picking it up. The time would come, but it wasn't yet. With one last lingering look, he slid the drawer shut again. Karin was due soon and it would do no good to announce his full intentions quite yet. He preferred to keep a couple of things in reserve. Karin's and his own plans may coincide for the moment, but it was always much better to keep a certain something in reserve.

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Karin stood in the doorway of Ky Menin's lounge area, disbelief written across her face.

"He did what?" she said. "Then Jarid was right."

"I know," said Ky Menin with a sigh. "I sensed there was something wrong with the way he was behaving last time we met. I have some of my men bringing him here now. We can deal with him then."

Karin crossed the room, her jaw set, and sat. "After all we've done, we can't have that old fool getting in the way. We've had enough of old fools. There's enough unease in the rest of the Guilds without Ka Vail upsetting the balance."

Ky Menin nodded and crossed to sit beside her. He placed a hand on her leg and leaned in as he spoke. "Look, from the reports I've had of your father's behavior, I cannot believe he's any sort of real threat. Look at where we are, Karin. Just think about it. Storm Season, Kallathik unease, and now your father behaving as if he's lost his senses completely. We're in an ideal position."

She looked unconvinced. Slowly, she shook her head. "No. You know the traditions as well as I do. Prophet or no, I still have to deal with the fact that I'm a woman. With Tarlain missing and Roge gone, they could just as easily turn back to the old man."

Ky Menin sighed again and sat back. "You're right, but then you're not right. Traditions change. Everything changes. It doesn't matter that you're a woman any more, Karin. Things have to change. We've been bound in the traditions passed down from the First Families for far too long. Anybody with any sense knows where the real power in the Men Darnak household lies. You can't believe otherwise."

A subtle chime from Ky Menin's household systems announced an arrival. Karin looked expectantly toward the door, and Ky Menin stood, smoothing down his tunic. The room's sparse white furnishings echoed the simplicity of his dress. Clean, white, it would do. He nodded to himself. Any further conversation could wait. He turned back to Karin, still sitting expectantly on the couch.

"This will be Ka Vail. You wait here. I won't be a moment." He glanced about the room one more time. "This, I think, will be the ideal setting." He said the to reassure her, just as much as to echo his thoughts. He gave her

a quick nod before going to meet his guests.

Moments later, he returned with a flustered looking Aron Ka Vail, escorted by two of Ky Menin's own Guildsmen. Ky Menin nodded to his men, and they quickly withdrew, leaving the three of them, Ky Menin, Karin Men Darnak, and Aron Ka Vail, alone in the clean, functional living space.

"What is it, Karryl?" said Ka Vail. "What urgent matter forces you to have me escorted here? What of my own business? Don't you think I have things to attend to?"

"This is all our business, Aron," said Ky Menin slowly. "I suggest you have a seat."

Aron Ka Vail hesitated, frowning. "No. I suggest you tell me why you've had me dragged here." He glanced across at Karin. "And why the good lady is here too."

Karryl's voice showed traces of his impatience. "Sit, Guildmaster Ka Vail."

Ka Vail's frown deepened, but he did as he was bidden. "All right. What is all this?"

Ky Menin waited until he too had taken a seat, and he steepled his fingers in front of him. "It has come to my attention that you've set certain things in motion, Aron, that you've done things that are counterproductive at best in our current circumstance."

Ka Vail looked across at him with open hostility. "What are you talking about, Karryl? No more word games. I'm tired of them now. I think we've had enough."

Ky Menin leaned forward, speaking quietly. "You know exactly what I mean. After all we've been through up until now. Leannis Men Darnak. That's what I'm talking about."

"What?"

"You're helping him and his men. Providing him support."

"And so what? I fail to see your point."

Karryl took a long low breath that was just short of a sigh, and he sat back in his chair. "I also know that you've had a constant flow of information about what's been happening at the mines. Apparently -- well, this is how I hear it -- the Kallathik are agitating and more. Is that so?"

"Yes, there has been some trouble, but what of it? We have trouble every Storm Season. Again I fail to see your point."

Karryl shook his head slowly. "You should know better than that. How can you lend your resources to helping Men Darnak especially now? Where is the trust, Aron?"

The older Guildmaster narrowed his eyes and stood slowly. "You tell me where the trust is? I cannot believe you are doing this, Karryl. You've had me escorted from my own estates for no other purpose than to level a series of pointless accusations -- and in front of *her*." He waved his arm dismissively in Karin's direction. "Leannis Men Darnak deserves our respect. More than that shown by his sniveling offspring. You would do well to show some respect too, Karryl Ky Menin, before you say something you might regret."

Ky Menin smiled. There was nothing soft about the expression. "I suggest you take your seat, Aron."

"I will not!" said the old man. "I've heard enough. I will lend my support to whomever I want, whenever I

want. And you have no place telling me otherwise. Nor have you any place telling me how to run the business of my Guild. My Guild, Ky Menin."

"Sit down, Aron."

"No, by the Prophet, I will not!"

Karin suddenly stood. "Who do you think you are, old man?" she said. "Sit down and do as you're told."

Ka Vail blanched and swung to face her. "And you would do well to learn your place, woman." He advanced on her. "Respect. I've seen your capacity for respect. Your own father " He shook his head. "It was a poor aspect when fate brought you into this world. I've seen you, girl. I've watched. I've seen what you've done. What about your father, eh? What about that fine old man who has done so much for you, who has done so much for all of us? By the Prophet, woman. He's your father." The old man was shaking visibly.

"He's an old fool, and so are you, Ka Vail," she said.

Ka Vail leaned in close to her. He spoke through clenched teeth. "And you are a mistake in the world. You are a corrupt, diseased thing out of your proper place. There is nothing of either your father or mother in you. Thank the Prophet she is no longer with us. She is better off dead than to see this."

Her hand flashed out and connected with his cheek. The noise of skin on skin echoed from the walls. She turned, strode away from him and sat, keeping her gaze turned away. Ka Vail stood where he was, trembling with his anger, looking at neither of them, a red mark blossoming on his cheek.

"What are you doing with Men Darnak?" asked Ky Menin from where he sat.

Ka Vail spun to face him. "I'll tell you nothing more." He swallowed before speaking again, clearly having difficulty speaking. "And now I'll leave you both."

"You'll do no such thing," said Ky Menin, calmly. "You will sit and you will tell us precisely what we need to know."

Ka Vail gave a short soundless laugh and headed for the door, shaking his head. He had not taken four steps before two of Ky Menin's men were standing in the doorway, blocking his path. The old man stopped and turned to face Ky Menin.

"What is this, Karryl?"

"You will do exactly as I ask," said Ky Menin.

"I will do nothing of the sort." He tried pushing past the two blocking his way, but they stood firm. Ky Menin gestured to them, and they led the old man back to the chair and sat him forcibly back down. Ka Vail brushed at his sleeves, looking first at Ky Menin, then up at the two men who now stood on either side of him, and finally over at Karin, who was now looking over at him with a slight smirk on her face.

"And so we have to deal with another traitor," she said quietly.

"You should know all about treachery," he shot back at her. His face was red, the anger visible in his hands, but the presence of the two men beside his chair was obviously enough to dissuade him from further action.

"Now," said Ky Menin. "Where has Men Darnak gone?"

Ka Vail sat with jaw clamped tight, staring with open hostility across the intervening space. Ky Menin sighed.

"Listen to me. It would be in everyone's best interests for you to work with us, Aron. You can still be useful in the times to come. I will say this to you only once. If you are going to insist on being difficult, then I am just going to have to look at other alternatives. In the meantime, I still need the answers to my questions. No Men Darnak? Then what of the information you have from the mines?"

Still Ka Vail sat where he was, refusing to answer anything.

Again, Ky Menin sighed. "I'm afraid you leave me no choice." He shook his head briefly, motioned to his men to keep the Guildmaster where he was, and disappeared out to his offices. Despite the play of disappointment, he was actually quite looking forward to the opportunity this suddenly gave him. When he finally returned, Karin was looking at him expectantly. He returned her look blankly.

Aron Ka Vail sat stubbornly. He didn't even look up as Karryl re-entered. Ky Menin nodded to himself and crossed to stand in front of the old man.

"Are you sure, Ka Vail?" he said.

Nothing.

Slowly, deliberately, Karryl lifted his hand. Within it, he held a snub, shiny metal cylinder with three small projections at one end. At the opposite end, there was a dial, regulating settings. Karryl fiddled with the dial briefly, then leaned forward and pressed the three projections gently against Ka Vail's temple.

"What are you doing?" said Ka Vail.

Karryl ignored the question, and with a gentle pressure of his thumb, depressed a small stud at one end of the device. There was a quick cracking sound and the old man cried out, flinching back against the chair. Karryl glanced over at Karin. She was leaning forward, watching, her tongue pressed lightly against her upper lip. He turned back to the old man.

"This is a new tool I've had my people develop, Aron," he said. "As you can see, it appears quite effective. Now, are you going to tell us what we want to know?"

The old man was visibly paler, blinking, his eyes watering. He said nothing.

"Very well." Karryl reset the dial and leaned forward again. The old man shrank back against the chair. Karryl motioned to his men to restrain him, then pressed the device to the old man's temple. A quick pressure of his thumb, the cracking sound and the old man jerked, every muscle in his body tensing as he cried out, louder this time, the sound of pain in his voice.

"You-you, cannot do this," stammered Ka Vail, then groaned deep in his throat.

"Oh, but I can," said Karryl. Again, he adjusted the dial. Without even waiting for a response, he thrust the toy forward and activated it. The old man screamed this time, tears running out of his eyes, slumping down in the chair. Another low groan issued from his mouth.

"You can save yourself the pain," said Karryl.

He could barely hear the old man's voice as he spoke, haltingly. "I don't care what you do to me, Ky Menin. What I've done is right. Leannis Men Darnak will have any help I can give him. My men are with him, and

they will protect him. They will take him as far away from you and *her* -- " He gestured with his head toward Karin. " -- as they can. Darthan will take him in. Then they will come back and deal with you."

Ky Menin smiled gently. "You're an old fool, Ka Vail." He leaned forward and activated the device again. As the old man screamed, his smile became broader.

"Guildmaster!" One of his men had released his hold on Ka Vail and had stepped back. "You cannot do this!"

"And who are you to question what I choose to do?" said Ky Menin, taking a step forward. "Do you need to learn your proper place too?" He took another step.

The man stood where he was. "I have a duty, Guildmaster. You cannot do this. By the Prophet. I have been with you for several seasons and I have seen what happens, but nothing warrants this. Nothing."

The smile remained on Ky Menin's face and he nodded twice. He said one simple word. "So." With a quick flick of his wrist, he adjusted the dial on his new toy and reached out to touch it to the man's skin and activate it in one single motion. A loud crack, and the man collapsed to the floor, not even issuing a sound. Ky Menin looked down at the crumpled heap on the floor, then back at the device with interest. Far more effective than he had imagined. He gave a satisfied nod, and then looked at the other man still hovering by Ka Vail's side. He could see fear in the man's eyes, but the man said nothing, merely swallowing under Ky Menin's gaze. Careful to put the dial back to a lower setting, he moved back to stand in front of the older Guildmaster. He leaned forward, bringing his face closer to Ka Vail's fearful features and spoke in a low, deadly voice.

"You're finished, Ka Vail. You have no more useful function, and by the time I've finished with you, you'll serve as a reminder to anyone who wants to work against us. The Guild, *your* Guild, will fall into place, and you'll be powerless to stop any of it."

Aron Ka Vail spoke haltingly, grimacing every couple of words as the pain washed through him afresh. "You're the one who is finished Ky Menin. The Kallathik will march and others will join them. You can do nothing to stop them. Better that they seize control at least temporarily rather than you have your way. You forget my sons. They will make you pay for this. You will pay."

Karin laughed. Ky Menin stood and barked a short, sharp ugly laugh as well.

"Your sons! You really are an old fool Ka Vail. How do you think we know about what you've been doing? Your sons! One's a halfwit, and the other is working with us, you pathetic old man. At least Jarid is bright enough to see that things have to change. And change they will."

"J-Jarid?" whispered Ka Vail, haltingly.

"Yes," said Ky Menin, leaning in closer for emphasis. "J-Jarid. Your beloved younger son." He gave a short laugh again, and applied the device quickly to the old man's forehead. Once more, the sharp crack, and the old man collapsed into a heap in the chair.

Ky Menin stood up, looking over to Karin. She was sitting calmly, watching the proceedings.

"What now?" she asked.

"Well, we can get rid of that," said Ky Menin, waving his hand at the unconscious form of Ka Vail. "If what he said is true, we will have to organize the Guilds ourselves. We have to put the Kallathik and anyone else in their place. We have the means of doing it. We can call the Guilds together for a meeting at your estates. Get Jarid to help you. He will be eager to assist with the old man out of the way. I'm sure that if he shows himself

cooperating, he might just believe it will cement his position within Primary Production. We should use that."

Karin nodded, glancing back over at the unconscious Ka Vail. "And what about him?"

Ky Menin didn't even bother looking at the old man. I'll get my men to dump him somewhere outside the estates. He may not get far in the storms, but I think he'll serve us better alive. No matter if he doesn't make it though. Word will get out. They'll see what happens to those who choose to work against our interests."

Karin stood and crossed to join him. She reached out and took his hand. "I always believed you were the cleverest among them, Karryl," she said. There was a brief, amused, twitch of her lower lip, and something else resting in her gaze. The way she was looking at him...

Carefully, Ky Menin extricated his hand from her grasp. "Come on," he said. "We have things to prepare."

The slight narrowing of Karin's eyes did not escape his notice.

Twenty-Eight

Tarlain had learned much since the Kallathik disclosure. The Atavists had been visiting for Season after Season, along with radical members of the Church of the Prophet. Even then, the Kallathik had been slow to respond, slow to do anything. Was it any wonder that their rapid locomotion came as a complete revelation? The rumors and occasional evidence of Kallathik disquiet over the Seasons had been the result of the constant pushing from Atavist visitors, but now, somehow, the Atavists had been able to convince the leaders of this sept that the time for action was nigh. It had to be linked to the instability of the transition as much as anything. He sighed and ran his fingers back through his hair, stopping the short pacing back and forth across the dim chamber. Everything he'd discussed with Din Baltir would come to nothing if this hive and others joined together in the manner they were suggesting. Whether the Kallathik liked it or not, the human population was here to stay. That didn't mean that those not a part of the Guild hierarchy had to suffer. What about the miners? What about the groups of itinerant workers? The farm workers? There were more here than the Atavists.

The miners and farmers

An idea was starting to form. He linked his fingers behind his neck and stared up at the low ceiling, then caught himself. He'd seen his father doing exactly the same thing in his chambers when he was working through a knotty problem. It brought a quick grunt of surprise. Were such things passed down from parent to child? He wondered briefly where his father was now.

The noise of a Kallathik moving down the passageway outside brought him back to the immediate. If he was going to have any success with the creatures, he had to act soon. Who knew what it would take to stop them, or alter their course once they had started?

He waited till the noise of the Kallathik had faded, then slipped out into the dank passageway, headed for the central chamber and the direction which the lines of hulking armored forms had taken to the outside.

There seemed to be no real order to the Kallathik grouping outside. There were small clusters, there were larger groups, there were even lines, spread out across the valley floor. Up near the main burrow entrance, four Kallathik stood, looking out over the rest of their kind, motionless. If there was any communication between these four, Tarlain could not tell from where he was. He thought that at least two of those standing up there on the hillside were familiar, but it was still hard to tell. Wasting no more time, he strode across the open space heading for their position.

As he approached, one of the vast heads swiveled to face him. He picked up his pace and stood a couple of feet away directly in front of it.

"I need to talk to you," he said, mustering as much authority as he could.

There was a pause, and then the Kallathik spoke. "Talk," it said.

Tarlain wasn't sure whether it was a question or an invitation. He swallowed, took a deep breath and looked the Kallathik straight in its twinned pairs of eyes. "This is wrong. There is a better way," he said.

A slight shaking of the Kallathik's tail section and it turned its face away.

"No!" said Tarlain. "You will listen to me."

The vast head turned slowly back and the Kallathik readjusted the position of the spear it held. Tarlain swallowed again, but this was too important to let the gesture intimidate him. The creature said nothing, just fixing him with its unreadable gaze.

"You are making the wrong choice," he said. "My people have made wrong choices too, but there is a better way. What are you going to do? Seek out every last man woman and child and kill them? You are a peaceful race. I know it. You have no strife, no trouble among your kind. You don't kill. You work together."

"Kill," said the Kallathik. "You kill. You kill each other. You kill us."

Tarlain frowned. "What?"

"Here, in the mines, everywhere. We have seen and we have remembered. We have learned the way."

But that couldn't be right. If it was true, it had been kept quiet within the machinations of the Guilds responsible. Tarlain's mind was racing. How was he going to convince them of anything if it was really true?

"If this is true, if all of this is true," he said, "why are you talking to me? Why do you not take that spear you hold and drive it through my body?" He slapped his chest in emphasis. His heart was pounding in his ears. It could all end here, all of it.

The Kallathik shifted its grip as if considering. Tarlain spread his arms wide, giving the Kallathik a clear and open target. Again it shifted, and then it gave a deep, low growl, a sound Tarlain had never heard before. He waited, the moment dragging on for an eternity.

"There are those of my kind who would not hesitate," he said. "Why do you hesitate?"

Silence.

"You said yourself that there are two types of my people. There's more than that. What you are doing is not right."

He slowly lowered his arms. "What do you want? What do your people want? We aren't going away. You said so yourself. I don't know why, but the Atavists want to rid this world of all who are not their kind. Maybe it's just some Atavists; I don't know. Our people are not all the same. Would you do this to your own kind?" He knew he was taking a risk with the argument -- he had no real knowledge of Kallathik history. None of them did.

Again there was the low growl. Another Kallathik echoed the sound, turning its head to look at Tarlain too. He was getting their attention.

"Our people have used your kind. These Atavists, these others are using you too."

Another of the Kallathik clacked and burred something, but he couldn't stop now.

"You have been treated wrongly. Our own people have been treated wrongly. Yes, it's a time for change. Everything is changing, but this is not the way. You have to believe me. I want this to stop as much as you do. There is a way. I think there is a better way. Think about the forests. Think about the trees."

Another head swiveled to look at him. A quick burr from another of the group, then another low growl. Tarlain had to find something that would make sense to them. He glanced around, seeking then saw one of the *ajura* wood totems near the edge of the hillside.

"The sacred *ajura* grows. It stands in peace. But there are parasites that grow upon them, making some of them ill. You have seen it. These plants suck the life from the trees. They make them die. There are people who do the same thing. There are parasites and diseases amongst us. Do you kill all the trees to rid them of the parasites?" He had no idea if the logic of the analogy would make any sense to them. Again he slapped his chest. "Now! Here! I am here. I am one of them. Why do you not kill me?"

The Kallathik nearest him went still.

"There is another way. Listen to me. We can work together. Change will not be easy. Let us fix what should be fixed. If there are parasites, we will root them out. We will purge this world of the disease. If we must march on the Guilds, then march we must, but let us do this together. Let me show you that we can work together. Let me convince others of my kind to march with us. Let me show you. The miners, the farmers, others. We can do this. Give me that chance. I beg you." He could feel the passion washing inside him. His eyes were damp. The Kallathik were still.

Tarlain dropped his hands to his sides, a great weariness washing over him. There was no reaction to tell him that anything he'd said was having any real effect. He looked from broad unreadable face to broad unreadable face. Nothing.

He was just about to try and summon the energy for another attempt, when the lead Kallathik growled and quickly followed it with a high chattering sound and a succession of short clipped syllables.

As one, the four Kallathik went still. All around the valley, Kallathik went still.

Using the multi-purpose hiking stick he carried with him -- a gift from one of the other workers -- Markis prodded at the small smoky fire. It was always hard to find enough to make a decent fire, and they burned with a half-hearted sluggish flame that did little to cut through the chill. At least it wasn't raining, and he could be thankful that the wind had died down. He tugged the cap lower over his forehead, trying to capture and retain some of his own warmth.

He looked around the rude camp, wondering what he was going to do next. He'd left his fellow travelers a few days back when news of the happenings had reached him, convinced that there would be at least something he could do. The messenger had told them of the things happening around Bortruz and beyond, some sort of activity, but the details were sketchy.

He looked around the blank hillside, down on the estates and across the empty landscape. He'd found a slight hollow which provided at least a hint of shelter, but that's all he had: a hint of shelter, the clothes he wore, a pack with a few travel essentials and the walking stick. It wasn't much to reflect where he had come from. He poked at the reluctant fire again. Still, change went two ways. Things either got better or things got worse. He couldn't see how things could possibly get worse from here. He'd lost just about everything. At least he still had what he believed in. In the meantime, he would have to find some way to keep himself alive. He could forage from the land, take what he could, but the estates were hardly likely to be taking on workers in the current circumstance. He looked up at the sky, at the remaining streamers of darkening light, then back down at the fire. It would be night soon, and the cold would descend. He leaned back and rummaged through his pack, pulling out the blanket and bundling it to one side. He patted the heap and thought about the things he'd learned over the past few weeks.

His companions may have been relatively low in the order of things, but they'd been open and giving. They had shown generosity where there was no reason to give it. They'd offered him solace and shelter and taught him, when there was nothing they owed him. Compared to the others he knew in his former life within the Guild hierarchy, these men who had virtually nothing to their names were a different sort. He wondered briefly how people all descended from the one origin could be so unlike. Everyone, all of them, had come from the First Families, or what remained of that population who had made it down to the planet. They were all the same stock, the same set of beliefs and values, and yet such variation still existed. Had such diverse groups existed on the ship itself during the many years of travel across the void?

With a grunt, his thoughts returned to his own situation as he poked at the fire again. He didn't know which estates he was near. He'd headed blindly in the direction that the Storm Season holdings lay, guided by the brief directions given him by Abaile, but he was in no position to tell one from the other. Somewhere down there, not visible for now, lay his own family holdings. Not seeing the Ka Vail estates -- he wasn't ready to deal with that yet -- was a relief. He thought he was somewhere close to the Ky Menin holdings, but he couldn't be sure. Somewhere nearby sat his father and brother and the knowledge filled him with a strange mix of emotions. Somewhere nearby sat everything he had once held dear.

Some motion in one of the fields ahead drew his attention, and using the stick to bear his weight, he pushed himself to his feet. The firelight, meager though it was, made it difficult to distinguish anything, and he stepped away from its circle so that he might see better.

A pair of figures was approaching. They were heading directly for where he stood. They both looked old, though how he could tell from this distance, he didn't know. One of the figures seemed to be supporting the other, guiding him. Taking a firm grip on his staff, Markis headed down the hillside to meet them.

As he neared the approaching pair, Markis felt his breath catch. Even through the descending gloom, he could recognize one of the two men -- the one being helped across the field, his weight supported, one hand held out

in front of him as if trying to feel his way. It was his father, Aron Ka Vail. He barely had time to wonder what had happened to him before he was charging across the intervening space. Anything that had gone before didn't matter. The old man was obviously in trouble.

"What's happened?" he asked as he pulled up in front of them. He at least had the caution to think better about revealing his identity just yet.

"This man needs help," said the older Guildsman leading Aron Ka Vail. "Do you want a job?"

"What is it?" said Markis again, adopting the speech of the itinerant workers he'd been traveling with. "What you want?"

"You can earn some money if you take this man to Darthan. There will be people there who will take him."

Markis peered into his father's face, but Aron Ka Vail didn't appear to see him. "Who is he?"

"That doesn't matter," said the Guildsman. "All you have to do is lead him to Darthan and look after him." The Guildsman dug inside one pocket and pulled out a purse. He hefted in one hand, showing its weight.

Markis's heart was pounding in his chest, and it was all he could do to keep his voice level, to keep the torrent of questions from tumbling from his lips.

"He don't look well," he said after a pause. "What's happened to him?"

"Leave me," croaked Aron. "They will take it out on you if you help me."

"What's he talking about?" asked Markis, still peering again into his father's face.

"That doesn't matter either," said the old man leading Aron Ka Vail. Markis noted his livery and recognized the marks of Technologists: Karryl Ky Menin's personal household. "There are just some of us," continued the old man, "who want to make sure he's looked after. Now, will you do it?"

Markis nodded and the old man tossed him the purse. "Take him to Darthan. Find Men Darnak's men. They'll know what to do. Treat him well. He deserves at least that," he said and turned away without another word. Markis watched him disappear across the fields into the gloom toward his estate.

Markis turned back to his father, the questions still tumbling in his head. Aron Ka Vail was an old man. Whatever ordeal he'd been through had taken its toll. Markis had no idea what revealing his identity might do. It was better not to risk it. Not yet, especially after all that had already passed.

"Here," he said, guiding Aron's hand to his walking stick. "Lean on this. Let me help you back to the fire."

Aron frowned, as if puzzling over something, but then a cough racked his frame, and he doubled over, leaning his weight on the staff. Markis rushed to place his hand on the old man's shoulder.

"Are you all right?" he said.

"No," said Aron. "I am not. I will never be all right again. Not after this." He coughed again. "The Prophet fills our lives with cruel jokes. See, how it works? My misfortune makes you better off."

"I don't..."

"If this hadn't happened to me, you wouldn't have this job."

Slowly the old man straightened, Markis's hand still on his shoulder. Aron reached out with one hand, pawing at the air, and then making contact with Markis's arm. He felt up the arm until he found his shoulder. Markis swallowed back his horror. It was suddenly clear. His father couldn't see. He bit his lip, struggling to maintain control of his voice.

"Come. This way. We'll get you to Darthan."

"Darthan!" Aron gave a hollow laugh. "No, boy. Just take me somewhere where I can die. I just need somewhere I can end this bloody misery in peace."

"No, master," said Markis. "I've been paid to take you to Darthan, and that's where we'll go." He applied gentle pressure to the old man's shoulder, steering him forward.

Aron took one hesitant step, then another, leaning his weight heavily on the walking stick.

"You know," said Aron as they made painful progress across the ground and up the base of the hill. "The Prophet knows how to play with us. It's a cruel joke. You remind me of someone. It's something in your voice." Again, he gave a short hard laugh. "The Prophet's just reminding me how well I treated my own. No better than this. No better than this. And now, when I can no longer take it back, I would give everything to be able to do so."

The old man stumbled, and Markis caught him. He placed an arm around his father's shoulder to help guide him up the hill.

"I'm sure it will be all right," he said gently. "Once we get to Darthan "

"Didn't you hear me, boy? Just take me somewhere where I can die in peace. The Prophet can't do any more. There's nothing left. Nothing."

"Come on," said Markis. "We'll look after you, that's for sure. I'm sorry I haven't even got no padder to take you there, but maybe we can find one. We'll get you there. You'll see."

He caught himself, but the last words had already left his lips. Would the old man see? Markis just didn't know. Aron Ka Vail seemed not to have noticed.

Thirty

Karin stepped into the broad reception room, seeing Jarid sitting waiting for her. He looked up as she entered, meeting her eyes and holding the look.

"It is done," she said. "We have all we need."

Jarid simply nodded, never letting his gaze lose contact as she crossed the room.

"Have you seen Edvin?" she asked.

Jarid shook his head.

"Edvin?" she called, and then to herself: "Where is that man?" She walked briskly to the doors at the end of the chamber and threw them open. "Edvin?" She gave a sigh of exasperation as she rejoined Jarid, pausing only to straighten a cushion on the way past one of the chairs.

They didn't have long to wait. Within moments, Edvin stepped into the room and stood to one side waiting. He glanced at Jarid, but his expression betrayed nothing.

"Lady?" he said.

"Where is Yosset?"

"There is something you should know about your husband," said Edvin. Jarid sat forward.

"Well, what is it?" said Karin, sitting as she did so.

Edvin hesitated. "I don't know what it is, but something in him has changed."

"Explain." She cast a glance at Jarid as Edvin continued.

"When I gave him the news, he simply smiled, as if the news actually pleased him. I informed him about the treachery of Guildmaster Ka Vail and he laughed. He accused me of being a fool." He paused to clear his throat. "I went on to tell him how Master Ka Vail here had acted with honor to defend the Guilds and he said I was an idiot. He said..." He paused again. "He said that Master Ka Vail was the traitor and he'd get his reward accordingly. That the Prophet would see to it. And then he threw me out."

Karin narrowed her eyes. "Did he just? Go and find him, Edvin. I want to see him now. Here."

Edvin nodded and looking slightly uncomfortable, withdrew.

As soon as Edvin had left, Karin stood and beckoned to Jarid.

"This is not good," she said. "And now I have to deal with the coward." She urged him closer. He stepped near to her and she looked directly into his eyes.

"You know, Jarid," she said quietly. "There are cowards and there are men." She lifted one hand and traced her fingers gently down his cheek. "I know which I would rather have." She paused to let the meaning sink in. "And very soon now, I will have no further need of Yosset Clier, my brave and wonderful husband. If anything were to happen to him..."

Jarid held her gaze, barely moving, just the slightest tremble as the ends of her fingers met the edge of his lips and she withdrew her hand. Quickly she turned away.

"You should go," she said. "Before anything...before Yosset gets here. For the moment, I need to deal with him myself. We need to inform Ky Menin to speed up his preparations. If Yosset is wavering, then we have to make sure of things as quickly as we can. I will have to take charge of preparing the men myself."

She turned quickly, pausing meaningfully before taking a step forward and moving in close to him. "Hurry, Jarid," she said in a low voice. "Go. Find Karryl and warn him. I will see you soon." She leaned in closer and gently brushed his cheek with her lips.

Jarid's eyes widened just a fraction, he swallowed and then nodded. Quickly he turned on his heel and just as quickly was out the door and gone. She looked after him, watching the door leading to the outside for a few moments, thoughtfully, and then moved to sit and wait for her husband. She didn't have long to wait. It only seemed like seconds after Jarid had left, that Yosset appeared through the door at the other end of the room.

"So, Karin," he said. "Welcome home my loving wife. I hear there's been a little trouble over at Ky Menin's."

"Sit down, Yosset. You're enough of a fat halfwit without working at being one."

Clier nodded sweetly and smiled, doing just as he was bidden, folding his hands in front of him as he sat, the smile still firmly in place. "So, what can I do for you?"

"We have been betrayed, Yosset. Betrayed by that old fool Aron Ka Vail."

Clier continued to smile sweetly. "So I hear, my love."

"And there are rumors of trouble elsewhere. I think we're in for trouble. We need to prepare."

"I have heard that much as well," he said. "Did you have a nice time with the Ka Vail boy?"

"Don't be an idiot. What has that got to do with anything?"

Clier nodded slowly. "Don't think I'm a complete fool, Karin," he said. "Just because I hold my tongue, doesn't mean that I'm blind. How exactly has Ka Vail betrayed you? What, by lending assistance to your father?" He leaned forward. "You tell me what constitutes betrayal, Karin. We're talking about your father here, not just some Guild functionary. This is Principal Men Darnak, the man who brought you into the world, who cared for you, who looked after you, who saw to your well-being after your mother was gone. Who is the one doing the betraying?"

"You were always ambitious, and that suited me, but you seem to have lost any sense of what is right and wrong now. I could overlook some things before, but now? Your father, your brother, Guildmaster Ka Vail -- what next?" He stood and walked to the back of the chair he had been sitting on. He rested his plump hands on the back. "There is a limit, Karin. There is a limit and the natural order of things will be maintained. The Prophet's will sees to that."

"You are a fool, Yosset," she said and laughed. "Hold to your superstitions and that religious nonsense if you want, but it won't do any good. The only reason things happen is because people make them happen, belief or not."

"You're wrong, Karin. And I'm starting to be afraid of what you've become."

She got to her feet. "Better to be what I am than a sniveling fat cretin like you. By the Prophet, I don't know how I've put up with you for all these years. We do what we have to do, you useless slug. We need to restore order."

"There will be no order if you're involved."

"Shut up, Yosset and sit down. We need to talk about what happens next."

"You simply refuse to listen, don't you?"

"Didn't you hear me?"

Clier sighed. His shoulders slumped. He moved back around to the front of the chair and sat heavily. Karin looked across at him with satisfaction.

"See, you can't even fight your own battles," she said. "You're not a man. You're a useless wretch. There's no way I can rely on you. And because of that, I'm going to be forced to take extra precautions."

"So," said Clier, finally, a tone of resignation in his voice. "What do you want me to do?"

"Well, with Roge gone, and with Aron out of the way..."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know. Karryl had some new toy. He used it to get the information out of Ka Vail. It seemed to affect him more than Karryl expected. Anyway, they finally threw him out. He was useless. I can't see him taking any action against us now."

"What do you mean -- useless?" said Yosset.

"Well, I don't think he could see, for a start. Whatever it's done to him, he's merely a hollow replica of what he was. I really don't know if he'll recover. He was a mess." She waved a hand. "But that's unimportant. I need you to do something. As I said, with Roge and Ka Vail no longer in the way to upset things, there's only one choice. I need to be closer to Karryl. He has the only significant power base left in the equation. With him and me together, there is nothing that can stop us. And you know Karryl -- he still has a few surprises for the bleeding masses yet."

Clier was frowning across at her. "You really don't feel anything, do you?"

"And what should I feel, Yosset? Remorse? Or satisfaction that those who have acted against us have been punished?"

He simply shook his head.

"So, pay attention," she said. "We need to call the Guild leaders together. We need to let them know what's happening and then plan how we are going to take care of the current situation. Ky Menin has some plans, but we have to convince all of the Guilds to act together. I need you to send out the call for a gathering, jointly with Karryl. That will bring them in. From there, it should be an easy matter to steer things in the way we want. You can take control of Primary Production fully, and from there..."

"What do you mean, I can take control of Primary Production?"

"Well, Ka Vail's out of the picture. The older Ka Vail boy is nowhere, and Jarid, well, he's just that -- a boy. With my help, he won't be any trouble at all."

Yosset leaned forward a worried expression on his face. "So what about the Ka Vail boy? How can we be sure of him?"

Karin simply smiled. "Oh, don't worry about that, my dear husband. It was Jarid Ka Vail that informed us about his father's activities in the first place. He left Ky Menin's estates so that Karryl could work on the old man with no clear chance of recrimination. No, we don't have any concern there. The young man's just hungry enough to do exactly what we want. You just leave him to me."

Yosset Clier sat back in his chair, his jaw set, his eyes narrowed again.

"Is he now?" he said quietly.

"So," said Karin, barely noticing his expression. "I suggest you get moving on preparing the meeting. We'll use the building here. That way we won't have to travel and it will give that little extra air of authority. The old man might be out of the picture, but we can still use him, or at least his memory, if we have to."

Thirty-One

Tarlain stood upon the steps of the Guild building in Bortruz, flanked on either side by two tall Kallathik. He'd thought it important to have them here, though there'd been one or two moments while they'd been mounting the steps where he thought that the whole structure was at risk of collapse. He needn't have worried, for though the *ajura* wood steps had creaked and groaned under the Kallathik weight, they'd borne the strain. He looked out over the assembled faces, waiting, choosing his moment. At first, only one or two of the local townspeople had gathered, but word swiftly spread. It wasn't often that something this unusual happened in a place like Bortruz.

The Kallathik stood motionless. If he had not known better, even Tarlain could have mistaken them for totems. The slightest flick of one of their tails told him they were watching, communicating between themselves in that silent way he didn't understand.

He looked around at the crowd again, checking his words until the last few stragglers joined the back of the group. Did he have any right to ask for their support? It had to be right. He had a duty as Men Darnak, as a Guildsmen to make things right. If he let the Kallathik action go unchecked, only bad could come of it.

Judging that the moment was right, he lifted the spear he held, high above his head.

"Do you see this?" he said clearly. "Do you know what it means?"

A couple of the crowd frowned. One or two looked at each other blankly. There was the dull buzz of voices from the back.

"This," said Tarlain, "is the mark of a coming storm. A storm bigger than anything the Season can throw at us. Bigger than anything the Twins can throw at us." He shook the spear for emphasis, feeling the weight of the polished wood, then cast it down, so it fell in the mud at the foot of the stairs.

"What's your point, Tarlain Men Darnak?" said a voice from the middle of the crowd.

"Did you hear that?" said Tarlain. "You heard the name. Tarlain Men Darnak. You know who I am. But do you know who these are?" He gestured to either side at the motionless Kallathik. "These are the owners of this land, this place, this world. We are nothing more than guests in their place, thrown here by an act of the Prophet. We survive here because of their grace, no other reason."

"I've heard enough," said a man at the back and started to walk away. A brief mutter started to follow him.

"You there!" yelled Tarlain. "Stay where you are!"

The man stopped, looked slowly back at Tarlain, snorted, shook his head and turned away again.

"Stop," said Tarlain.

In a blur, another, different Kallathik stood in front of the miner, twin spears poised, staring down at him with its four eyes, passionless. The man swallowed, looked up slowly into those expressionless features and lifted his hands. He took a hesitant step back.

Tarlain had their attention now.

He lifted an arm. "And there," he said pointing.

From the opposite corner, yet another Kallathik appeared in a blur of motion, stopping just as quickly as it appeared. The creature beside him had seen his signal and passed it on. It had taken Tarlain a while to understand that they could also communicate at a distance, but now that he knew they could

"That's what awaits you if you don't listen to me now," he said to the crowd. "And the Kallathik are ready to march. They are ready to march on the homes and the families and the holdings of everyone who stands in their way. We have treated them like creatures for too long. They have been patient while we have ripped up their world around them, but now they are patient no more." He paused, looking for signs that his words were sinking in. "You have a choice, all of you. I know the conditions you live and work in. They are not far removed from those of the Kallathik themselves. Those conditions are put in place by the Guilds and the Guildmasters who run them. Who gave them the power?"

Another voice from the crowd. "By the tradition of the First Families."

And another. "And by the Words of the Prophet."

Tarlain waved his hand. "The First Families brought us here for what? Look around you. Is this the paradise they sought?"

A low mutter broke out. Someone pushed someone else. The man pushed back. Someone else swung a blow.

"Stop!" yelled Tarlain. He couldn't afford to lose them.

"Whatever happens now," he said. "The Kallathik are going to march. You have a choice. You can march with them, or against them. The Guilds have ruled too long on a structure supported simply by tradition. Well, tradition is not enough. Now comes the time for change. Do you want a better life? A better life for you " He picked out a face in the crowd and pointed. "And you and you. Do you want a better life for all of us?"

The muttering grew.

"So, now is the time to make your choice. You either march with us, or against us."

Deliberately he took the steps to the ground, one by one. The paired Kallathik moved in behind him. The front ranks of the crowd shrank back. Slowly, he stooped and picked up the spear he had cast down, holding it to his side, one end planted in the ground.

"Make your choice," he said clearly. "You must make your choice now." He stepped forward and the crowd parted to make a way through their middle. Slowly, he walked the length, looking from face to face, the Kallathik shuffling along behind. As he reached the edge he spoke again, not looking back behind him, but in a clear strong voice so that all could hear.

"Those who are with us should follow us now."

He didn't bother to look back at how many followed as he strode down between the buildings toward the edges of Bortruz. He knew they were there. Bortruz would be the first--the first of many. And in ones and twos and in numbers, he knew they would join.

Somewhere, back in the crowd behind him, unnoticed, a solitary figure slipped away, heading for the stables where his padder lay tethered and waiting.

Thirty-Two

One by one, the Guild dignitaries filed into the broad hall. One by one, they took their seats. Though there was no formal placement assigned, the natural hierarchy that worked within the Guilds manifested in their choice of seating. This large wooden barn, set aside from the main cluster of buildings on the old Men Darnak estates had many times served the purpose for both impromptu and formal meetings of the upper echelons of the Guild functionaries. Karin stood off to one side, close to Karryl Ky Menin, watching as they moved to their places, low conversations stirring amongst them. She had only the slightest tinge of nervousness. Ever since word of Tarlain's activities had reached them, there was no question. She knew what she had to say. She knew what she had to do. She only prayed that these, the men who made the Guilds work, would give her the audience to do it.

The Guild leaders had come from all the surrounding estates, in buggies and wagons and on the backs of padders, heeding the urgent call to Guild business sent out by Karryl. In the front row sat her husband, watching her with narrowed eyes. Three places down from him, was Jarid Ka Vail. She had that one, she knew, and she suppressed the slight smile that threatened to creep onto her face. There would be time for that later. Plenty of time.

Torches lined the walls, flooding the space with warm flickering light, and three high-backed chairs lined the wooden podium to the hall's front. A long, low table sat in front of the chairs, forming a subtle barrier between those that sat on the stage and those below. Just briefly, she was reminded of the meeting in the Guild halls back in Yarik when her father had delivered his final announcement. Well, this time it would be different. Just how different remained to be seen. She scanned the faces, trying to judge whether everyone was here. A low buzz washed across the open space, losing itself in the empty vaults of the high-roofed structure. She glanced at Karryl, standing impassively, his hands folded in front of him, waiting for the noise to settle down.

Finally, the noise level dropped and the fifty or so Guild functionaries started to settle. Karryl gave a brief nod and moved toward the stage, climbing the three short steps, and crossing to stand at the center, in front of the low table. For once, he had worn a muted gray, instead of his normal pale cream. If anything, it made him seem more pallid, waxier. He lifted his hands slowly and held them, palms forward, for quiet.

"Can I have your attention please? Thank you all for being here, for taking the trouble to join us," he said. "We have business to conduct this evening. Important business." He gave a quick glance around the assembled faces, and then continued speaking. Karin watched, looking for reaction.

"Storm Season is upon us now," continued Karryl. "And there is a greater storm growing in our midst. We are entering a time of change. This is not a change in the seasons, a change in the way we conduct our business day to day, but a change in the way we need to approach everything we do."

"We've heard this speech before, Ky Menin. Why have you brought us here?" It was Aldus Yak Farin, a Guildmaster from one of the subordinate Guilds. Karin could not remember which one, and she pressed her

lips together tightly at the lapse. All she remembered about him was that he was always vocal.

"No, Guildmaster Yak Farin," said Ky Menin, completely unfazed by the interruption. "You have not heard this speech before. If you will let us proceed, everything will become clear."

Yak Farin snorted and sat back in his seat, crossing his arms. Karin knew the man could be discounted, but it didn't make this any easier. One or two heads had turned to look back at him. Yak Farin met the looks and snorted again, shaking his head slightly.

"We have important news," said Ky Menin, once everyone had settled again. "Because of that news, I would like Karin Men Darnak to join me up here to talk to you."

The reaction was immediate. A couple of the Guild leaders got to their feet. Others called out. Several shook their heads, muttering.

"Wait," said Ky Menin, lifting a hand.

"Why should we?" yelled someone. "You go too far, Ky Menin. Why should we listen to this?"

For the first time Karin could remember, Ky Menin seemed to lose his veneer of calm. A flush came to his cheeks and he lifted his voice over the growing noises of protest.

"You *will* listen! Or you will lose everything you have. Is that what you want? Now please take your seats and be quiet."

The uncharacteristic outburst had its effect. Slowly, gradually the Guildsmen took their seats. Ky Menin urged them down with his hands, and when relative calm had been restored, nodded briefly to Karin. Taking a deep breath, she crossed to the stage. She moved to the center, waiting as Ky Menin withdrew to slip behind the table and take one of the seats. She was suddenly alone, facing a room full of hostile faces. Another deep breath and she started.

"You all know me. You all knew my father. Every single one of you knew my brother." She picked out one or two key faces and met their eyes. "Storm Season is with us, but so is a time of change, a time when we have to act. The Kallathik are marching and we must defend everything that goes to make us strong, to defend everything passed down to us by the First Families."

"Trouble with the Kallathik. It's Storm Season. Tell us something we don't already know." It was Yak Farin. "Why should we listen to you? How can you stand there and talk about what was handed down by the First Families."

It was Karin's turn to lift a placating hand. "There is something you don't know, and more," she said, unperturbed by the interruption. "The miners have joined with the Kallathik. And there are others. They are moving against us even now. Some of you may have heard that already. Well we can confirm it's true."

There was a stir across the hall.

"Even now, they are marching toward these estates, prepared to take from us everything that the Prophet has granted us, preparing to rip away the very fabric and the order of our society. You know me. You knew my brother, Roge. If he were here today, he would be the one standing here before you. But he's not here. Nor is my father, Leannis Men Darnak. We are without a Principal. So, I stand here before you, representing the family of Men Darnak, representing that tradition that has kept us alive on this world since the day when the ships first crashed from the sky. Yes, I am Men Darnak. Do you hear that? I am Men Darnak. I am my father's

daughter, and you, all of you, need to understand what that means."

"What do you mean the miners have joined with them?"

"Just what I say," she said. "They have taken up weapons, as have the Kallathik. But that is not all..." She had them now; she could sense it. One by one, she looked around the faces in the hall, pausing at one or two, making the briefest eye contact with others, but touching each of them with her glance. "They have banded together with the Atavists as well. There is a combined force heading our way, led by Tarlain, my younger brother--"

There was a stir across the hall at the mention of his name, but she spoke over it, driving the words home. "--and they mean to take us and everything that is ours, to overthrow our social order. We cannot allow that to happen. By the Prophet and in the name of the First Families, we cannot allow that to happen. The very nature of everything we believe in is under threat. We, all of us, must work together to crush this heresy, to place these fools back in the place they belong. Does not the Prophet tell us that everything in this world has its place?" She spread her palms wide, pausing to let the words sink in. "Now. Are you prepared to listen? Are you prepared to act? Are you prepared to do what we must to restore the proper order to things? You " She swept one arm in a wide gesture. "Have a duty to your Guild, have a duty to the other Guilds, have a duty to the Prophet's teachings and the traditions of the First Families."

Several of the Guildmasters were on their feet. "What do we have to do?" called one.

"How can we fight the creatures?" said another.

She gestured for them to resume their places and glanced back at Ky Menin, giving him a brief nod, before turning back to the audience. She could not let her satisfaction show. Not yet. But the daughter of Leannis Men Darnak finally had the Guilds.

"Each of you has men. Each of you has household staff and members of your Guilds living on your estates or nearby. We must prepare. Guildmaster Ky Menin has some plans. He also has one or two surprises that will help us win this conflict quickly and efficiently. If you are all in agreement, I will defer to the Guildmaster to share his thoughts, and we can plan together as a group. Then, make no mistake, we will fight. We will fight and we will drive them back to where they came from and we *will* restore the proper order."

Seeing no dissent, she nodded to Ky Menin, and then stepped around the edge of the low table to take one of the chairs herself. She looked out over the faces of the Guild leaders as Ky Menin started to speak. They were absorbed in what he was telling them, and she sat back, at last letting the sense of victory work within her.

Two of the group had their attention not on Ky Menin, but on her. Yosset still watched her and her alone, a slight narrowing of his eyes still evident. The other face turned toward her was that of Jarid Ka Vail. She met his eyes, gave him a long, pointed look and then looked away.

She would deal with Jarid when the time came, just as she would deal with her husband and with Karryl Ky Menin. Slowly, she savored the words in her head. Principal Men Darnak. She gripped the arms of the chair and bit gently on the inside of her lower lip. Principal Men Darnak. Principal *Karin* Men Darnak.

The shout came from behind one of the sandy hills of mine leavings and Sandon swung about to see what was happening. Slowly, in a seemingly unordered fashion, the first padders and wagons appeared, making their way around the edges of the humped piles of discarded earth and rock. Despite the stupidity of it, Sandon felt his heart lift. He had only spent a mere few weeks with these people, but he continued to feel a closeness to them all the same. And he was still dressed like one of them – Tchardo the Atavist. It was almost like his family was coming home.

Not wanting to be too obvious about it, he searched for sign of a particular wagon. At last, he was rewarded. A neatly painted vehicle appeared around the bend. He watched it out of the corner of his eye as he walked across to one of the Kallathik groups to see how preparations were going. He didn't want to appear too eager, did he?

The group had been here for three days now, just outside of Darthan, near another cluster of mines and another Kallathik settlement. People, Kallathik, mineworkers had been streaming in from nearby areas to join them. Not an hour before, Fran had returned, bringing news of Tarlain. He sought among the assembled humans for the boy's face, trying to locate him by his hair. Finally spotting the boy, he headed across to meet him. Fran was standing with a group of the other Men Darnak retainers, but of the old man, there was no sign. A quick look about gave Sandon no hint as to where the Principal might be.

"Fran," he called as he approached the group.

The boy quickly looked around as he heard his name, and making his apologies, stepped back from the others. There was a half smile on the boy's open face as he neared.

"Tchardo," he said. "It's good to finally get a chance to talk to you."

Sandon placed a hand on his shoulder and drew him out of earshot.

"Yes, sorry it's taken so long. With the preparations the way they are, things are a bit hectic. So, you managed to talk to Tarlain?"

Fran nodded. "He wasn't very happy."

"No, I expect he wasn't. So, what's the news?"

"Oh, he's coming. He cursed his sister, his brother, after he had gotten over the shock. The news hurt him bad. He vowed to make amends for what they had done. He would have come straight away, but said that the work had to be done first."

"So, was there any trouble finding him?"

Fran shook his head. "Not really. Once I was in Bortruz, it was easy from there. He'd been talking to people, making speeches. They all knew him, knew where he'd gone. The whole place was buzzing with it. He'd really stirred them up."

Sandon nodded thoughtfully. "So, it appears that young Tarlain has inherited something of his father's spirit. I wonder what happened to bring that out."

Fran shrugged. "I don't really know anything about that," he said.

"No, no. But that's fine. You've done well, Fran," he said, clapping the boy on the back. "Thank you. Now, we should get back and see what we can do about helping the preparations. You go back and join your

companions, but listen, make sure not to let on about whom I really am. It's not time yet."

Fran nodded seriously, and then grinned. "It's good to see you, *Tchardo*." Sandon returned the grin easily.

He watched as Fran headed to rejoin the other Men Darnak retainers, and then turned about to search again for the familiar wagon, stroking his beard thoughtfully. He was a little nervous about seeing Alise again. No matter that everything had been so easy between them from the start. Events were taking over now, and he couldn't afford for it to become complicated. Not yet.

So, Tarlain was on his way here. That much was good. He scanned the camp, at the same time still looking for any sign of Men Darnak. The old man had shown little improvement, and the burden of that knowledge stayed with Sandon constantly. The Atavist party had drawn up together to one side. They were in the process of tethering their animals and lining up the wagons, but still no sign of the Principal. In the old man's current state, that was not good. The old man had already said he would not see any of his children, particularly not Tarlain. In one of his more lucid moments, he'd even said that he was ashamed of what he was, of what he'd done. Sandon rubbed the back of his neck and grimaced. Somehow, some way, he held a certain responsibility. If he'd not been so quick to follow what he believed was his duty to the old man, things might have turned out very differently. And now? Leannis Men Darnak needed his youngest son. He had nothing else to hold on to. Not even the fragile shards of his own mind.

Sandon looked back up at the Atavist grouping. They'd swelled in numbers since the time he'd been with them. There seemed to be almost twice the amount of wagons, all lined up in their brightly painted but simple hues. Already their encampment was starting to look well established. Tables set up, beasts tethered in even lines, the children doing what the Atavist children did, there was little to say that this was not their natural place. He paused, but knew within that he had no choice; he had to go and see them.

It was months ago now that he'd spent the time among these people. So much had happened in between, and yet there was something here, something that touched him with a feeling of comfort. One or two of the Atavists passed him and gave the characteristic brief nod of recognition. Sandon almost smiled at that. It was strange, that they could be so passive, and yet at the same time, he knew they were here to fight, to take up arms against the Guildsmen. Somewhere, he'd have to find the reference in *The Book of Words* that allowed them to do this. But that was later. He noticed Witness Kovaar scurrying away from the opposite end of the camp. Whatever he'd been up to, it would lead to no good. There were more pressing things to attend to now.

He paused in front of a passing Atavist, and without waiting for the man to stop, he asked. "I am seeking Alise. Do you know where she is?"

The Atavist paused, looking confused for a moment, and then tilted his head to one side. "Alise?"

"Yes, Alise. The healer. Do you know her?"

The Atavist shook his head and pursed his lips. "I know no Alise," he said. "If you seek a healer, go to the blue-painted wagon fourth from the end. You will find one there."

"Thank you," said Sandon, and the Atavist went on about his business, but not before giving Sandon a slightly puzzled look.

Peering along the line of wagons, Sandon located the one the man had indicated. It was his turn to frown. Perhaps all healer's wagons looked the same. He stood at the back steps, hesitating. What if it wasn't the one he was looking for? Then he would ask his questions and leave.

"Sandon!"

Alise's face was poking out of the back of the wagon, beaming down at him.

Sandon quickly glanced around, but there was no one nearby to overhear. "Hello, Alise," he said. "And remember, it's Tchardo."

She looked troubled for an instant, and then the look was quickly replaced by a smile. "Yes, of course. Tchardo. It's good to see you again. Have you changed your mind and come to join us?"

"No," he said, slowly. "But it's good to see you too. I was hoping you'd be here."

"And so the Prophet Wills," she said, stepping out of the wagon and climbing down to sit on the bottom step. She looked at him carefully. "You have lost weight," she said. "And your beard is longer."

Sandon smiled. "And you look just the same," he said. "There is nothing that should change."

She looked down, a slight flush coloring her cheeks.

"So, what has been happening to you? Tell me about it," she continued, quickly changing the subject.

"Can I join you?" he asked. She nodded and he sat on the step next to her.

"Well, since I left, I have been traveling most of the time. I found who I was looking for, but I fear he was not who I expected to find." He glanced around again, making doubly sure that there was nobody who could hear what he was about to say. "There is something wrong with Principal Men Darnak," he said quietly. "That's why I'm here now. His condition, his behavior has deteriorated. It's as if something has been draining away his capacity to think rationally. I've come to you because, well, I don't know. You heal people, Alise. I wanted to know if you thought there was anything you could do."

She looked at him seriously, waiting for him to continue. When he said nothing else, she spoke. "You should know better than that, Tchardo. How much time did we spend together? How am I expected to know the answer if you don't give me what I need? I'm afraid you will have to tell me a little more than that."

Feeling chastened, Sandon looked out over the camp, watching the Atavists finish their preparations for the evening as he recounted carefully everything he could remember about the old man's quick deterioration. Once or twice, Alise interrupted him, asking brief, pointed questions. He told her as much as he could, and when he was finished, he waited for her to answer, keeping his attention on a group of Atavist children playing between the wagons further down the line.

Finally, Alise lifted a hand and placed it on his arm. The touch sent a quick rush through his stomach, but he pushed the feeling away. She left the hand gently resting where it was as she answered.

"I know of preparations that can do that to a person, but I cannot be sure. It takes careful dosing over and extended period. Gradually the medicine poisons the mind, rotting away at the brain. I'm sorry. Stress, conflict, all of these things increase the effect, bring the onset of deterioration more quickly. If it is the case, then the best thing for him is rest. Somewhere quiet. At least that would slow the progress."

"Is there nothing?" he asked.

She shook her head slowly. "I'm sorry. The victim can recover if the Prophet wills it, but in normal circumstances, there is little hope."

"Damn it!" he said, and caught himself at Alise's sharp intake of breath. "I'm sorry, Alise. I just have to find

some way to help him."

She gave his arm a brief squeeze. "And if the Prophet wills it, you shall."

"So, who is this?" A tall Atavist was striding toward them, his step confident, his bearded face inquisitive, but open. "Alise, will you introduce me to your friend?"

Sandon looked from Alise back to the approaching figure.

"Yes, of course, Lothan," said Alise. "This is Tcharo. I told you about him."

"Ah, yes," said the newcomer. "So this is the one."

Alise stood, and Sandon followed suit. "Tcharo, this is Lothan, my husband. We serve the healing needs of our family together."

Confusion was replaced by disbelief by confusion again in Sandon's mind. Her husband? He stammered out a reply, and then making some quick excuse, took his leave.

"Will we see you later?" asked Alise as he walked away.

"As the Prophet wills," said Sandon. He could think of nothing else to say.

#

It was over two days later that Tarlain Men Darnak arrived at the encampment. The first people to appear was a ragged group of human mine workers. Sandon stood to one side and watched as they filed in. Following them came Kallathik, line after line of the creatures, all headed up by Tarlain himself, still wearing his Guild livery. Sandon noted the confidence in his step, the pride in his carriage. There was almost something of his father's old bearing in the way he carried himself.

Sandon chewed at the inside of his bottom lip. He wasn't sure whether he should approach Tarlain now, or wait. Alise's revelation was still smarting, and he was suddenly unsure of his own ability to make the right choice. He glanced over to the Atavist site, and as if thinking about her had drawn her forth, he saw her heading toward him. She stepped warily around the end of the column still filing into the camp, holding her skirts up from the mud their passage had churned up. Just for a moment, he thought about heading in the opposite direction, but he stayed where he was. She'd already seen him, and there was no point avoiding it any longer. She picked her way across the muddy trail, and giving him a smile of greeting, came to stand beside him to watch the new arrivals.

"There are so many of them," she said, after a few moments silence.

"Yes," he replied. "More than I would have expected."

"More than we could have hoped for," she said.

Sandon nodded, watching her out of the corner of one eye, avoiding meeting her gaze directly. There was nothing to suggest there was anything different about her. Nothing.

"Tchardo?" she said.

"Hmm?" he responded, only half paying attention.

"There's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"I'm sorry, Alise," he said. "It will have to wait until later."

Tarlain was crossing the camp toward the main cluster of Men Darnak retainers. Half because he wanted to avoid the awkwardness he was feeling, half because now was as good a time as any, Sandon headed over to try and intercept the young man. Alise hurried after him. He pursed his lips, but didn't say anything.

When he was a few paces away, he called out. "Tarlain Men Darnak."

Tarlain stopped and lifted one arm to stop the small group of men that were walking with him.

"Yes?" he said, standing and waiting for Sandon to reach them. "Do I know you?" There was even authority in the young man's voice.

Sandon waited until he was right up close before he said anything.

"I need to talk to you," he said quietly, suddenly remembering having said almost exactly the same words to Leannis Men Darnak so many months ago.

Tarlain peered at him, frowned. His eyes narrowed, then quickly widened. "You!"

Sandon nodded, lifting a placating hand. "Please, can we talk?"

Tarlain gestured to his companions. "Wait here," he said.

Sandon quickly drew him out of earshot. "Fran found you," he said when they were far enough away. "He delivered my message."

"Yes," said Tarlain with a sigh. "I could barely believe what he told me. Roge. Is it true?"

"I'm afraid it is." Sandon glanced warily across at the others who were watching curiously.

"My father?" said Tarlain.

"Not good. I don't know where he is right now. He keeps wandering off on half-imagined quests. With the preparations, sometimes it's hard to keep an eye on him all the time. The priest does little enough to help, apart from filling his head with more nonsense."

Tarlain nodded grimly. "We'll send someone to find him. The man you sent -- Fran is it? He gave me some idea of how bad it was. Has anyone done anything?"

Sandon ran a finger through his hair. It was his turn to sigh. "Alise -- that's her over there -- she's one of the Atavist healers. She's not very optimistic."

"Damn," spat Tarlain. "That's not good enough." He glanced across to where Alise was standing, watching.

"Believe me," countered Sandon. "She has no reason to play with the truth."

Tarlain planted his fists on his hips. "Why should I believe you, Yl Aris? In the Prophet's name, why should I?"

"If you think about it," said Sandon slowly, "you'll realize why. In all the years that you've known me, Tarlain, whom have I served? For whom have I worked? Is it my own interest? And before you say anything, you know the real answer. You have to know that's true." Despite wanting to appear as calm and rational as he could, he could feel the emotion pouring out of his own words. His eyes were threatening with moisture, and he quickly looked away.

Tarlain looked at him for a long time. "You know, as much as I dislike you, Yl Aris, as much as I don't like admitting it, I think you're telling the truth."

"Well, then, I urge you. Find your father. Make sure he's taken care of. Forget what he's done, what he's said."

"Why should I, Sandon?"

"He was not himself. You have to believe that. By the Prophet, you must."

Tarlain gave a deep sigh. "All right. Get the Atavist woman to help you find him. Look after him. He's still my father, after all. In some ways, what is done, is done, but I owe that to him."

Sandon nodded, found himself halfway back to Alise before he realized that he'd just been commanded. There was no other word for it. He stopped in his tracks, and slowly turned to look at the youngest Men Darnak.

Tarlain stood watching him, waiting. After a moment, he spoke, almost as an afterthought. "And clean yourself up, man. Shave that ridiculous beard off and get some proper clothes. There's no reason for keeping up this stupid pretence any longer."

Sandon blinked. As he turned to rejoin Alise and go in search of the boy's father, he realized the young man was right.

Thirty-Four

Edvin hovered near the door, and Ky Menin finally beckoned him in. He kept Karin's man standing for a few moments more before speaking.

"So, what is it?" he said, finally.

"The Mistress has sent me with a message for Jarid Ka Vail."

"Has she now? Well the Ka Vail boy is no longer here. He's gone off with his men. Preparations. You can give whatever it is to me."

Edvin stood nervously, running his fingers back and forth along the length of a sealed message tube. "I don't think I should do that, Guildmaster," he said.

Ky Menin unfolded his hands and stood. He watched the man, assessing, and then nodded slowly. "Yes, of course, you're right, Edvin." He took three steps closer. "But you understand how delicately things are

balanced at the moment, don't you? Perhaps it would be better if you let me know the contents. We don't have to break the seal. Surely you know what's in it."

Edvin looked around himself, as if seeking support where clearly none lay. "Perhaps, Guildmaster." He swallowed. "Perhaps if you just told me where Jarid Ka Vail is, then I can deliver the message and be on my way."

"I'm afraid," said Ky Menin, "that he's long gone. After his discussions with your mistress, they decided that it was a mistake to let Guildmaster Ka Vail wander around the countryside. In the current climate, it could work against us. He's gone to find the old man and deal with the problem."

Edvin nodded, but looked puzzled. "Why did he just not send someone?"

"Because he wanted to deal with the matter personally," said Ky Menin. "He seems to take a certain amount of pleasure from these things. Now tell me. What's in this message that's so important?" He took a step closer.

Edvin shook his head. "I cannot do that, Guildmaster."

"Look. Jarid is far away by now. Not only does he have to track down the old man, but he's also trying to assess the strength of the Kallathik and the miners. I have no idea where he might be. It would be better if you just gave the message to me, and I'll determine whether we need to find him or not."

Edvin's grip on the message tube tightened, and he pressed his lips firmly together. "I have to go," he said, backing away.

Karryl crossed the remaining distance separating them and stood, looming over the man. "Don't you think I know what's going on here, Edvin?" he said. "Last time they were together, the tension between that pair was undeniable. Even a blind man could have seen it. Karin has no loyalty to her husband. And you, well, you're closest to her, aren't you Edvin? You know what's going on. If you cannot give me that," he said, waving his hand at the tube clutched in Edvin's hands, "then you can do something else which will help Karin more. And you do want to help her, don't you?"

Edvin said nothing, chewing at his bottom lip, then gave a brief, hesitant nod.

Karryl turned away. "You can return to her and take a message back to her from me. Before Jarid left, he and I reached an understanding. We reached the conclusion that it would be better for him to work with me here, in the Guild of Technologists, rather than trying to take over the operations of Primary Production. We already have effective control of that Guild through Karin's husband, through her. We don't need to upset the order of things any further." He turned around to face the man. "Can you remember that?"

"Of course," said Edvin without any resentment.

"Now," said Karryl. "It's important that you deliver that before she tries anything foolish. Let her know that I understand what she's planning, and we can do this a better way."

Edvin nodded and withdrew, taking the message tube with him.

Karryl pressed his lips together, then finally crossed and sat back on his couch, slowly folding and unfolding his hands. It wasn't the best, but it would do. He would have to keep an eye on that man, make sure he did what he was told, but it was as much as he could expect for the moment.

#

Markis and the old man made their way painfully across the hills. Markis had to lead him, carefully, watching the ground for any hidden holes or rocks as his father staggered along, leaning heavily on the staff. Aron Ka Vail was still visibly weak, and Markis watched him as they traveled, wondering what there was that he could possibly do to help him. To see his father reduced to this ... it was almost too much. More than once he'd been tempted to tell him exactly whom he really was, but he just didn't know how the old man might react. Would he stumble away, denying him to the end, to finish up collapsing on some rain-swept field? The old man had effectively disowned Markis, after all. No, he couldn't afford that risk with Aron in his current condition. Better to ease him to a point where he could tell him. Perhaps if his sight were to come back...

The thoughts kept coming back as they staggered across the hills and valleys, the weather whipping around them, not knowing where they were really going or what good it could possibly do.

Later that night, Markis tried to locate what shelter he could. Travelers' huts frequently dotted the countryside. It was foolishness to travel cross-country in Storm Season and stay exposed to whatever the elements might throw at you. They didn't even have a padder to ease their path. He'd thought a couple of times about how he might acquire one, but there seemed to be nothing for miles around. Finally, they came across a solitary hut. Rudely cobbled together from a simple frame and *ajura* planks, it would serve to keep off the worst of the weather. This one had recently been used and maintained, for not only was it still standing, despite the passing quake activity they'd had over the past few weeks, but the cracks between the timbers seemed to be relatively small. He bundled his father inside, cinched the door shut, and set about getting them some light and heat. A small oil heater sat in one corner, but the shelves were bare, apart from a lamp, and the remains of some dried supplies that were well beyond usability. A simple pallet sat in one corner, a couple of threadbare blankets heaped together in a pile. He shook them out and laid them across the mattress, and then guided his father over to sit. It was simple, but for now, it would do. With the heater, he figured he could take the worst of the cold. The old man needed the blankets more than he did. Squatting in the opposite corner, he sat to watch, listening to the wind thrashing against the outside of the hut, and thankful that they were inside rather than out. Slowly, as he watched the man that he'd once known as his father, the smell of damp earth and old musty blankets around him, the lamplight dwindled and his eyelids began to droop.

Much later -- Markis had no idea how much time had passed -- something woke him. His back was stiff, his neck sore, and the lamp had died completely. Outside, the wind had died, and he wondered what it was that had brought him from the fitful doze. There was a muttering from the opposite corner. Even in the darkness, he recognized his father's voice.

"... and take this pain from me. I have lived long enough. I have served you well, or tried to. Though I know you watch us, and we cannot hope to fathom your Will, there has to be a balance. Take me. But bless my son. Markis has always served you well. He does not deserve the wrongs that have been done to him. As you are our Prophet, take this evil and shape it with your Will. Restore my son to his rightful place."

The old man was praying. Markis, overhearing the words, understanding what his father was asking, was uncomfortable. Prayer should be a private thing.

He cleared his throat. "Guildmaster," he said.

There was silence.

"Guildmaster," he tried again.

The voice was hesitant when it finally came. "Yes, what is it?"

"I can't see as how you'd be doing any good wishin' harm upon yourself. What's there to gain by that, eh?"

Again the silence, then finally a response. "You cannot understand," said the old man.

"And how's that?" said Markis. "Don't you think we all have troubles? What do you think will be served if you simply give up? Look at my people. What do we do? We travel from place to place, trying to find work, trying to find enough to keep us going through the worst of the Seasons, and yet we go on."

There was a deep sigh from the other corner, then a cough that trailed off into silence. Finally, the old man spoke again. "I have wronged my son. Everything I've done is wrong. Had I listened to what was real, what my gut was telling me, then none of this would have happened. Too interested in the politics, in the intrigue. I saw betrayal at every instance, but there was nothing." A pause. "The only betrayal was right under my nose."

"And what of it?" said Markis.

"What of it? Because of what I've done, my eldest son is somewhere, I don't know where. I don't even know if he's still alive. The younger of the two has manipulated things in such a way that he will probably inherit the Guild. I can see nothing else. All of it was because I was so caught up in the changes that I couldn't see. And now. And now I cannot see at all. It's the Prophet's punishment. I don't deserve to live."

"And why should you deserve to die? Is not the Prophet benevolent? Doesn't his Will guide us?"

Aron Ka Vail gave a half-hearted chuckle. "You're the only one guiding me now."

"All right. What about your son, then?"

"What about him? It's funny. Your voice sort of reminds me of him. Even more to punish me by the Prophet's Will." He gave a low moan, and then subsided into silence again.

Fearing that the old man was truly in pain, Markis made to get to his feet, but the old man spoke.

"No, stay where you are. There's nothing you can do. I will die here this night."

"You will not," said Markis. "I may be naught more than a simple worker, but it seems pretty clear to me. You're boy's pretty important to you. I'm sure that he cares for you as well." He fought back what he was feeling, struggling to continue. Finally sure that he had his voice under control, he continued. "You won't be helping your son by lying here and dying. If you want to do something for him, the only way you're going to do that is by fighting against what's been done to you. Then you can help him, eh? Then you can help him. You won't do nothing for him lying dead in some hut in the middle of nowhere. Let us get to Darthan, and then we'll see, eh?"

There was a faint noise from the opposite corner, and then silence. Markis hoped, prayed that his words might be getting through to the old man. He could only wait until morning to see. Somehow, knowing his father over all the years, through countless struggles big and small, he thought there was a strong possibility. Silently, looking up into the darkness, he made his own, hesitant prayer to the Prophet. He didn't really know whether he'd be heard, but he thought it was worth the chance that he would.

Markis and his father had been traveling for a mere two days when they finally came upon the first signs of the camp. They must truly have been a pathetic sight; not one challenge did they receive as they approached, though they passed miners and Kallathik alike, clearly gearing up for some sort of battle. Markis led the old man, carefully, slowly. He was still weak, and as each day had passed, Aron Ka Vail seemed to be fading in strength.

As they neared the outskirts of where Markis thought the encampment proper must lie, he noticed a small cluster of men, standing off from a solitary figure huddled on the ground in front of them. He knew their dress, their colors. Men Darnak's livery and an old man with them, it could be nobody else. There was something not quite right about the scene. As they neared, the details became clearer and Markis felt his heart lurch with the first true sight of the old man hunched on the ground before them. Stained pale robes, torn in places, fell around an almost emaciated form. Straggly hair fell in clumped strands about an unkempt beard. The old man rocked back and forth, muttering to himself, drawing patterns in the mud with one hand. Occasionally the voice rose, the words becoming comprehensible, but there was little sense in them. It was Men Darnak, he knew, but the transformation...

"That is Principal Men Darnak's voice," Aron said. "Take me to him."

"Sir, we're heading that way, we are."

Aron Ka Vail grunted to himself, seemingly satisfied with the response.

Markis was in two minds. With his father's frailty, and the condition of Men Darnak, he didn't know what effect it might have, but for once he was thankful that his father could not see the full extent of the Principal's state.

"Principal Men Darnak," said Aron, as they neared.

The old man looked up, his face questing for the voice as if he didn't know who had spoken.

"Who is that? Is that Roge? Roge, what are you doing here? Have you come to join me?"

"Principal, it is I, Aron Ka Vail."

Men Darnak turned away. "Leave me, Roge. You have no place here, as I have no place. You should be gone. I know about you, about your lies. The storm told me. It told me everything. Everything." He continued rocking back and forth. "You, Karin, all my children. All of them."

Aron Ka Vail swiveled his head, trying to focus on the voice. "Principal? It is you, Leannis, isn't it?"

Men Darnak leaped to his feet. "Here!" He pounded at his chest. "It is the father, the man, the Principal." He swung his arms wide. "Every bit. Can you not see?"

Men Darnak's sudden aggressive stance prompted Markis to step hurriedly between them. Aron lifted a hand to feel in front of him, met Markis's arm and slowly ran his hand up to the shoulder. "Why are you standing there?" the Guildmaster asked. "Let me go to him. We need to talk."

"No, wait, please, Guildmaster."

"Guildmaster?" said Men Darnak. "What do you think? Do you think that action achieves its own reward? By

the Prophet, it is strange. The actions you perform run without control through your offspring. That's the way it works. It doesn't matter what you do. It doesn't matter. Your children take your message to existence." He threw back his head and laughed.

Markis looked to the other men standing nearby; a couple of them were watching interestedly, the rest had their attention elsewhere. There was no help or explanation to be had from that quarter.

Men Darnak had lowered his face and was peering at them again. "You," he pointed at Aron. "You, hiding there. Do you know where it comes from? Is it the evil that comes from a man, springs forth from his seed and runs through the world? Is that it? Where did my children come from? Where did yours come from? I know. I know. There is no answer there. I have looked you know." He took another step closer. "I have looked. The world is our child, our manifest destiny and the flesh that walks we put there through our actions. But what about the Prophet, hey? What about him? Where and why and how and when? It's justice, not will. Not will, not justice. They're sent to taunt us you know. Our children. Our children are our punishment. See, see here!" He pointed at Markis.

Markis drew his father back a step. "Come, Guildmaster. We should go."

Aron resisted the pull. "No," he said. "What has happened? Leannis, my old friend, what have they done to you?"

Just for an instant, Men Darnak stopped the wild swinging of his head, held himself steady, and fixed his gaze on the man who had spoken to him.

"This is justice," he said. "Can you not see this? Can you not see what happens when you bring these -- these things into the world? The Prophet? Ha! What is the Will of the Prophet, eh? Aron. I'm sorry. It's hard. You have to be patient with me. There is no order any more. That's what he said, what he used to say. That man. That priest. Maintaining the order of things leads to an ordered life. Empty words from an empty church. An empty life."

Men Darnak seemed to lose focus again, his gaze wandering away.

"Leannis," said Aron. "What can we do? How can we help?"

Men Darnak spun back. "Put a curse on all you have brought into this world, for they are tainted. Put a curse on them as they have cursed us." He laughed, throwing out his arms and tilting his face up to the sky. "We are worse than the beasts. Do you hear me? Prophet, where are you? Do you hear?"

Aron strained against Markis's restraining hand. "We must do something."

"What can we do, Sir? I be thinking that there's not so much we can do."

A shout came from nearby. Another group of men had just crested the hill to the right. They were dressed in livery that Markis did not recognize.

"There he is," said one, pointing down at them. They quickened their pace toward the group.

As they neared, another spoke. "We come from Tarlain Men Darnak with instructions to bring his father back with us."

The sound of his son's name brought Men Darnak upright. He stood straight, firm. "Tarlain?" he said. "Tarlain. Tarlain..." The words trailed off.

"Principal Men Darnak," said one of the men as they drew closer.

With a sudden laugh, the old man turned. The next instant he was dashing away across the valley, calling out behind him. "Tarlain, Tarlain, Tarlain!"

"Principal Men Darnak, wait!"

Both groups of men rushed after him, leaving Markis and Aron standing alone apart from two of the new group who had remained behind. Within moments, all the others had disappeared from view over an intervening rise. Their shouts could still be heard over the hills.

One of the other two men approached them shaking his head. "It's terrible to see what's happened to the old man," he said. "Who are you?"

"This be Guildmaster Aron Ka Vail," said Markis. "I am taking him to the camp of Tarlain Men Darnak."

The man nodded after a pause, taking in their appearance. It seemed that there was nothing that could surprise anyone any more. "The camp's back over that way," he said, gesturing back over his shoulder. "But you'd best be quick. They're getting ready to move. We should go after the others. Can you find your way?"

Markis nodded. The two remaining guildsmen headed off in the direction that Men Darnak had taken.

"What would you be wanting, Guildmaster?" said Markis.

Aron sighed deeply. "I thought to be able to find Leannis and offer him what little support I could. I fear the only thing that can help him now is the Prophet himself."

"So, what would you?" asked Markis again.

"Take me to the camp," said Aron. "Take me to the camp."

Markis took the Guildmaster's arm and started leading him in the direction that Tarlain's man had indicated.

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Markis led his father slowly into the camp. Somewhere he would find someone to look after the old man, and then, then when the time was right, he would reveal himself. That time was not yet though. As they moved through the clusters of men and Kallathik, preparing or simply standing around, he watched with interest. Everything he knew about the Kallathik made this sudden organization and focus surprising. What was it that had spurred them to such action?

Over to one side, he noticed some more men wearing the colors he now recognized as those belonging to Tarlain Men Darnak. These were not your classic Guildsmen. They were a rough collection of people, workers, miners, others, obviously pulled together under Tarlain's name for a single common purpose. In his current garb, he looked just as much a part of the motley collection. That Tarlain had the power to draw such a group together spoke of deep feeling running through the people, feeling he could have hardly imagined existed.

"I had no idea," he said to himself.

"What? Idea of what?" said Aron.

Markis realized he had voiced the thought aloud and he grimaced.

"Oh, it be nothing, Guildmaster," he said. "There's just so many of them."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there's Kallathik here, and lots of them, and miners and others. They must have come from miles around to be here."

The old man grunted, seemed to think about this for a moment, then nodded. He stopped and doubled as a series of coughs shook his frame. "Where are we going?" he asked, finally, when he had regained his breath.

"I am going to try and find Tarlain Men Darnak, Guildmaster. If he's here, he'll know what to do."

As they neared the group of Tarlain's men, they got little more than curious glances. Everyone was a stranger, except for those who had come here together in their own smaller groups, and they clustered in small gatherings all around the camp. A couple of Tarlain's men looked up as the pair approached.

"I am looking for Tarlain Men Darnak," said Markis.

One of the men nodded and pointed back behind him. "Try that tent over there."

He thanked the man and led his father over in that direction. Two men stood in front of the tent and they stepped in front to block their passage.

"Who are you?" asked one, looking Aron Ka Vail and Markis up and down suspiciously.

"This is Guildmaster Ka Vail," said Markis. "He has come to see Tarlain Men Darnak."

"Guildmaster?" said the other. "Well, we're honored, I'm sure. He doesn't look like any Guildmaster to me."

Markis sighed. "Is Tarlain Men Darnak here? We saw his father a few minutes ago. Nothing looks the same any more, does it?"

The man who had spoken looked dubious. It was clear he wasn't going to move. Markis restrained the urge to yell at the man get out of their way. He wasn't used to people refusing him. He was just about to start to reason with him, when a familiar face poked out from the tent behind them.

"What is this?" said Tarlain Men Darnak. He saw the two of them standing there and stepped fully out of the tent. "Guildmaster Ka Vail! What has happened?" He strode rapidly toward them, pushing past his men. The shock was evident on his face. He grasped the old man by the shoulders, looking carefully at his face.

"What have they done to you?" he said, the shock turning to anger. "Who has done this?"

He turned to Markis. "I know you," he said. "You're Markis. What has happened to your father? What have they done?"

"M-Markis?" Aron said haltingly, his sightless face turning toward him. He thrust out a hand, seeking support.

"Markis? No. It can't be..."

"Come," said Tarlain. "Come inside and tell me what's happened."

#

Tarlain sat at one end of the large tent, the others arrayed around the sides. They had sent for the Atavist woman healer -- her name was Alise -- to look at his father. She had done what little she could, but her expression had been grim. With her had appeared another surprise -- Sandon Yl Aris. For some reason, he was dressed in Tarlain's colors, and he now sported a neatly trimmed beard. He'd done something to his skin, as well. It was strangely dark. Whatever had happened to him in the intervening time had marked him in other ways too. A deep scar ran across one cheek and across his nose. Markis watched him with interest as the discussions proceeded. He had not expected to see the Principal's chief information man here, right in the midst of the Kallathik camp. Things were aligning in strange ways, in a fashion that he could barely have imagined. And then there was the Principal himself. What had happened to him? He put a cap on his speculations and turned his attention back to the discussions.

"So, we can presume that Ky Menin and Karin are working together. Wherever Karin is, then Yosset is bound to follow. How much support can you muster in Primary Production?" It was Tarlain speaking.

Aron shook his head. "Jarid is there. I can only think that he has enough to rally the rest of Primary Production. You know as well as I do that our Guild members have been strong traditionalists. They're bound to support the current order, no matter what shape that may be."

Another bout of coughing cut short anything else he was going to say. Markis made to rise, to go to his father, but the Atavist woman waved him down. She put an arm around the old man's shoulders, speaking to him quietly. He nodded slowly in response. Markis sat back down.

"Well, we have no choice," said Tarlain. "We must act quickly before they have a chance to prepare properly. There's nothing we can do now to make it any better. They won't expect everything we can throw at them."

"But what of the Church?" said Yl Aris.

"The Church is with us," said Tarlain. "Along with the Atavist community. With the miners and the Kallathik, we have more than they can possibly deal with. There are bound to be casualties, and I wish there was some peaceful way to resolve this, but we no longer have any choice. We've seen what they're prepared to do."

Markis was impressed with what he was seeing. Tarlain Men Darnak spoke with strength and authority. There was no hesitation in his words or his manner. Were it not for tradition, thought Markis, he would be a fitting figure to inherit the mantle of Principal. It was hardly the boy he remembered from the Principate gatherings he had attended over the years.

"So when, Tarlain?" said Yl Aris. "When do you plan to act?" Even Yl Aris was deferring to Tarlain's authority.

Any answer was cut short by a commotion outside the tent. All heads turned to face the noise. Two men burst through the tent flaps, dragging another between them. Tarlain stood.

"Edvin," he said. "Well, fate works in very strange ways. Hold him there."

Tarlain advanced on the man, a hard expression on his face. "Where did you find him?"

"He was found about three miles from here. He was carrying this." The man who spoke held up a sealed message tube.

"So, how is my darling sister?" said Tarlain. "And what is that? Is that a message for me?"

In response, Edvin tried to shake free of the grip of his captors. "I'm not telling you anything."

"Edvin?" Aron pushed himself to his feet. Alise rose with him, holding him with one hand, her other arm still around his shoulders.

Edvin seemed to notice the tent's other occupants for the first time. "Why aren't you dead, old man?" he spat. He pulled against the restraining hands. "They should have killed you while they had the chance."

Tarlain's arm flashed out, and he struck Edvin across the face with a resounding slap. "That's enough," he hissed.

Edvin drew back, glaring. He scanned the rest of the assembled faces. "You're all here, aren't you?" he said. "All of you. Yl Aris too. Every one of you will get what you deserve." He spat blood to one side.

Tarlain gestured to the man who was holding the message tube, never letting his gaze falter from Edvin's face. "So, let us see what little errand my sister has sent you on." He quickly broke the tube's seal and withdrew the paper contained inside. He only broke his gaze to look down and scan the message. When he looked up again, he gave a Edvin a slight smile.

"Well," he said. "It appears that Karin is acting just as always." He gave a brief, humorless laugh. He lifted the paper and waved it around. "This, my friends, is a message to Jarid Ka Vail."

Markis sat straighter, and his father let out a low hissing breath between his teeth.

Tarlain continued. "In it, she says that Yosset is becoming a liability to their plans. If Jarid deals with Clier, then he will earn his reward. And that reward ..." He paused. "Includes cementing their *relationship*."

Markis jumped to his feet. "How could he think that?" he said. "How could she think that Jarid would do such a thing?"

"Wait," said Aron Ka Vail, holding up a hand. "He can do it. He would do it."

Tarlain turned on the old man. "What do you mean?"

Aron hesitated, struggling with the words. "I have only shame for what I am about to tell you." He stopped, then started speaking again. "It was Jarid who was responsible for your brother's death."

Tarlain was across the intervening space in an instant. He had a handful of the old man's robes bunched in his hand. "What do you mean? Explain."

"Leave him!" yelled Markis, taking a step toward the two. Alise put a hand on Tarlain's shoulder, gently pushing him back.

Aron slowly shook his head. "I'm sorry Tarlain. May the Prophet forgive me, but I knew. Karryl Ky Menin came to the conclusion that Roge was too weak, that if he continued it would work against the Guilds. It was Jarid that arranged for Roge's 'accident' convincing him to travel in the groundcar. I don't know what he did to make it happen, but it was Jarid who did it."

"And you knew?" Tarlain said between gritted teeth.

The old man coughed again, saying nothing, just bowing his head. Tarlain turned away, an expression of disgust on his face. Markis sank slowly down to the ground. He stared across at his father, barely able to believe what he had just heard.

"Tarlain, if I might suggest..." Sandon had risen to his feet and was standing close to the young man.

"What is it, Yl Aris?"

"I think that this message may work in our favor, that we can use it to our advantage."

Tarlain frowned, still looking troubled. "How?"

"If the message were to be delivered to Yosset Clier, rather than Jarid as it was intended, might that not help us?"

"Yes, you're right. Of course you are!"

Tarlain turned away. He walked slowly to the rear of the tent, his head bowed. He stood before his chair for several moments, and then turned and sat, looking from one to other of the faces gathered about him.

"Sandon is right. We need to find a way to make sure this is delivered to Clier. As always, Yl Aris has teased apart the intricacies. Who can we send without suspicion?"

There was silence, broken only by a brief renewed struggle from Edwin. The men quickly subdued him, but not before he had spat out another curse. "You are lost, all of you. Do what you will. No one can get past the security, especially none of you. And even if you do, they know where your allegiances lie. You're finished."

Markis slowly rose to his feet again. "Wait," he said. "No one knows where I am. I can get to Yosset Clier. I can get there. Yosset would be bound to see me. Our links in Primary Production will let me through. If I know Jarid, he will have forgotten about me. Even if he hasn't, he would have discounted me. Dressed as I am, I should be able to get close enough to the estates to get through. What do you think?"

Tarlain stroked his chin and glanced at Yl Aris, who nodded. "Yes," said Tarlain. "It might work. We are about two days from the estates here. It will take us about that long to finalize our preparations. If you can deliver this message, then the division it would cause should feed into our timings well enough. Can you do it?"

"Yes," said Markis, finally feeling as if he could do something that was not entirely useless.

"So, perhaps the Ka Vail family can do something to redeem the situation," said Tarlain. "And as for you..." He drew the words out slowly. "*Guildmaster* Ka Vail. I will think about what to do with you later."

"Wait," said Markis, the words coming out laden with emotion, his hand balling into a fist. "Don't you think enough has been done to him?"

Tarlain whirled on him. "Has it? Has it? You think about that, Markis Ka Vail." Tarlain seemed to control himself with an effort. "Go," he said. "Do what has to be done." He spun to face the back of the tent.

Thirty-Five

Sandon squatted across the other side of the tent, watching the man who had once seemed so young, so ineffectual, wondering at the ways things changed. Most of the tent's other occupants had already left. Tarlain sat in the chair at the end, staring into space before him, rubbing a hand across his brow in a gesture deeply reminiscent of his father. He glanced across and caught Sandon watching him.

"Sandon," he said. "There are some things I have to say to you that are long overdue."

Sandon inclined his head and Tarlain continued.

"I was never very fond of you, but you probably know that. I could not see how you warranted the influence you held within the Principate and with my father. Certain things have happened over the past few weeks that have made me change my opinion. I have seen what you've done for my father, despite everything, despite what he did to you."

"It was only my duty," countered Sandon.

"No, but it was a duty that went beyond duty, Sandon. You have been completely faithful to that. I understand how beliefs can motivate you to do things, but what I've seen goes further than that."

"Tarlain, there is no need..."

"You're wrong, Yl Aris. There is a need. Despite everything, I want to thank you for what you've done for the old man. I understand now that everything you've done in the past, every subterfuge, every underhand manipulation, all of it was done in good faith in support of the Principal and his aims for the Guilds. It's taken me a long time to see that and I apologize that I did not see it sooner."

Sandon bit his lip. Tarlain looked away again, his gaze fixed in the middle distance.

A slight cough from the tent's entrance interrupted the moment. Alise stood just inside the tent flaps, waiting for their attention.

"Sandon," she said. "I think the old man is calm enough within himself to talk. Would you like me to bring him here?"

Tarlain stood. "Yes, Alise. Please."

A few minutes later, she led Leannis Men Darnak into the tent. He had been cleaned up a little. Fresh white robes hung from his skeletal frame. His hair hung lankly about his head, but it had been washed and combed. He looked confusedly about the tent's interior.

"Why do you take me to this place of death?" he asked, querulously.

"Father," said Tarlain, taking a step forward.

"Tarlain?" Men Darnak peered through the gloom.

"Yes, Father."

"Tarlain? Then I must be dead. I had a son called Tarlain, but he's gone."

"I am not gone, Father. I'm here."

The old man shook his head. "No, no. A long time ago. A long, long time ago. Let me look at his spirit." He took three stumbling steps forward and held out his arms. "You look like my son, but I have no children any more. They are all gone."

Sandon stood. "Principal," he said. "You are here with your son. We are all here. You have not yet passed from this life."

Men Darnak frowned. "Yl Aris? You too? But you are gone as well. Everyone is gone. This must be the afterlife. The Prophet has taken me." He looked around the tent. "Such a grim place for an afterlife don't you think?"

"This is no afterlife," said Tarlain. "Enough of this nonsense from the Church, Father. The priest's not here." He placed his hands on his father's shoulders. "You are here now. Here with us."

"And what of Kovaar?" said Men Darnak. "He must still be alive. That's why he's not here. Yes. We're dead and he's still alive." He frowned and nodded to himself, following his own chain of logic down whatever path it was taking.

"Kovaar is off across the camp talking to the Atavists, Principal." Sandon felt hollow, watching the man to whom he had devoted so much of his life reduced to this. He felt hollow and helpless. He could see the feeling echoed on Tarlain's face.

Men Darnak lifted a hesitant hand to his son's cheek. A tear spilled from one eye. "I'm sorry, Tarlain. I'm so sorry." His hand trembled as he slowly traced the shape of Tarlain's face. Then his attention was gone.

Tarlain turned away, his own eyes brimming with moisture. "Take him somewhere safe, Alise," he said quietly. "Make sure he's comfortable. Please ... please, look after him." His voice caught with the last request.

After Alise had withdrawn, leading the old man, Tarlain turned back to Sandon. "We have to make sure he's safe when we start. We can do that much at least."

Sandon returned Tarlain's imploring look, suddenly without any words. He felt powerless, powerless to do a thing, and that feeling gave him nothing but shame. He looked away, no longer able to meet the young man's gaze

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Tarlain scanned the hillsides and the surrounding landscape, looking down over the clustered Storm Season holdings of the Guild dignitaries. He swallowed, knowing what was about to happen, how much of this was against everything he'd been brought up to respect and honor. He had seen what the Kallathik could do. Was

this right? None of it was right any more. He'd seen what had happened to his father and now what they'd done to Aron Ka Vail too.

The Kallathik were motionless now, nothing to distinguish them from a line of carved totems, apart from the twin sets of spears they carried at the ready. Lines of wooden statues heralding the gray and windswept dawn. The breeze fluttered against his tunic. He could smell the rain in the air.

Off to the right, two hills away, stood the gaunt, robed figure of the priest, Witness Kovaar. At this distance, he could not make out the man's features, but the priest seemed to be in conversation with one of the Kallathik leaders. The creature's head was swiveled down attentively. Kovaar pointed across to one of the estates, then across to another. Tarlain turned his attention to the landscape in front. So, it had finally come to this. The Kallathik, the Church of the Prophet, the Atavists, the workers from the mines, all stood together, and there, below, lay the symbols of what they stood against. Over to the left stood the estates of Karryl Ky Menin, Guildmaster of the Technologists; further off in the distance, the estates of his sister, and her husband, Yosset Clier. Somewhere, out of sight from where he now stood, lay Welfare, and Primary Production. These lands were power, or at least the symbol of power. He glanced over at the horizon, where a pale orange-red glow marked the edge of the land. The Twins would rise soon and paint everything before them with the color of blood. He drew in a deep breath and held it. It would not only be The Twins that would mark the landscape with a bloody taint.

A flash of something from Ky Menin's estates drew his gaze, and reflexively, his grip tightened on the wooden shaft of the spear he was carrying. This was it. Even at this distance, he could see figures emerging from the buildings of Ky Menin's holdings. Apparently, Kovaar had noticed the motion too, for a triumphant cry issued from his position. The priest was waving his arms, gesticulating toward the emerging figures.

"Do something! Now!" he heard him scream. Still the Kallathik stood unmoving.

People below were running out from the Ky Menin estates. Tarlain glanced about himself. Surely, the idea was to catch the Guildsmen unawares. There was little hope of that now. Someone had clearly raised the alarm, because more figures were starting to emerge from the other estates. What the hell was he doing here, alone and exposed on an empty hillside? At least he could have positioned himself amongst the ranks of Kallathik warriors, but it was too late for that now.

Over on the other hill, Witness Kovaar was making a show of waving his arms, dashing halfway down the slope, then charging up again. As the wind swirled about, he could catch half-defined snatches of the priest's cries. It seemed to have absolutely no effect on the ranked Kallathik, who simply continued to stand as if they were carved from the very stuff of the hill itself.

Small knots of men were crossing the fields below, drawing ever nearer. They wore clearly visible Guild uniforms and carried various weapons. Tarlain frowned. These were Guildsmen of number. They were more than simple household staff, and there were far too many of them. This was not a population caught unawares. Somehow, the Guilds had been warned. They were all there, representatives of each of the Guilds, their uniforms separating them one from the other by color and cut. Even Welfare was there. Despite all their conversations, despite everything they had spoken of, the fine ideals, the recipes for change, Karnav Din Baltir had thrown in his lot with the rest of them. Tarlain worked his jaw and tightened his grip on the spear handle, trying to push away the feeling of betrayal. What else could Din Baltir have done?

Across the landscape, the deep ruddy orb of the Minor Twin crept above the horizon, a sliver of orange-yellow light marking the presence of its larger, brighter sibling. Shafts of light thrust across the plane, setting long copper shadows streaming from buildings and the approaching Guildsmen. Why weren't the Kallathik doing anything? What were they waiting for? Kovaar was still charging up and down the hillside in front of them, exhorting them to move, but they just stood there, seemingly unaffected by his performance.

The twin suns crept ever higher, then, as if at some strange signal, the wind stopped. The silence was so clear that Tarlain could hear his breath in his ears, his heart pounding in his chest. Everything was still. The men below were still too far away to hear anything from then. It was as if, in that moment, the entire world was holding its breath. Then, slowly, almost imperceptibly, a strange humming swelled from the Kallathik ranks, a deep moaning cry echoing in the pit of his abdomen and growing with every second.

Suddenly, without warning, a tall, pale robed figure broke from between the ranks of Kallathik and charged down the hill, a spear held high in one hand, the dirty white robes flapping around it, sleeves flying from its arms. Tarlain narrowed his eyes? The snowy mane was matted, tresses bunched together with muck. Some mad, old deluded Atavist, charging down the hillside to make his stand. Tarlain applauded the sentiment, but no, not now. They didn't need this. Someone cried out from a neighboring hill, but the Atavist ignored him.

Someone down below had seen the charging figure too, because he was pointing up the hillside and gesturing to his companions. A small knot of men broke off from the rest of the group and started jogging forward toward the hillside. Tarlain glanced over to where the priest stood. He had stopped his mad dash for the moment and was staring down at the charging Atavist. For an instant, it seemed that all eyes were on the sole figure running across the ground between them. Even the group of men jogging toward them had stopped their progress. One of them toward the front of the group had his arms out wide, halting the rest of his companions. Alone, robes flying, the old man bounded across the field, waving his spear. With a mighty heave, he threw it forward and released. The hard wooden shaft arced up and out, catching the ruddy light across its shining length. It sailed across the intervening space, to fall, skid across the grass and lie like a pointer on the ground. For a moment, there was silence. The old man slowly lowered his arms and let them hang limply by his sides.

"Principal Men Darnak!" called a voice from the hillside.

The old man looked around himself, trying to locate the source of the shout.

"Principal Men Darnak!"

Tarlain looked over. It was the priest shouting. And then, with sudden realization, he knew who it was down there and his guts went cold.

"Principal Men Darnak!" Witness Kovaar shouted again and started running down toward the solitary figure in the middle of the empty field.

A sudden shaft of light speared across the landscape. It came from the group of men below. The man in front, the one who had held back his companions, was holding something to his shoulder. The light drew a straight line from the thing he carried to the priest on the hillside. Witness Kovaar threw up his hands and crumpled to the ground in mid cry, tumbling forward to lie in an awkward heap.

Tarlain didn't understand what he had just seen. The priest lay where he was. Another shaft of light, and this time one of the Kallathik toppled where it stood. And suddenly Tarlain did understand. They had some sort of weapon down there, and they were using it to pick off the figures on the hillside.

"Father!" he cried.

Then, everything erupted. Without a sound, the waves of Kallathik broke their formation and charged down the hillside with their impossible speed, twin sets of spears whirling in their arms.

Tarlain barely noticed. His attention was fixed on the solitary old man, caught between the lines of Kallathik and men. He was standing there, looking confusedly around himself.

"Father, up here!" Tarlain shouted again.

Leannis Men Darnak seemed to come to himself. He turned and looked back up to where Tarlain stood, fixed to the spot, still calling. And then he started running.

Tarlain was vaguely aware of the line of charging Kallathik. It barely registered as one by one they toppled, holes appearing in their number as they made their rapid advance, soundless except for that deep eerie chant that still echoed within him. He barely noticed the flashes of searing light, impossible and bright in the dull light of the Storm Season suns. All he could see was his father, arms outstretched, running across the fields toward the hill, toward Tarlain, as if coming to greet him after a long absence. He took one step, two steps. Then the line of Kallathik obscured his father's position. For a moment, then another, the line of Kallathik blocked his view, and then it was clear. His father, Leannis Men Darnak, was gone.

"No!" shouted Tarlain.

He couldn't see him. What had happened?

One of the charging Kallathik had stopped. It turned slightly, lifted its spear arms and shook them. For a moment, Tarlain didn't comprehend what he was seeing, the white bundle held aloft by a set of twin spears, the sudden red stains swelling across the white. The Kallathik shook the object free, and then turned and charged off toward the knots of men before it, leaving a splayed figure tossed aside on the ground behind it. And then Tarlain knew and his mouth fell open.

This could not be happening.

"No," he breathed. "Father. Not you. Not now." The words shuddered from his throat.

All around him, down below, battle raged, but he could see none of it. All he could see was a lone, pathetic crumpled figure, stained and lying sprawled on an empty field.

One by one, the Kallathik fell, the lines broke, and the creatures started to retreat up the hillside. Groups of Guild functionaries followed, gradually increasing their pace. Over somewhere, out of sight for now, there were Atavists, and mineworkers and others, but Tarlain gave them no thought. He gave no thought to anything, but the solitary figure lying still on the empty field. It was all he saw as the Guildsmen reached his position and surrounded him.

Thirty-Six

Jarid slipped into the cool room and retrieved a bottle, then climbed the stairs, humming to himself. Using the stock of new weapons that Ky Menin had supplied, they'd beaten back the troublesome Kallathik easily. On top of that, they'd managed to take the youngest Men Darnak. It was much better than he could have expected. Strangely though, he felt little for their victory. It had been easy -- far too easy.

He fished around in a drawer, found an opener, then leaned back on one of the counters, lifting the bottle to his lips and took a healthy swallow. At least his father had always made sure that they were well supplied during Storm Season. He took another mouthful, and quickly caught himself as a dribble ran down his cheek and over his chin. Using the back of his arm, he wiped his chin dry. He took the next swallow with a touch more caution. Because his father laid so much importance on the preparations, he wouldn't have to do

anything else for the estates for months. It left time to concentrate on the important things.

The Prophet only knew where Markis might be. It didn't matter though. Markis had ceased to register as a threat for some time. Jarid was so close he could almost taste it now. Tilting the bottle up, he took another healthy swallow. All right, he had convinced Ky Menin that he was an obedient player in the Guildmaster's game, but that wasn't quite enough. He glanced around. All this was effectively his now. It was a start, but he wanted more. The only trouble was, if he was to play Ky Menin's game, he'd have to wait, and waiting was the hardest thing of all. How many years had he already spent? How many seasons waiting in his brother's shadow, biding his time? Well the time for waiting was nearly over.

On the other hand, there was Karin. Now that they'd taken the Men Darnak brat, Karin was the only one of the lineage who amounted to anything worth considering, and she was certainly worth the consideration. He rubbed his neck, thinking about her face, her body, the way her fingers lingered on his arm when she touched him, the deep looks that she gave him. There was little wonder she showed interest when she had to put up with what she had. How could a disgusting lump like Yosset Clier keep such a woman satisfied? She had to have had interests elsewhere. Ky Menin? No. Ky Menin didn't seem to be the type. The only thing he was in love with was his blessed power and his influence on the Principate.

He pushed himself from the counter and wandered into the living room swinging the bottle from his fingers as he walked. He'd have to make some changes here. The whole decoration was old and stuffy. Formal presence -- that was what his father had always been about. Well, not any more. But that would keep for later. It was a pity he'd not managed to catch up with the old man.

Taking another sip, he lowered the bottle and swung it back and forth, suspended merely by one finger of his right hand. Hmm, Karin Men Darnak. The problem was, that until everything had settled, until the lines of power and control had been re-established, he needed to rely on Yosset Clier for support. There was no way he could do that if he was caught interfering with his wife. Things might be changing, but there were still clear boundaries. It didn't remove the possibility; it just meant that he'd have to be more careful. He wasn't worried about her in that equation. Jarid was absolutely sure that she knew what she was doing.

He lifted the bottle for one last sip, and then held it in his lap, running one hand up against the cold, damp surface. He'd just have to be careful. That was all. And Jarid Ka Vail was always careful, wasn't he?

As for the Men Darnak boy, Yosset had said that he would be released once everything had settled down. There was no way in the world that Jarid was going to let that happen, no matter what Karin's odious little husband thought. The boy would always remain a threat, and the best way to deal with threats was to remove them completely. There was no word yet what had happened to the old Principal. And there was another problem. Who would really become Principal now?

Perhaps... no, the thought was unimaginable.

It might just pay to foster the relationship with Karin. If things worked out the way he wanted, if Yosset Clier was suddenly out of the way, there were possibilities. He half smiled to himself as he planted the bottle on the table and leaned back, lacing his fingers behind his neck. In a little while, he would go and question Tarlain Men Darnak, but not for a little while. There was plenty of time yet. Plenty of time to enjoy the victory and to shape the ones to come. Plenty of time to let the Men Darnak brat sweat, waiting for the inevitable. His position would do nothing to help him now. Nothing at all could help him now.

The darkness had drawn in by the time they arrived. Jarid was sitting, contemplating, not even having bothered to light lamps to chase away the gloom. He was still fumbling with a light when the man led Clier, Karin and Guildmaster Ky Menin into the room. At last, the light flooded through the room, revealing him standing there, watching them as they descended the stair.

"So, Jarid," said Clier. "It was a good victory. I think we have them under control for the moment. They will have withdrawn to assess, count their losses. It shouldn't take us much with the Guildmaster's new weapons to clean up the rest. What do you think?"

Jarid waved them in, looking smugly pleased with himself. The lingering look with which he graced Karin did not escape Clier's attention. All well and good. Let him have his little fantasies. There was a game to be played out here. Yosset looked around the room, checking for anything that might be of concern, noted the broad panoramic windows that he'd stared out of so often when meeting with Aron Ka Vail, gave a merest glance at the darkened landscapes outside, barely visible with the light within the living space, then returned his attention to the boy. Everything should be in place by now. He remembered those windows very well.

"We have agreed," said Clier, "that we are now in a position to be able to find out what we need to know about the opposition's movements. Guildmaster Ky Menin assures me that he has the means to do just that. If you would have your men release Tarlain Men Darnak to us, we can get on with it. Where are you holding him?"

Jarid crossed to the couch and flopped down on it, put his feet up and gave an insolent smirk. "I don't think that's going to happen," he said.

"What?" said Yosset, barely able to believe the boy's brashness.

"I have other plans for the Men Darnak boy."

Yosset stepped forward. "I don't think you understand your position, Jarid."

"Oh, I understand it well enough," Jarid countered, shooting a quick grin in Karin's direction. Yosset glanced at Karin's face, but she was betraying nothing. Meanwhile, Ky Menin stood in the background, simply watching.

Yosset nodded. He walked across the room to stare out the window into the darkness. He would play this to its conclusion, whether they thought they could manipulate him by bringing him here or not.

"Whether you like it or not, Jarid Ka Vail, you are a subordinate within the Guild of Primary Production. I hold the rank here. As long as your father or your brother still live, and we have no evidence to say otherwise, then you remain just that, a lesser functionary. I suggest you start to do what I say."

Jarid rose slowly and turned to face him. "And who are you?" he said, the sneer evident in his words. "Who are you, Yosset Clier? You don't even come from a named family. The only reason you have position is because of your links with the Men Darnak family, because of Karin."

"Jarid, no," she said from across the room.

"No," he said, swinging around to face her. "I will talk. This fool is like all the rest. It's not those most capable who get the positions within the Guilds, is it? It's all families and associations and positions of birth. Well damn it, no! Listen to what you're saying. You should know better than anyone. We can put up with his

self-important speeches for as long as we want, but it doesn't change anything. We all know what's happening here."

"And what is that?" said Yosset quietly, still not turning around.

Ky Menin suddenly loomed from the shadows to one side of the room. "Actually, Yosset, what Jarid is saying is right. We've been long overdue for a real change, and this is our opportunity. Let us seize this chance to drive our positions forward. If you can't deal with that, then I don't believe you deserve a place in what's to come."

Clier stared out the window, holding back his reply.

"In fact," continued Ky Menin. "I have decided that it makes more sense for Jarid to work together with me in the Guild of Technologists."

"Such a clear night," said Clier. He slid open one of the large windows, then moved to open another one.

"What are you doing, Yosset? Have you lost your senses?"

"Nights like this, after a good storm, everything is so clear." He turned to face them, a slight breeze from the window plucking at his clothes. "Don't you think?"

There was a frown on both Karin and Ky Menin's faces.

"What are you talking about, Clier," said the Guildmaster.

Yosset laughed. "You see, I don't believe Jarid can work with you at all, Ky Menin. I believe he has already promised his services to someone else."

Ky Menin tilted his head, an expression of puzzlement on his face. "What?"

Taking his time about it, Yosset reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. Carefully, unhurriedly, he opened it, read what was there and then looked up at Karin. For a moment or two, she looked puzzled, and then her eyes widened and she blanched.

"Where did you get that?" she said.

"Oh, I too have my means, my dear wife. You see, Karryl, written here, in Karin's own fair hand is her plan to have me dealt with, and then to form an alliance with young Jarid here, whatever form that alliance may take."

"Is that true?" said Ky Menin, taking a step forward, a thoughtful expression on his face. Yosset was surprised at how calm the Guildmaster seemed.

All the smugness had dropped from Jarid's face. "There's nothing you can do about it, Clier. Nothing." He took a step forward.

"Oh, but you're wrong, Jarid," Yosset replied. "As much as I have been devoted to my wife, as much as I have loved her and tried to please her in every way I could, it appears that was not enough. I had hoped that perhaps one day she would return those feelings, but I can see now that it was never going to happen. This time she's gone too far." Suddenly his voice adopted a hard edge. "This time you've both gone too far."

Jarid laughed. "It's too late for you, Clier," he said. "What are you going to do?" Taking another step, he

pulled something from his pocket.

Clier recognized it immediately as one of the small hand weapons. He knew just what it could do.

"Jarid, no!" said Karin.

Swallowing back his doubt -- he was committed now, committed to act for one of the first times in his long existence within the Guild hierarchy -- Yosset took a step back toward the open window. "Markis!" he called.

Out of the darkness behind him, a figure appeared. In one hand, he carried one of the Kallathik spears.

"Markis?" said Jarid. He frowned trying to make out the figure standing in the gloom.

"Don't you know me, Jarid?" said Markis. "You should know me now."

The weapon in Jarid's hand wavered.

"No, but you can't. Not now," he said between gritted teeth.

Slowly he swung to face his brother. "Didn't you learn the lesson before?" He took a step toward the window. "You always got in my way, Markis. You were always there to stop what I wanted. Not now! Not this time!"

He fired then, but the shot sailed out into the darkness. Karin flinched at the noise. Yosset swung to make sure that Markis Ka Vail was unscathed, and was just in time to see the older brother raise his arm and launch the spear. His teeth were bared. The shiny double-ended spear sailed unerringly, catching Jarid Ka Vail firmly in the chest. Jarid stumbled backward, dropping the weapon he carried, groping ineffectually at the hard wooden shaft protruding from his chest.

"No!" cried Karin.

"That's for Father, for the Guild, for everything," said Markis. He stepped into the room, fixed Karryl Ky Menin and Karin with a hard glare, and then stooped to retrieve the weapon that his brother had dropped.

Ky Menin looked about himself nervously.

"Markis, no," said Yosset. "We have better ways of dealing with them."

"You pathetic fool," said Ky Menin, taking a step closer to Karin. "Do you think with the resources at my disposal I would really let you do that?"

He suddenly whipped something out of his pocket, and throwing one arm around Karin, pressed it to her neck. Karin had told him about this device; Yosset knew exactly what it was. He stepped forward, holding up one hand. "Don't hurt her, Karryl," he said. "Don't hurt her." Despite everything, despite everything that had happened, he could not see her hurt.

Markis stood where he was, his brother lying dead at his feet, the weapon held in his hand, wavering.

"Don't, Markis," said Yosset. "Please."

"But -- "

"Listen to him, Markis," said Ky Menin, gradually maneuvering himself toward the open windows. Markis

slowly lowered his arm, all the rage apparently gone.

Ky Menin smiled, ducking his head slightly as he moved closer to the windows. "I think it's time for us to go," he said. "And once we've all calmed down, we will work out what we're going to do." He made one more smirking statement. "Think on it Yosset. Think about the Guilds." And with that, he backed out into the darkness, taking Karin with him.

Markis turned to look at Yosset with a pleading expression on his face, but he could do nothing more than stand there and slowly shake his head. Perhaps Ky Menin was right. Perhaps there *was* too much at stake here. They would need Technology in the months ahead.

Suddenly, in the darkness there was a cry, a cry of pain and horror. Both of them turned to the window in shock, just in time to see a huge shape rearing up right outside the windows. A Kallathik! And there were more of them beyond.

Yosset backed away from the opening, away from the huge scaled creature with its twin sets of spears, fixing him with its double-eyed gaze. He stumbled and nearly fell, throwing out a hand to catch himself on the edge of the couch. Markis just stood there, looking back at the creature impassively. Relaxing his fingers, he let the weapon drop to the floor.

"Markis!" said Yosset.

The Kallathik swiveled its head, seemed to take in the picture in the room, the two solitary figures standing there, the body on the floor, the spear protruding from its chest, and then it stopped.

For several moments, nothing stirred, nothing moved. Yosset barely dared breathe.

And just as suddenly, the creature was gone, back into the darkness.

Huge shapes flitted past the windows at impossible speeds, and Markis watched, and then he turned, stepped over his brother, moved to a chair, and sat.

Yosset, still shaken, glanced nervously out into the darkness then back at the older Ka Vail boy. "Markis, what is it? What should we do?"

"I suggest you sit down and wait until it's over," he said, staring down at the body in front of him. "There's nothing else we really can do now except wait."

Thirty-Seven

Sandon led Tarlain past the few bodies and fallen Kallathik that remained scattered across the Ka Vail grounds. He had known where to look. He'd found the boy -- no, young man -- in the very place he himself had been held, what seemed so many months ago. It was not that long, but it seemed it. It seemed somewhere way in the distant past. As they entered the house, Sandon watched him. Tarlain's grim expression grew even grimmer.

"So much waste," he said, shaking his head as they stepped inside. He took in Yosset Clier hunched in one corner, Jarid Ka Vail's body on the floor, and Markis, sitting staring blankly into space.

Sandon held back, allowing him the room. He could see echoes of his father's more thoughtful moments in the young man's expression.

Finally Tarlain turned. "So tell me, Sandon. Tell me how all this happened."

With those words, the other two looked up, waiting to hear what he was about to say. Sandon paused, considering, taking in the scene one more time, trying to judge exactly what had happened here.

"The Guilds didn't expect a night attack at all. They forgot, or simply didn't understand the capabilities of the Kallathik night vision. In the end, it was short work. There weren't too many casualties. We can thank the Prophet that it was mercifully quick."

"Good," said Tarlain with a heavy sigh. "We can be grateful for that much. There have been enough losses. Now, we have to work out how we are going to try and rebuild."

He looked around the room, looking as if he was trying to decide. Finally, he crossed to a chair, and sat heavily.

"There is more news, I fear," said Sandon, remaining where he was. "Your sister."

Tarlain looked up and simply nodded.

"She was caught by the first wave of Kallathik. Ky Menin was with her," Sandon continued. "They must have tried to fight."

There was a gasp from Clier and he buried his face in his hands.

"I'm sorry, Yosset. I understand your loss, but we have all lost in this terrible tragedy," said Tarlain. Sandon listened to the boy's words, his tone; there was a maturity there that he barely expected.

The Guildmaster made no response. He sat where he was, silent shudders running through his shoulders as he kept his face hidden in his hands.

Tarlain looked thoughtful. "Has there been any news of Din Baltir?" He said.

"No," said Sandon. "Nor I fear of your father. There's been no word of the Principal at all."

Tarlain looked down. "We lost him in that first battle. I saw it happen. It was quick. At least he is finally at peace now."

Sandon frowned and tilted his head, barely comprehending what Tarlain had just said. Men Darnak gone? No. It couldn't be true. There was a deep hollow opening up inside him. "Y-you're sure?" he said.

"Of course I'm sure, Yl Aris. I saw it. I saw it with my own eyes. Kovaar too. He was one of the first."

"Kovaar! May he rot," said Sandon, his teeth tightly closed.

"What?" said Tarlain, looking up. "What are you saying, Yl Aris?"

Sandon took a deep breath. "Alise told me. Kovaar had been trading with the Atavists for certain herbs, dealing mainly with her husband, Lothan. When I first described his condition to her, she knew of something similar, but had nothing to connect it. After our discussion, she took the trouble to discuss it with her husband,

who is also a healer. Of course, we have no proof of it now, but I believe that cursed priest may have been responsible for the Principal's deterioration. He was the only one with the opportunity, the reason, and he had the means."

Tarlain sat up straighter. "Why would he do that, Yl Aris?"

"You must realize that there were elements of the Church of the Prophet aligned with the Atavists. I witnessed one such meeting while I was traveling with them. Whatever they were doing, whatever the ultimate purpose, they were attempting to undermine the stability of the Guilds. What better way to achieve that than by targeting the Principal himself?"

Tarlain shook his head, rose and started pacing. "No, I find that hard to believe."

"Think about it, Tarlain. Kovaar was as hollow as the Church he claimed to represent, and there was always something not quite right about him. I watched the man. I even suspected that he knew who I was all the time I was traveling with them. What purpose could he have had in keeping that knowledge to himself if it was not for a further chance of instability, hoping that I was there to also cause some mischief for your father? I don't know what he would be thinking, but maybe he thought I was there to seek some sort of revenge."

Tarlain stopped his pacing and looked up slowly. "But you see plots wherever you look, Yl Aris. Don't you think you're taking this too far?"

Just for a moment, Sandon doubted what he was saying, but then he shook his head. "Why would I? Again, think. Think about how the Guilds operate. Think about how the Principate functions. All of it is subterfuge and positioning, has been for years. Your father taught me very well. To use an old expression, he taught me everything I know. You must recognize that. I see plots because they're there. Your father your father was the master." Sandon's breath caught. He pushed the rising emotion down, forcing himself to continue. "But what I really don't understand is the Kallathik. What interest could they have?"

Tarlain crossed back and resumed his seat. Clier slowly lifted his face from his hands and looked across at the young man, the marks of tears evident beneath his reddened eyes. The sudden interest touched Sandon's awareness, and he watched the Guildmaster as Tarlain started to explain.

"It took me some time to find out, but it's all about the *ajura*. It's that simple. The restrictions in Primary Production, the tariffs involved in the trade, the monopoly, all of them mounted up. The wood is sacred to them. They don't appear to perceive action and time in the same way we do. For years, they were prepared to wait it out, hoping that we'd eventually just go away, but finally they decided, collectively, to take action. It took a great deal of bargaining to restrict the action they were prepared to take. I have agreed to make sure that the trade restrictions are lifted, and that they have free access to what they need. The miners joining with us was the final proof of our faith. It was the only way they could be controlled."

Clier's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly, but he saw Sandon watching and looked quickly away.

"Once we had the miners on side, the rest was easy," Tarlain continued. "Not without cost, but easy. They had a common purpose in easing the conditions which the Guilds had imposed on them."

"Yes, it makes sense," said Sandon. "But the Church, the Atavists?"

Tarlain sighed. "It's all there in that blessed book you were carrying around Sandon. Return to simplicity. The Return all the time. That's what they wanted. It was belief. Misguided belief, but belief all the same. They saw how greedy and controlling the Guilds were becoming, and decided it had gone on too long. If they didn't act, there was a threat that Guilds such as the Technologists -- particularly the Technologists -- would impose their

way of life."

"And what of the Guild of Technologists?" asked Sandon. "With Ky Menin dead, how do we manage them?"

Yosset Clier cleared his throat. "There is more you should know, both of you. Ky Menin has been holding back technology, keeping it to a select few. These new weapons were a part of that. I'm sure there's more, much more. We can only suspect how much."

Sandon chewed at his lip. "That's not going to be easy. There's no clear line of succession within the Technologists. The same is true for some of the other Guilds too. If we are going to try and re-establish some sort of order among the Guildsmen, we are going to have to manage it carefully."

Clier nodded. "We are going to have to manage them all carefully. I can offer what support I can in the Guilds, within the Principate. At least I have an established position, and with Markis, we can build a block of influence. Those within Primary Production will fall to both of us working together."

Markis looked at the portly Guildmaster, held his gaze for a moment or two, and then took a deep breath.

"Yes," said Markis finally. "But what about my father?" There was a pleading look in his eyes.

"He is being cared for by the Atavist healers," said Sandon. "I don't expect him to be very active any more. It's going to be a long recovery, if he ever fully recovers."

Markis grimaced, but nodded his understanding.

"There is work still to do with the Atavists and the Kallathik," said Sandon.

"But we can do it, Tarlain," said Yosset.

Tarlain looked thoughtfully at his sister's husband, and then turned back to Sandon. "We have so much work yet to do. I'm going to need you more than ever, Yl Aris. I never thought I'd say it, but I think I understand that now," he said.

Sandon looked across at Yosset Clier. The Guildmaster returned the look, for once unflinchingly. Sandon finally broke the gaze. He looked back at Tarlain, saw the care etched in his tired face, the hints of his father's bearing already evident.

"Yes, I think you probably are," Sandon said quietly.

End