

Threadsinger

Threadsinger

Mary Jenkins

Threadsinger

©2025 Mary Jenkins
DRAFT v2.0

Written in novelwriter
Typeset in LibreOffice

Cover by Mary Jenkins, using reference from adorkastock

This book is a work of fiction, no animals are harmed in the making of this work, similarities to existing people or places is coincidental, no AI was used, etc.

Reproduction is allowed with common sense: don't release into the wild, and do not reproduce commercially. The author wishes that none of the text be used to train LLMs or other forms of AI, and if you ignore this warning that's why we can't have nice things.

Table of Contents

1. Forge.....	3
2. The City.....	19
3. Hunt and Hunted.....	31
4. Of My Blood.....	43
5. Foreigner.....	57
6. Small Places.....	63
7. Control.....	73
8. Two Men.....	93
9. Shackles.....	105
10. Possession.....	121
11. Loves.....	135
12. The Open Eye.....	153
13. Into the Blight.....	173
14. Fog.....	191
15. Homecoming.....	205
16. God.....	213
17. Flesh.....	227
Author Bio.....	239

1. Forge

A day of reprieve. One day where Sky had not had his flesh torn open or his mind ravaged by visions of violent chaos.

The creature had done everything imaginable to him. He'd not guessed that it would yet torture him with *nothing*.

It still held him completely immobile, as it always did. The creature's arms were wrapped around all his limbs, torso, and neck, and its tendrils were buried into his skin such that he was thoroughly attached to it. That day, it had left him alone only in that it was not actively hurting him. That whole day, for whatever reason, it did not move once, or if it did, it was so slight he could have discounted the movement as imagined.

For one whole day he had watched the sun climb and retreat with no rest apart from a stray cloud or breeze. The creature had long since taken down any nearby trees, leaving only half-rotted stumps and piles of gray ash behind. He was in the open, only safe from sun exposure when the creature's huge body cast its shadow over him, which it did only in the late afternoon.

He could not wipe away his sweat. His hair was oily masses in his face, and he could not move his head enough to keep his bangs from his eyes. The only free part of him was his face, his mouth. He could breathe well enough, though his tongue was so dry he only mouthed words when he felt the need to speak.

He begged forgiveness from Melrim for leaving her behind. He begged the creature to release him. He begged the

Talrish sun and the Leinan moon to strike the creature down, them and every house god he could think of. He even begged the moon goddess in the Talrish way.

He no longer begged for rescue from a hunting party. The only people who came near the creature had misshapen black welts on their faces, one above and below each eye. The creature's thralls. These ignored him, racing straight for the creature to plunge themselves into its body, to feed themselves to it.

Even from miles away the creature could devour everything.

That fate might have befallen him, too, had the creature not taken this strange interest in him. He didn't know what he had done to deserve its attention, but he could not decide which fate was worse.

I'm alive. It wants me for something. There is hope as long as I'm alive. I must learn what it wants and trick it into releasing me. He moved his wrist as far as he dared. This far and no farther, otherwise there would be pain. He had learned his limits well. *It wants me alive.*

Perhaps the creature thought him a toy, like a cat playing before killing its prey. Perhaps all this pain was his purpose. If so, there was no hope. There would never be hope.

He could not think like that.

The last streak of orange on the mountains faded against the sky's deepening indigo. He was growing cold. One whole day of nothing but him half-standing, naked, completely at this creature's mercy. Was this meant to be a day of rest for him? Would it run him harder the next day? What if....

What if no more would come? What if the creature had died in the night?

He yanked his wrist hard.

A lightning bolt of pain shot through to his shoulder. He screamed as he yanked again. Both arms, flailing. The pain reached his chest. He was nothing but pain. If the creature was

dead he would never be free unless he broke away. He had to get away now *now NOW!*

The creature's flesh moved at his neck. He sagged like a marionette dangling from a nail, held up only by the creature's attachments to him. He gasped, or tried to. It was all he could do to breathe. The creature lived; it had pacified him again.

Sky took ragged breaths through clenched teeth. This was his life now. This would never end. The creature would never allow him freedom.

The pain took an hour to fade. He breathed slowly and sweat trickled down his sides. The creature was most inactive at night. He should have waited longer before attempting something like that. A full moon was rising. He could wait until it reached its zenith before trying again, or halfway down again to be certain. Perhaps the creature wasn't dead, but maybe it was dying. Yes, he would try again on the last watch of the night.

He was so cold. Cold, but not hungry, though his mouth was dry. He had been held captive weeks, more than long enough to die of thirst. The creature kept him fed and watered somehow, or at least trained his body to ignore those needs. Perhaps he was starving so badly he could no longer feel hunger.

He clenched and unclenched his fists. He could move that much. That movement made the creature's feelers on his arms pull on his skin.

Was that always where those tendrils had been on his arm? Had the monster's grip slipped during his struggle? Could he escape if he thrashed hard enough, often enough?

Or is that hope a new kind of torture?

It didn't matter. He would wait until the last watch of the night and try again. He shut his eyes and sighed.

He was vaguely aware of thick, slow movement at his back. Pressure at his neck. His scalp.

His face felt heavy. Something was wrong. His skin prickled where the creature touched him. He felt warm. Too warm.

He wrenched his eyes open to a wilderness cast in the light of a breaking dawn.

No! NO! I fell asleep?

I was put to sleep!

He pulled his arms forward but they were unnaturally stiff. The creature's feelers were at his neck so thickly he could not move his head. Was it pacifying him again? No, he wasn't paralyzed completely. This was something else. His limbs didn't respond to him correctly, like he was carrying weights through mud.

The creature's grip around his body was more oppressive than it had ever been. More limbs, more feelers, more pin-pricks of needles where the creature inserted more fingers. Punishment for last night's attempt?

Or was yesterday's reprieve the creature waiting, gathering its resources? Would the torture be worse from here?

Fire ripped through his back.

He didn't have the voice to scream. He was falling, collapsing, smothered by every pain he had experienced compressed into a single moment, a single point of light. His senses were empty. There was no sky, no earth, no hands or eyes or arms or ears, just an infinite agony. He was a nothingness full of pain and he was still falling.

He fell down, down... until he hit the center of a deep, dark abyss.

There was a breath of stunned calm, then a rhythm like a heartbeat that suffused him.

The emptiness persisted. This wasn't oblivion. He lived, but....

His awareness scurried forward, finding nothing. He reached outward with his hands—he could move freely at least—sensing nothing. His sense of space was wrong.

Where am I? What is this?

His voice rang into the void like waves of golden light, echoing back to him and through him. His voice was all that was left of him, his voice and whatever that rhythm was. That

rhythm was golden, too, and almost melodious, a golden flute song he could almost understand. It escaped his attention when he tried to listen for the pulses individually, but it meant he was still alive. It was an anchor he could hold onto to keep his sanity.

Sanity? The creature had driven him mad.

The pain was a distant distortion, present but muffled and abstract, yet threatening to hunt him and obliterate him at any moment. He was aware of it but was not affected by it as long as he could keep that golden music going. He hummed the rhythm to himself.

What happened to me?

His thoughts moved again as waves of gold light. Those words overlapped the golden music, bringing out new and complex harmonies. This surprised him and did not surprise him.

I need to get away from here.

He moved his hands outward again, fluidly, too many of them. He had a dozen hands, two dozen... but he could not move his center. He reached out again, not knowing what he was expecting to find. He tried to open his eyes but nothing happened.

The great pain found him. It struck him, spearing him to his center. He cried out with dissonant golden notes. It was his arm, he could feel his arm outside in the place where the pain lanced him, razor hot pain drawing down in five lines from his fingers to his chest. His body was being torn in half. He screamed and his own voice was knives in his ears. He flexed and relaxed his hand madly—the hand the creature had smothered with its feelers, he had two hands—but every movement he made sent hot ripples into his void-without-senses.

He dove back into the void, the place deep inside himself where the pain could be defeated. There was emptiness and the persistent golden music. The wall of pain crept inward. He reached out with his whole self, his dozens of nameless limbs, and pressed against that wall.

On his hands, his eyes opened.

Sounds, sights, tastes, shapes—sensations flooded him like a monsoon after a drought. It was utter chaos, a multicolored deluge of nonsense images and music. He saw tastes and heard colors, a breathless entropy.

The chaos would drown him. He pressed against it harder.

He was golden lines of light, and as his hands moved they trailed music that started to converge. It was hard to make sense of so much overlapping noise, but his shape-sense broadened to match. He began to understand.

He could taste thick, branching rivers, thumping and shuddering to some quick, rolling rhythm. Sparkling trees made of salt and lightning. Bundled ropes of fiber that spread and tightened moment to moment. Ribbons of something slick that gripped some things and encased others. Enormous, rigid structures with gaps he could crawl into to trace on the inside. He was building a complex shape-sense as his hands sped through the void—not a void any longer.

He was hundreds of eyes and hands. Thousands. He couldn't fathom how he could move so many limbs at once and understand what they perceived, but his music grew more eager the more he tasted and listened.

Everything he touched was made up of smaller and smaller shapes, and then he suddenly perceived a hidden uniformity. Nearly everything was made of tiny cells, each breathing and containing still smaller shapes. Some tastes were so subtle he could only sense where they were coming and going, but he felt the cells breathing and sharing tastes with each other. How many were there?

There was a pleased silver rumble. It made Sky's music dance.

What had that silver been? It hadn't come from what he was tasting.

The wall of pain ebbed. Reluctantly he brought his attention back to his real body, finding dull aches and a fading, prickling heat. He opened his eyes—his two eyes, his real

eyes. The world, the real world, was so flat that he shuddered. Color alone... color and such flat shapes as to almost be unimportant. But the creature was not torturing him any longer. He took a deep breath.

His inward visions had not ceased, they were just not in his full attention at the moment. *Mad. I've gone mad.* His thoughts rippled through his back as golden music. *Mad!* he declared.

He had thought the creature had devoured his right arm again. It had done so once before, and the sensations had been similar. Yet he held it up in front of him and balled his hand into a fist.

His music flared with delight. Movement! The movement changed all the shapes he perceived so deliciously that he did it again. Flex, relax.

He was lost in the tastes of change—*large movements become small tastes!*—racing through his body on the inside, using lines of golden light to taste everything.

He was tasting his body *on the inside*, muscle, bone, blood, all through his hand and partway up his arm. He held his hand out under the sun, awed at the depths he could touch and taste, all invisibly to his old senses. His shape-sense was more perfect than his eyes.

He pushed those inner eyes out through the surface of his skin, into the air. It was uncomfortable to move them without something for them to hold, but even outside, they could taste small shapes. The air was not empty after all. When he brought those lines together into a ribbon, he could almost see something glinting in the sun. He brought his hand as close as the creature allowed. There was something substantial there. Colorless but glossy. He was disappointed it wasn't gold-colored.

He withdrew his golden senses and turned them inward on themselves. They were physical structures as real as the cells in his body, each a single thread of light lined with tiny feelers and hooks that let them move. He tasted them tasting each

other. These threads were numberless inside his hand. They were not made of light as such, but it took light to move them. Gold ripples moved through his music when they darted about.

The threads attached to a large thread-like something, though one without feelers. A larger thread... a cord? Longer still than threads, these converged like veins, growing thicker the further toward his torso he traveled. His threads could reach quite far, but it was easier to use new threads to pick up the trail further along as he went.

He traced the cord until he reached... himself. The core of his thread awareness. It was a large organ of a radically different design than the rest of his body, bursting with golden light, humming and trembling when he touched it.

His core was an organ inside the deepness of his back.

He could not cleanly perceive inside it, but he could perceive its edges. The center of his thread-consciousness was a rounded sub-organ, behind which came thousands of cords, woven together in a tight band. The back end of this mass curled back over itself into a knotted center. The cord he had traced up his arm came into the sub-organ on the other side, the smooth side. That side had a few threads to move, the threads he had moved when he had first been brought here.

This was not a human organ. These were not human senses.

He shuddered under the creature's limbs and he let out his breath slowly. The creature was not torturing him today, not directly, but instead it was doing... this. Why? What would it gain?

The creature rushed its limbs to his other arm, and it tore into him. Pain again, pain like the first time, but... lessened. His thread-self rose to meet the pain at once. He gave a slow gasp as the pain turned into another wave of raw sensation. His deepness shivered in delight as his senses were multiplied.

Newborn threads raced through his left hand, delighted. Symmetry, delicious symmetry. Bones, muscles, tastes! Sinew

and blood! His cells moved and breathed and lived and died and he perceived it all. He flew down both his hands in unison, and his shape-sense of his left hand grew to match that of his right. He stretched out his fingers and moved them over invisible harp strings. Glorious!

For the first time he perceived the silver threads working. It was the creature, spinning new threads out of silver light, shaping them out of the cords in his arm. He chased a silver thread but could not catch it. As amazing as his threads were, the creature's were grander. Something about their musky tastes were immediately attractive to him. He had to taste them properly. He sent threads into the creature's flesh where it was buried into his, but silver music drew them away, and the idea slipped out of his mind.

He should be more afraid of what was happening to him. His awareness was broad enough now that the silver undercurrent in his thread-mind could no longer be hidden from him, though it was indistinct. Golden threads filled his body up to his shoulders now.

The silver voice had been the creature's voice. The monster. It had been torturing him! The creature was evil, and he should distrust everything it did.

It's seducing me.

The creature moved from underneath him, drawing one of its long arms forward until it was in front of him. Its hand was a flower-like mass of feelers, and inside it held a large brown jackrabbit. The animal took short quick breaths; it was alive. The creature lifted its hand toward him as if offering the jackrabbit to him.

His hands reached for the jackrabbit and he touched it.

Why did I—

Tastes flooded him. There was a primal urgency to his music now. The animal was *different* from him and he needed to *taste everything*.

The deep tastes of the animal's cells were all uniform, but entirely different to his. The cells' wrappings had a different

taste. The muscles and fur, the organs, the things the jackrabbit had been eating—all different. He memorized everything. Threads burrowed into one of the cells' deeper patterns to drink it in. His outside senses were nothing. He was only thread and ecstatic golden music.

One cell he drew aside, and a few threads pulled it into his hand. Other threads wrapped it gently with the music he was singing, the shapes he had memorized and was still tasting. Before long he was done. A delightful golden shimmer rolled through his back as he drew the packaged cell up to his arm, where it attached to a structure split from the main cord. It pulsed there, finished. Collected.

There was a moment of stillness. He was floating at the top of an arc, and then he was shooting down, falling faster until he was blind to all thought but one.

Mine!

His threads ravaged the animal.

He devoured it, drinking in each cell he touched, turning some into light, and turning others into matter he made part of his body or drew into his cords for later use. The animal was still alive and its heart beat underneath his fingers until his fingers pressed against it directly and drank it into stillness. Fur turned to ash in his hands. Someone was laughing. It was his voice.

His hands closed around nothing; the jackrabbit was gone, bones and all. When he opened his hands a dull, tasteless powder fell from his fingers. He was still laughing. Gold heat pulsed through his body.

His eyes locked to the horizon. Beyond the clearing, a forest. And beyond that, and beyond that, life and endless life. He reached his hands forward as if to touch the forest from afar. He struggled to free himself from the creature's grasp so he could taste more, drink more. He could not bear having life in front of him going so untasted.

The creature's threads moved through his back, singing sweetly to him. His desire calmed but sat smoldering inside him, threatening to flare if fed.

Sky could not help but feel the creature was pleased with him. And he was pleased it was pleased.

I'm losing who I am.

With effort he tore his eyes away from the forest and down to his hands. They were shaking. His hands looked human, even if he could see them with blinding complexity from the inside.

A sound drew his attention. One of the half-dead stumps had collapsed inward on itself. Gray dust rose in curling rivulets from its center. He wished he had been able to taste it before the creature had destroyed it.

It's making me into a monster. Making me feed the way it does. Making me want...

He clenched his fists and coiled his threads until their hunger grew muted. The creature was spinning new threads in his torso, his hips. Threads would soon fill his whole body, and the creature wouldn't stop until he was a monster, too.

"You can't have me, you bastard!" he roared. "My name is Tabyz Sky, and I'm human! I'm human!"

He coiled his newborn threads as soon as they came under his control. He suffocated his music, but he would not entertain this false ecstasy, these perverted desires.

"My name is Tabyz Sky and you will never—ohh!"

The creature had revealed a mink and offered it to him. Even coiled, his threads were focused sharply on the animal, which wriggled in fits as if it knew its fate. He wanted nothing more than to explore it and drink it. Holding his hands back was the hardest thing Sky had ever done in his life. His deepness quivered in despair, wanting it.

"No, never! Never!"

The creature drew the animal closer to him. Sky clenched his hands tightly but could not bear to look away. The mink had black spots around its face, one above and below each

eye, and it looked all the more delicious for it. Those spots around its eyes marked it as belonging to him. Its only purpose was to feed him. It was an undeniable truth in his music.

“My name is Tabyz Sky and I’m human! My name is—”

His voice caught. His chest wouldn’t move. He couldn’t breathe.

The creature had paralyzed his lungs, but just his lungs. He scrambled at his chest with his hands. Threads from his fingers darted inside his ribs, flailing for a way to unstop his breathing. What had the creature done?

He clenched his eyes and rolled his music, turning everything toward releasing what the creature had locked. Threads from his torso uncoiled and darted around his ribcage. He did not know these tissues well. He had to learn quickly, but he could taste his blood growing old. His cells were beginning to slow already. Air, he needed air! His cells were crying, he could taste them wanting to breathe. The more he moved about, the more quickly they died. This was too quickly! It had only been moments since he last drew breath!

The light in his deepness flickered. His flow of light had been stopped, too, and he hadn’t noticed until his threads could only jerk about. He was dying, all of him. He flung out his arms—

And the creature’s hands met his. Their threads bled into each other and Sky drank.

The creature’s offering enriched his body. Freshness and sugars poured into his blood and light into his cords. He drank and drank. His threads grew more certain. He wrapped his fingers tightly around the creature’s hands.

His larger body could not breathe, but his inner self took in huge gulps as if gasping. All of life was thread. He was thread. Thread was more important than breath. Light was more important than food. Threadsong was everything.

The creature sang to him and his threads emerged from his skin to breathe the air. His human body was powerless, had

always been powerless. New threads crept down his thighs to his knees. He was being reborn, being granted a great gift.

I never stood a chance once it touched me.

He relaxed against the creature's grip. It smoothed away his fears, chemically shaping his will. He was being sculpted by a great artist, and he was no longer afraid.

I see you doing that, he sang. It was not an accusation, but an observation. Knowing it was happening did not stop it from working.

The creature released his diaphragm and he took a deep, contented breath. Its voice worked alongside his now, and they both spun more threads down to his toes. The silver threads were elegant and worked more quickly and efficiently than his. His copied motions were clumsy but growing faster the more he practiced.

When Sky withdrew his hands from the creature's, he noticed that the bones in his fingers—his hands, down to his arms—were no longer bones. Instead they were banks of flat fibers. He tugged at them and his fingers grew longer. He could sculpt his larger body, too. Gold laughter rippled through his threads to his deepness and he smiled. He shaped his fingers into sharp points as if they were scythes, then back into human fingers.

"I'm human," he muttered, staring at his hands. "My name is Tabyz Sky." He still needed to say those words, but he no longer believed they mattered.

When the creature offered the mink again, Sky drank it with glee. He extracted a second harvested cell, and bundled it close but not too close to the first. Then he drank the mink until it was dust. A snake was accepted in the same manner. He took great joy comparing the three once harvested. His understanding of them grew exponentially with each new offering. A grasshopper. A spider mite. The differences were profound. He never wanted it to stop.

"I'm human," he said, but all that remained human was his head. The creature's limbs were thick there, and they covered

his face. He breathed with his skin while the creature worked. Something special was happening now. Something final.

Reem, I'm sorry. I will never see you again.

Reem.

Reem!

Heat through his head. He remembered Melrim in the garden at her father's party, the only one who came to comfort him when he was most alone. His hand in hers.

He thought of her in those priestess robes, breaking down for the first time he'd ever seen, confessing that she wanted to leave, wanted to be with him.

I should have gone back sooner. Reem, this is all my fault. I'm sorry. Reem...

The heat swept through his head down his neck.

"My name is Tabyz Sky. I'm—"

Her face winked out from his mind.

Reem!

He tried to open his eyes, but he had no eyes. His face... instead of his eyes there were round sensory patches, and one above and below his not-eyes to make six in all. He found his eyes at last, buried deeper under the skin of his flattened face, but they didn't matter as much as those six spots, thick with threads and cords of an odd quality. They were readying themselves for something.

He had just lost something vital. What had it been?

He opened his mouth but could not remember how to make sounds with his lips and his throat. There had been something, a word that marked him as separate from others. He had lost it!

He rolled his head around, seeking the space above the horizon, that big broad space with the single bright, hot light—he had no eyes, but could still see the warmth of it—but he had to see properly. He fought his two central spots down and brought his eyes to the surface with thread. That big blue space above him was more important than anything else now.

Heat flitted across his spots as he sang, *I've lost everything—I'm lost—help me—* His words were music now, music alone. Wasn't there another voice with him before? A silver broadness, godlike....

Something still held his torso fast, but he could feel the something lifting itself tall behind him. It turned him around to face it, holding it away from him. His threads were rebuffed when he sang for relief through its flesh. What was it, and why wouldn't it listen to him?

The something had a face with six black spots that mirrored his. When those spots came alight, the voice of God enveloped him.

CHANGE YOURSELF—REACH ME—

He stilled. His four spots—then six—burst with heat in response.

Yes—yes—!

God held him, God was here for him, had created him, and all he had to do was bring their spots together. There was an emptiness in his deepness that he was desperate to fill and then he would be complete. Under his spots, those special cords readied themselves.

He stretched his torso higher, his neck longer. He would reach his face to God's, but the light it took to sculpt himself....

Through the hazy heat-vision of his face, he could see six circles growing cold and hot in soft patterns to summon him. God's face was within reach of him.

He touched God's face with his fingers, and he spread them and folded them so he touched all six with equal pressure. The cords in his fingertips opened.

Not enough! The cords in his fingers offered the wrong kind of connection, and God would not sing to him. So close! He needed different cords, like the ones between his facial spots and his deepness.

Inside his hands, he destroyed his cords.

He built them back up as he went, carving them up and remaking them down his arms starting at his fingers. His deepness thrashed for the pain, but he needed to bridge the gap to God's lights more than he needed to live.

He felt God watch him closely through his fingertips, listening to his music but offering no aid. It gave him no hint that he was doing the right thing. He made a loud noise with his mouth. He was running out of light.

He made it as far up as his shoulders before his music flickered faintly. Threads in his feet dove into the ground only to find dust. All he had was his own body.

Threads sped through his fatty layers, stealing matter to make into light. It seemed the kind of thing that should work, and it did. There was less waste the more he worked. He learned by doing.

He did not need to destroy much muscle before he had enough. He finished his converted cords with one final thrust.

The voice of God rushed into him through his fingers.

They were linked so perfectly they were a single organism. One voice, one body, one will. He was suffused with the light of a great, infinite continuity, the one true consciousness in the universe.

YOU ARE MINE—

God pressed him against its body. He clung to it as if drowning.

God had traveled here from unnumbered worlds in the sky, seeking him and his world.

His body was fed and he drank deeply. He had thought his music was finished but God still gave him more music to sing.

YOU WILL WORK FOR ME—YOU WILL TRAVEL—FILL YOURSELF UP—THEN YOU WILL RETURN TO ME—

Yes—! he sang. His whole body sang in unison, every thread. *I will serve you forever—*

He held the creature tightly as the great fire in the sky sank behind the horizon.

2. The City

TWO YEARS LATER

Ked woke when the sunlight spilled over the edge of the hills to the east.

He had been facing the crest of dawn light, sleeping with all six spots showing. When sunfire touched his face he rolled forward like a cat, drinking sunfire with his face and the threads on his bare arms. His gold music was purposeful. Potent.

Light—drink—more—drink—

He was sprawled on a tile roof of some lord's manor, deep in a wooded grove on the side of a hill. There he had privacy for his nightly thread work and a view of dawn over the hills not shrouded by forest or tower. He would steal every second of dawn light he could.

He had been hunting the lord himself the previous night, but had decided against taking the man after eavesdropping for a few hours. The lord was an administrator, and not very bright; the man's mind would not serve him. The lord's general staff had been no better, caring only about Galluma's overwrought decorum and rituals, and knowing no interesting trades.

Ked was at a crossroads, and needed a mind that would inform where he should Wander next. The gambler had thought this lord was knowledgeable of the politics of the neighboring nations, but it had been knowledge of the wrong sort. Ked needed a merchant, not a farmer, valet, or politician.

Someone who knew trade routes and roads, and preferably someone who spoke multiple languages.

An urgent silver buzz flicked into the edges of his music, warping even his simplest harmonies. He would have to hunt someone by the end of the day, whether he found anyone more suitable or not.

Perched on the other end of the roof were a dozen birds, common pigeons, puffed fat in the frost. They edged away from him when he rose to his haunches, but they did not flee. He kept them in sight as he spread his arms to bask, moving slowly to not startle them, weighing whether they would be worth the effort to catch.

His light stores had been slim the last few days due to recent spying in the wooded paths leading into the city, and so he took extra time to bask properly, baring all six spots and stripping down to nothing on the roof. His human half was alert within moments, but his threadsinger half was thirsty and would need time to rouse.

Soaking in the dawn was invigorating. Intoxicating. Hot, pleasant sunfire trickled down his cords to his deepness, where vibrant music overflowed up and down his back. It softened the prickling silver a little. Would that he could bask all day and banish it further.

When the pigeons began to stretch and preen themselves, he donned his clothes, shirt and shoes and all. The manor bustled with noise now, and he didn't dare linger on the roof or try any acrobatics catching the birds at this point. Bad enough he spent the night there and basked naked, all while he was not entirely out of sight of the road into the city. He should have left in the night, but his hungers were strong enough now that he wanted his light stores full to help him keep control.

His current disguise was pale—most humans were quite pale this far west—with freckles and short, curly red hair. Ked closed his cuffs, singing his distaste for the long sleeves, and buried his spots under the skin of his face. Then he dropped into the shadow behind the manor.

He landed without a sound, then crept past the manicured topiaries toward the main road. Not a soul had seen him since yesterday, and only then because he had decided to be seen. Today he would try to evade the staff because he had devoured all of their chickens the day before and had stolen forty gold eru from the lord's personal treasury. His current shape was not known to them, and it was known to no one in this part of Galluma for miles up the coast. He would be marked as the culprit instantly if he were seen.

Ked slowed when he caught sight of the stables. He paused, his head pulled to the doorway as if on a lead. He had seen the lord himself ride in from the city on a giant of a horse last night, but dusk had fallen before the stable hands had left the horses alone, so he had lost his opportunity to investigate. Now, though... his music burred with shimmering noise until he diverted his path to take a look at them.

Horse smells, and horse tastes over his buried spots. Mundane. Still, he pulled his fingers over the dust and straw at the threshold. Yes, there was something interesting here.

Three horses stood in their stalls, and they eyed Ked as he approached them. He smiled and exhaled something they would like, breathing it toward them as he came closer to the first one. It was interested enough in him that it allowed him to handle its muzzle.

Different—different—drink—

Ked stole a cell to wrap and grabbed as many tastes as he could. The animal was larger than any other horse he'd touched, and he dove into its cell pattern greedily, half ready to resolve it into the cluster of horse cell prints right then. These show-warhorses were only bred to look intimidating, and that meant odd heavy spots in the cell pattern that he enjoyed finding. His music sparkled and danced as he worked.

Yet the horse was only slightly novel. Only a little larger, a little heavier. A new maternal line, yes, but nothing revelatory. The delicious differences poured into his song as dazzling harmonics, but the complexity was brief. The cell print cluster for

horses, sitting just under his left clavicle, resonated strongly. Too strongly. The new cell print would not be challenging to resolve with the rest.

Deepness gnashing, he spread his threads more thickly, skirting the skin of the horse's mouth on the inside, racing further along its fur on the outside, seeking parasites, small wounds with tiny infections, or anything else that might be truly novel to him. Nothing.

He reached for the second horse instead, which peeked its head over the top of its stall, but its maternal line was the same. Already he could scarcely taste anything interesting. Yet still he stood, sending threads deeper, music hungry for anything new to bring with him. There had to be something else. He took a cell print anyway, even though he knew it would contribute nothing when he resolved it with the others.

He stroked the animal's neck, then its shoulder. How long had he been here in the stables? *Too long. This gambler's mind is making me impulsive. There is no hoard to be won here. I should go.*

He touched his hand to the muzzle of the third horse for a quick thrust of thread—disappointment, again—as a shadow darkened the doorway.

“Hey! Who are—?”

Ked leapt for the man and grabbed his face in his palm, spinning to slam him against the door frame. The man, a sandy-blond youth, scrambled for Ked's arm. Ked injected a quick, mild sedative, and lightly interfaced with his brain, thrumming a song he knew would darken the last few moments of memory.

The stable hand's arms sank and his muffled protests became indistinct moaning. The young man dropped when Ked removed his hand.

If he was alone, I'm fine. If not, I'll need to be bold.

Ked ducked out onto the path to the main road, glancing from left to right. A trio of high officials wearing long black coats were making their way quickly toward him, only a

stone's throw away, wearing those ridiculous flat hats and the decorative silver swords the court believed made them look impressive. One pointed at him.

"Halt!"

Ked stared at them, eyes wide, making sure they got a good look at his curly hair and youthful face, then he fled.

"Stop, thief! Catch him!"

Ked raced down the gravel path to the main road then ducked behind a wagon, pulling up the hood on his cloak. The men were certain to chase him now, and Ked would not go too far out of sight until he hit the first cluster of people, the morning market in the first town outlying the city. He glanced back regularly, ensuring they were following—they were six, now, the three nobles and three blue-uniformed policemen—then dodged between handcarts and horse-drawn wagons.

He could easily outrun them all if he wanted; he could run from dawn to dusk without growing winded, provided he were in direct sunlight. But the lord was vindictive and the Galuman police relentless, and he didn't want to make sport of them today. His crimes at the manor were severe enough that the whole peninsula would have a warrant for his arrest within the hour. Best to end the trail cleanly and abandon his old shape early.

Sometimes the only way to hide is not to hide, as the gambler used to say.

After several minutes, he found a decent-sized crowd on the road and fell beside a handcart as if tripping.

While in the cart's shadow, he rushed his threads through his hair to darken it and straighten out his tight curls. He made it a hand span longer as well, thinning it so it was apparent it wasn't a wig thrown on quickly. He flexed at the structural fibers that formed his skull until he had high, taut cheekbones, almost comically protruding. Threads sped over his chin and cheeks, tickling hair follicles until he had two weeks' worth of a salt-and-pepper beard and mustache. He drew extra pigment

into his eyes to darken their color, then drooped his ears and the end of his nose.

It was expensive to do such quick work while in shadow, and he had to supplement his light with matter from his body. That slimness contributed to the disguise, but the itching silver gnawed harder inside his deepness. He would pay for these theatrics this afternoon, while he was hunting. Unfortunate.

When the woman accompanying the handcart saw him stumbling, she reached for him. "Grandfather, let me help you up. Are you well?"

He lengthened his back but kept it hunched as he took her hand, moving slowly as if in pain. He put gravel into his voice. "Stumbled a bit, that's all. Thank you kindly, child. Bless you." As he smiled, he stretched slack the skin around his eyes to make them crease.

The gambler would take on behaviors or use colloquialisms to disguise his age or identity when he crawled pubs he had been banished from, and so Ked had a wide gamut of reflexive responses at his disposal, at least while he was so tightly interfaced with the gambler's mindcast. It was one reason Ked had hunted the man; he had been impressive even without the ability to change his shape. This old man affect came effortlessly.

"Bless you," he said again, then turned away from her.

He trudged ahead purposefully, slightly ahead of the pace of the people around him. He may have been wearing the same clothes as before, but they were common enough not to be incriminating now that his face had changed. He dirtied his shirt as he went, dissolving stitching in the collar and yellowing it to make it look years worn. His cuffs were loose before, but now they were taut and short on his arms.

A hand grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. It was one of the officers in blue, tall and thin with tight auburn curls under his tall policeman's hat. He ripped Ked's hood down.

"Halt, you thief, you—" The officer stopped, dumbfounded.

Ked stood taller as if straining against the pains of forty years of hard labor. He was now half a head taller than the man who had seized him. "Officer, please, peace be to you, you gave me a start. If I offended, please, I beg—"

"No, never mind, grandfather." The officer released Ked's hood and grumbled as he turned away.

"Peace to you," said Ked with half a bow.

Ked moved forward with the throng, catching a pair of voices before they were lost in the murmurs of the crowd.

"Lost him. His cloak looked the same, but it's not him."

"We'll have sketches passed around. We'll catch him."

Ked left his hood down so he could drink sunfire on his face and walked as tall as an old man might walk, catching direct sunlight only when it sliced through the rows of buildings. Even here, in this town on the outskirts of the city, the buildings were several stories tall.

He found himself walking uphill toward a tower on a hill, a bad sign.

I am still in control of my hungers, but I need direction. A vantage point, he reasoned. The gambler had not spent a lot of time in the city—the punishment for petty thievery and gambling was strict in Wustor proper compared with the outskirts—and so the gambler could offer Ked no further leads.

But Ked had come to the city in the first place because there was nowhere else to go. Galluma hugged the coast, and beyond was endless ocean to the west, and impassable reaches to the north. To the south was ocean, too, though at least there were archipelagos, but Ked could hardly Wander on his own two feet through a stretch of islands.

No, he was cut off from further Wandering. It was just as well. His collection of mindcasts was nearly at capacity, and he found less and less to feed his cell print banks. A new yearning had crept into his song one or two weeks before, growing stronger the closer to the coast he had come.

It was time to return home to his master.

But his hungers still had to be managed, and he did not know how to convince them to retrace two years of his Wandering before he could find relief. He had not taken a direct path the first time, but the thought of even six months of Wandering through old lands made his deepness twist.

I've two years of skill now, and time left to spare before I become frenzied. My master would not have made me to self-destruct when I hit the end of the continent. There must be some way forward for me.

Everyone was going to market, and no one was coming up the hill to the old watchtower, so he moved off the path, then scrambled up a steep hill to the next rung of the spiraling road to the disused tower.

While in the bushes he dropped the old man disguise, though more slowly than he had gained it, as he did not have the light to do it faster. His skin grew taut and youthful, and he reabsorbed the beard and mustache. He kept his hair long and dark but thickened it to make it easier for threads to skim to drink sunfire. Having seen plenty of well-tanned people on the road that morning, he was comfortable darkening his skin, though not to its natural shade. It was easier to drink sunfire with the threads in his arms when his skin was darker. He devoured plants and ferns with his hands as he climbed, gentling the cost of this work.

The tower was empty, so Ked had privacy climbing the spiral stairs. As he walked, he touched the stone wall with a hand and gripped with thread in case a step crumbled underneath him. His gold music strained under growing silver pressure; his recent effort had inflamed his Wanderlust. He was encased entirely in shadow, and he coiled the threads he was not using to silence their protests.

Sunfire struck his hair and he sighed with relief. He climbed the last few steps and crossed the platform to the center where onlookers would not notice him, loosening his sleeves so his arms could drink, too. For the second time that day, he let his sensory spots rise to the surface of his face,

another bad sign, though he kept his human eyes. Sunfire pooled behind his spots and poured into the deepness of his back.

The sunfire he gathered with random threads was a light rain compared to the river flood he could drink with his spots, a pleasure he did not allow himself often. The threads under his spots fluttered with such delight that his spots tingled brightly from the heat of it. He would bask until his song regained its full strength, even if it took until the afternoon.

It's not so bad to hunt in the afternoon. The days are growing shorter again, but there will be plenty of light for me to explore the new mind even if I hunt late. And there's no mountains to hide the sun from me at dusk. I'll have as late a sunset as is possible.

The urgency in his back calmed as he drank. A quarter hour passed. Then another.

I'm rationalizing my behavior to myself too much. I'm more thirsty than I think I am. I must keep my light strong and proceed carefully.

He stood to consider the view, which was much better than it had been from the lord's roof. The peninsula was spread before him plainly here, including palaces and parks, huge paved roads and clusters of towers in pastel colors. The scale of it was truly staggering.

The city, people called it. Not Wustor, the city's real name, but the city. They caressed the word, elevated it like they did the title of the emperor. Oh, I'm off to go into the city to buy salt. Let's all go visit the summer festival in the city. Oh, that poet in the city...

The gambler had always thought Wustor was self-important to have given itself such a title, as if there were no other cities in Galluma, or as if it were the center of the world and all other nations cowered in the majesty of its shadow.

But from where Ked stood, he understood. Wustor easily dwarfed any city he had ever seen. The buildings never stopped, and when they could no longer spread outward, they

crept taller instead. Six stories. Eight. Ten. Thick as grass in a field. How could so many people live in such crowded buildings? The logistics of food and water distribution must have been exceptional to support all this.

It was a shame he could not afford to hunt an architect or a civil engineer this time. His master would have loved to learn more about all this.

The city, indeed. Wustor did not house the emperor's seat, but it was still the crown jewel of Galluma.

Yet, larger still was the ocean, which pressed against Wustor, crowding it like it did the edges of his mind. This vantage offered a better view of the ocean than he had seen yet, but even now he was reluctant to confront it.

I need to know what I'm up against, and I'm running out of excuses to avoid it.

Ked took a deep breath and stared straight west, into the sea.

The expanse of flat nothingness pushed against his music like a physical barrier. To his shape-sense, that empty horizon was perverse. No landmarks, no pockets of fertility or human habitation, just a blankness that could not be conquered, could not be Wandered. It marked the end of his purpose, and he was penned in by it.

The ocean would challenge him like nothing he had yet faced, and he wouldn't have to touch it for it to defeat him.

Water. Why did it have to be water?

He buried his spots and stood at the edge of the platform, leaning carefully until he caught something of interest at the southern edge of the peninsula. White sails—ships—drifted off the coast and dotted the edge of an industrial district. There, the shipping district, would be his next hunting grounds. A merchant sailor would give him the information he needed to plot his next destination, be it island or coast. And if the ocean was to be his foe, then a sailor would be a logical weapon.

At the back of his neck, a pocket of emptiness throbbed at him, pulling his thoughts toward the thrill of a new hunt. The gambler's mindcast was as small as he could make it and was ready for long-term storage, and had been for at least a day. He still clutched it with his interfacing cords, but it was growing slippery. He no longer wanted to hold it open. The instant he had a second mind in his neck he would dismiss it. He was more than ready.

To the pier. To the hunt.

3. Hunt and Hunted

Ked went shirtless in the shipping district because he could.

He was still wearing his tanned, black-haired disguise, which was not at all strange in the crowd in the market square. Here were people from nations he hadn't crossed in a year or more. Most were travelers, wearing strange wools or linens, and with bags covered in the dust of strange places. Some went without shirts, and some went only in loincloths. The latter was rare enough he decided it was better he didn't mimic the look, though he was tempted.

The variety of human races pleased him, and he made a game of guessing where someone was from before "accidentally" brushing their arm to grab a quick taste.

It aroused him, too, as the hunt always did. His body was a taut bowstring, and his music a constant droning that made him glide across the market square like a leaf floating on water. His Wanderlust and his hunger for mindcasts sharpened his music, and left his mind intensely alert. The emptiness at the back of his skull was heavy and insistent.

His eyes hardly glanced past someone before he had a detailed plan of how to seduce them, how to trick them away from the crowd into some dark corner before he would clutch their mind and drink them in. He could take any of them. He would have taken all of them if he could store more than one fresh mind in his head at a time.

Interfacing cords in his fingertips readied with ripples of golden heat. He had to be intentional with his choice, but still

he reveled in the hunt, drunk on the power flowing in circles in the deepness of his back. He never felt more alive than he did at these times.

Mind—drink—hunt—mind—take—

Reluctantly he dampened the fire flowing through his music, coiling his threads against his interfacing cords so he could reason out his target. His fingertips itched.

He'd been desperate too many times for him to have not learned the cost of a poor choice, particularly in such an important moment of his life. If he chose wrong, he could not choose again for two or three days. A few moments of intense pleasure would mean two or three days of suffering, or worse, loss of control over his mind.

And he did not dare nest in a city of this size. There were simply too many people, and even if most became thralls, the rest would fight back. Even he would not survive something like that.

An entourage of red-clad monks crossed his path. One man's skin was so pale he might have been an albino, although with shaven heads it was difficult to say. The sheer novelty of it almost drove him to take the man right then, in front of everyone.

His threadsong glowed so much he wondered if anyone could see the heat of his six buried sensory spots through his skin.

I need to cool off.

Ked tore himself away from the crowd and trotted toward the water, leaning on the gambler's mind to keep his thoughts to human concerns. That mindcast had become distasteful to use in its old age, but he briefly submerged himself in it so he could concentrate.

He had to travel far, so he would consider a sailor with employment on a long-distance trading ship. He would look for a crew that wasn't Galluman, or that was only partially Galluman. The more foreign they looked, the farther they would be traveling in trade.

But the idea of being trapped on a boat for weeks strangled his excitement. How was he supposed to survive when he needed to hunt every three days? He needed something more moderate than that. A ship that traded with neighboring nations?

No, he didn't know what he wanted. That's why he had to hunt a sailor, so he could be informed enough to weigh his options.

He rubbed his fingertips on his palms, letting his interfacing cords open and shut as he drew his fingers back and forth. The gambler's insight seemed sound enough. *Look for foreigners, but weigh all options.*

At each pier, he looked up and down at the size of the ship, the types of cargo, and the shades and shapes of people loading and unloading them. He took a mindprint of each sight, a second or two of memory, marking them with tastes associated with the cargo he'd seen and a cell print from those in his stores that he judged most resembled the crew physically. He would walk the shipyard its entire length and collect a mindprint from each ship before he made his decision.

Pity the gambler didn't know anything about sailing, or he'd be able to narrow these choices down from the start.

The final ship took Ked by surprise, or at least, the crew did. They did not go shirtless like the previous ship's crew did, but these men had very dark skins, just about as dark as his natural shape.

It was not just their skins. It was their height, the way their hair lay, their proportions. They looked like him. He almost never used his natural shape, but he knew it intimately. He knew it better than he knew anything else.

His music quickened as he let them draw him closer, thirsty to taste one of them. He had a few cell prints from people like this; they were the first he had ever collected. The cell print cluster containing those samples sparkled at his left elbow.

They're from where I came from?

A new hope bubbled into his mind: what if this ship could take him straight to his master?

How long would that journey take? Months? Weeks? It would be hellish, but it would be direct.

Entranced, he drifted forward, music pulsing at him to take one of the men who so looked like him. He didn't notice the guards until they had him by the arms and were dragging him away.

"This area is off limits," one snapped at him. Customs officials or dock policemen, at a guess. One mulled over a clipboard, and the others bore swords—real, functional swords. "Talnans or port officials only."

Ked only protested briefly. He straightened his shirt when they released him. "Talnans?" he said.

One soldier pointed vaguely at the ship. "The men from Talris."

"The other ships aren't so guarded."

"The Talnans are not to be approached, by order of the port authority, until their country has been legally recognized by the Emperor as suitable for public trade."

Private trade is all right, then, is it?

He squinted at the foreigner's ship. They were doing business the same as everyone else. Although... the few Talnans that were further down the pier were all accompanied by a soldier. Were they being guarded or chaperoned?

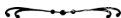
I can't approach one of the Talnans to get a taste.

Well, that simplified his next course of action. He needed to hunt someone who understood the politics of the port authority. Or, if he impersonated one of the guards, then he'd be able to get close enough to one of the foreigners to harvest a cell print.

No, he had to stick to his original plan. He needed to hunt a sailor, because he needed to know if he could survive a trip at sea. It didn't matter if the Talnans were kin of his body, because he would destroy the ship in a fit of frenzied madness if the ship went too long between ports.

As appealing as those Talnans were, he had to be rational. Every one of these ships was destined for far-off nations, and not a one for local waters or neighboring lands. He needed to hunt elsewhere.

He strode swiftly back to the market to hunt a fisherman.



The actual problem was getting someone alone.

The crowds were thick, and every corner held some food stall, some shop, some table spread with fish and mussels under a canopy. There was no alley or alcove free of people.

Ked stood equidistant between the small-boat fishing docks and the marketplace, indecisive. His music buzzed so tightly it was a high-pitched whine. The thrill of the hunt was within reach of him, but he didn't want to submerge himself in that pleasure until he had committed to a target.

His hungers were fierce, and his forward path would be difficult no matter what he chose. He had been on the cusp of losing control all day. Thus, he would grant himself permission to choose someone easy to hunt.

The market.

He strolled casually past fish stalls as merchants shouted to draw market-goers. But he wanted a fisherman, not a fishmonger. Gold music suffused him thickly as he watched workers roll carts full of sardines and pollock into place.

Someone multilingual. Someone who sails. Both if possible. But if I had to choose....

Everyone around him spoke Southern Galluman fairly well. He did catch discourse in other languages, but it was the shops, not the suppliers, performing that discourse. That meant language would be a secondary concern.

Anyways, if he was to return to that Talnan ship then it didn't matter how multilingual his target was. No one here

could speak the language of Talris, but the Talnans would surely speak some Southern if they were doing business here.

He caught himself sharply. *Stop thinking about that ship!*

One quiet man, perhaps in his mid thirties, had just finished unloading. Ked had overheard him using two languages, Southern and another he didn't recognize. But he was speaking with the fishmonger about recent sailing weather. He had just come off the water.

Ked's music pooled tightly in his back until it was a single point of glossy glittering gold, burning hot enough to be white. It rang through his body as a pure tone. His every thread was aligned with that man, was pointed at him.

You're mine— he sang.

He followed his target as he left the market and headed inland. There would be quieter places in the city than there were in the market. More alleys, more empty rooms, more shadows. He would get the man alone for certain. His fingertips burned with anticipation.

He was dimly aware that this hunt had stolen his reason, that he would be acting purely with instinct and need. But he had chosen his target well. He no longer needed reason. Desire moved his body eagerly forward.

Mind—drink—taste—

Ked watched patiently as the man picked up a kebab from a stall in the shadow of an apartment tower, and followed as he meandered up cobble streets between other apartments and indoor shops. The fisherman had a destination in mind. Maybe he was going home.

There was no crowd here, maybe half a dozen people in sight in all, but still Ked closed the distance. If his victim noticed him following so closely, he would make some excuse about how he reminded him of someone, or some other reason—his mind was a blur, he didn't care, he just had to stay close, he had to reach him and touch him.

The fisherman did spot him following a few times, but Ked shuffled his facial features in between each glance, and so the

fisherman did not panic. Ked, in his eagerness, did not begrudge the light this took to accomplish. This is why he had basked so long, after all.

The man ducked into an alley at a dead run.

Ked bounded after him, enraged.

He knows! He knows!

He was on the fisherman's heels, and they both tore through dirty alleys and over an open sewer. They passed pedestrians but no one followed them. No one could outrun Ked. No one!

You're mine—mine—

Ked leapt on top of the man and injected a paralyzing agent, a subtle one. The man gasped for breath as Ked dragged him into the shadow of a building between alleys and behind a rain barrel.

No one else had seen this happen. He could finish the hunt here and now.

Ked's music was a blinding crescendo, and his six sensory spots rose to the surface and flared with heat. His spots could see nothing but the fire of his joy, his bliss. His song coalesced into a single resonant chord.

Ked found the will to ask, "How?" as he spread his fingers flat on the fisherman's face above his eyes and over his scalp.

"Your clothes..." the fisherman gasped, "never changed."

His fingertips opened, and he arched his back as he melted into the fisherman's mind.

Tastes, thoughts, lives, sights, sounds... it all came upon him in a flood through his vibrating fingers. Ecstasy! Pure joy! His purpose was fulfilled, as it had been hundreds of times before.

Hauling nets, hunting mussels underwater, slicing his hand with a scaling knife, a leg infected from a thorn underwater, one love, two, the storm where he lost his brother, wind and salt... every moment of this man's life—Yaomin's life—landed in Ked's mind, compounding into a shape he could control. He had dominion over it, and he clenched those

thoughts and memories tight until they filled the emptiness in the back of his skull. Fullness at last. A desire sated.

Blissful fire raced through his fingertips up his arms to the back of his neck down to his deepness and up again.

Ked breathed with ragged gasps, sagging over his prey as salt drenched his body. The fisherman shook, partially from the drug Ked had used, and partially out of fear for what would come next.

“Who are you?” Yaomin breathed.

Ked laughed out loud as his spots flared. He pressed his body flat against the fisherman’s, weaving threads past clothing to drink the fisherman’s body and draw it into his.

He was starving, he needed food, light. This man belonged to him now. He learned the shape of the fisherman’s body intimately as it dissolved into him, and he drank even the bones down to nothing.

His whole body rang and he laughed with his voice and his spots. Even in the shadow, his threadsong glowed with light and power. He took cell prints, several of them. These cell prints were special, paired with the matching mindprint, and they were wrapped with many-fold more tastes and impressions. From this, could mimic the body down to the cell if he had to.

Mine— his music rang.

He pulled himself upright, hoping he had not ruined the fisherman’s clothing too much. He stood and shook the shirt free of thread-ash, the remnants of what he had not been able to drink. The fisherman’s shape was hot in his mind, and his body was liquid.

He changed himself.

He became broader of shoulder and paler-skinned. His fingers grew thicker and shorter. A day’s worth of stubble crept outward on his cheeks. He even replaced scars, one along his foot where the thorn had pierced him and rotted his skin, another on the palm of his hand. Teeth, freckles, moles, eye-lashes, everything.

A great calm trickled down his back as the last of his bones fell into place. Glorious. He was powerful, full of light and purpose. The fisherman's guise was his now, another tool to spy for his master. Another mind for his collection. This was what he had been born to do.

He was donning the shirt when a clatter down the alley cut through his euphoria.

Someone slipped around a corner.

Ked abandoned the rest of the clothes and leapt toward the witness, burying his spots. As he rounded the same corner, he caught a glance of two young men dashing toward the shore, toward an open road.

NO!

As singularly focused as his music had been during his hunt, it was all the more focused now on catching the humans before they could sound an alarm.

There were to never be witnesses of his hunts. Never!

He flew forward as if shot from a bow, and he met them in five heartbeats. He yanked the arm of one, pumping him full of poison and throwing him to the street where his head cracked against the cobbles. The second he tripped mere strides before he would have made it out into the open. His hand wrapped around the human's neck, and threads shot into his spine and numbed his body into paralysis.

His buried spots burned as he dragged the second man deeper into shadow. *Never witnesses! Never!*

He had hunted while he was too desperate. He should have hunted sooner, he should have brought the fisherman into a more private place, he should have....

Too late for any of that. The youth's eyes were glassy as Ked pressed his hands onto his scalp and interfaced with him. He did not take another mindcast—he couldn't, not so soon—but he did scour the man's recent memory. What had he seen?

He and his two friends had crept into their favorite smoking alley when they saw Ked kneeling over the fisherman.

They saw... everything. It had been too long and the sight too violent for Ked to wipe their short-term memory.

They must both die.

Both? There had been *three* of them!

Ked rose and turned just as a third man thrust a knife into his chest.

Ked's music shattered, his light fragmenting into screeching dissonance and random color and noise. His spots rose to the surface and screamed, then fell dark. He could not see, could not taste. His shape-sense was a deafening chaos.

The human half of him clenched his teeth in a snarl and gripped the man's shoulders. He did not know how to speak, so he groaned vaguely as he slumped against his attacker.

He was dying. A human had killed him. A human!

The human mumbled something, then the knife was yanked out of him. Thread reached for thread... and he came back together. The metal barrier was gone. His light rebounded with frothing hatred.

His spots burst with heat and he clenched his hands on his attacker's face, shooting it full of his fastest-acting poison.

The man crumpled. Ked collapsed on top of him, coughing and wheezing.

He had almost died. Might yet be dying. Threads sped along his deepness, tracing the edges of his core, trembling as he tried to put his weave back together. Such pain! He had not been in such pain since... since before he was born. His threadsong was scattered but the rhythm was still there, his pure gold self, and he strained until the rough edges were smoothed.

If he had not been so full of light when he was stabbed....

His threadsong was whole again. He raced threads around his core, seeking more places to repair.

He touched his mindcast collection and cried out aloud.

His mindcast stores had been scattered. Decimated. Dozens of hunts, ruined, wasted. Most were fine, but he was shaking. He could not tell how many had been destroyed.

His human flesh was whole already, healed involuntarily by the threads in his torso. But his torn viscera was nothing compared to the damage to his collection. It mattered more than his life.

Were there any further witnesses?

He drank in the blood that had soaked into his clothes and he pulled himself up on his hands and knees. The alley was abandoned, but would he bet his life on that?

I can't play in the fisherman's shape. I don't dare.

When he donned a new disguise, he lived the life of his victim for about a day. This made it easier to hide the evidence of his hunt and to find excuses to justify a trip away, which made less of a disturbance when the victim “disappeared.” But, like now, there were times he had to make a cleaner cut.

He checked each of the three witnesses, and ensured they were dead.

I need to leave Wustor immediately.

He was shifting his skin back to his tan, long-haired disguise before he decided he best not use a shape he had yet used in Galluma at all. He felt for his mindcast stores, seeking a recent cell print that would not be too much out of place, and cringed when he moved threads past mindcasts that were scabbed and distorted. Everything was raw.

It would have to be an amalgam shape. The long-haired disguise was a decent template to start from, but he would tweak his face as he went. He started by lightening his eyes.

He had always thought of himself as invincible. Now his only thought was to get home to his master as quickly as possible before anything else happened to him.

I cannot die yet. I must deliver my collection.

He crept out of the alley, face serene as if nothing had happened. No one gave him a second glance, even the soldier standing a few stalls down. Jewelry, herbs, perfumes, and bolts of cloth—he considered each stall as if it interested him, as if they weren't all dead things, useless. As if he wasn't guz-

zling sunfire with his hands and his face and his hair, as if he hadn't just fought for his life.

His thoughts turned straight to the ship of foreigners, the ship from Talris. Dangerous or not, he would try getting onto that ship. With his worsening hungers, he could not trust himself to take the slow way back home.

He made his way toward the pier.

4. Of My Blood

As Ked walked, he extracted the eru hidden in the fatty tissue and sinew inside his belly, and palmed them to slip into his coin purse. He might need all forty to pay for passage.

The ocean was less frightening to him with the fisherman's mind in his grasp, but it was still foreboding. And the fisherman did not know much about these long-distance traders, much less anything about Talris.

How is it that humans cannot properly judge each other? Damn them. Was this hunt a waste, after all of that?

He might be able to pay for the voyage, but how to bypass the guards? *Talnans and port officials only*, the officer had said. Well, what if he arrived wearing his natural dark-skinned shape?

He had never worn his real shape around others. The moments he had spent in his natural skin had been brief, and in deep wilderness. But the guards would not question another Talnan returning to the ship, or at least they would question him less.

Yes, better to be questioned because he, as one of the foreigner's crew, had escaped their chaperones than to be questioned because he, as a Galluman citizen, was trying to bypass an embargo.

I still don't know the extent of the damage wrought to my core. I think I fixed everything, but I don't know how my weave really works. Best I don't stress myself for a while.

He kicked off the gambler's shoes and proceeded in bare feet, tasting dirt and detritus with the threads in his feet, a

small luxury that would help keep him calm. He stripped the fisherman's shirt and wrapped it around his waist to keep his back and chest in the light of the sun, which was now creeping downward. Late afternoon. With luck he wouldn't need to make any more changes to his body, but he still wanted his light stores as full as possible.

His skin grew slightly darker every time he crossed in and out of the skyscrapers' shadow. It was easier to make smaller changes, and better he not delay by trying to find a hidden place to make the changes all at once.

Ked would darken his skin the last few shades once he was deep in the shipping district, as no one was as dark as his natural shape. No one, save for the crew of the Talnan ship on the last pier.

To the port officials he would claim to have been a crewman gotten lost or gotten distracted, and slipped past the guards by accident. And to the Talnans he would be a countryman who'd tragically lost his memory and was seeking asylum.

Even if the Talnans were kin-enemies of his race—he would have no way of knowing in advance whether he was of their clan, or only closely related—surely they both would be enemies of these Gallumans more than they were enemies of each other.

And I can defend myself if things go wrong.

He winced at the thought, and felt his chest with his fingers where the knife had struck. *Can I?* Threads darted sheepishly inside, reaching for his core again. Better things don't go wrong at all. Better to use mind and tongue, not thread.

But he was well fed now, both with matter from the fisherman's body and a recent mindcast to satisfy his craving for new minds. His gold threadsong was calm and malleable, entirely absent of prickling, suffocating silver. He needn't lean on instinct like he had done during this last hunt.

The gambler had been an arrogant brawler. Perhaps that had been why Ked had been so blind with rage when con-

fronting those witnesses. *No, the gambler was all but dismissed at that point. It was my arrogance, my hungers.*

He should have anticipated a counterattack once he had seen there had been more than one witness. He should have armored his core the instant things started going wrong. He should have hunted before he had become clumsy with desperation. These were easy mistakes to avoid. Was he growing so careless after only two years of hunting?

Forgive me, Master. I will not fail you again.

He may have come out unharmed, but the damage to his collection was unforgivable. Most mindcasts were whole, and some were clearly destroyed. But were they still useful to his master if they were only partially damaged? Could he repair any of them?

I must check them one at a time. Slow work.

Ked had the Talnan ship within sight. His skin was dark enough now that he did not escape notice, not with his shirt off. People's eyes followed him and he smiled at their attention. Now their shock was part of his performance.

It was oddly thrilling to walk unconstrained by the context of the identities he had stolen. Walking as himself, he was free in a way he had never been before. With the afternoon sunfire on his chest, he felt confident enough to meet any challenge.

The port officials at the other piers were eyeing him, but they buried themselves in their paperwork or turned back to their strutting. *That's right, I'm none of your business,* Ked sang with amusement.

Ahead, the dark-skinned crew were pointing him out to each other. Underneath his cheeks and forehead, his threads laughed with pulses of heat. On his face he put on a meek curiosity.

The fisherman had only known how to speak Southern Galluman and a smattering of creoles from the outlying islands, but these foreigners would be doing business in Galluman, surely. At least one of them would be able to speak to him.

The real trick would be the officials assigned to the Talnan ship. Upon sight of him, they began speaking to each other quietly, all while keeping him in their sights, but they did not move to stop him or question him.

No one sent him away this time. It was working.

On the pier for the ship itself, three brown-skinned men came forward to meet him, leaving behind a sharply-dressed Galluman bureaucrat with his clipboards and charcoal pencil, who glared at him.

The one with the beard was likely the captain, as he had the most embroidery on his jacket. The tall one in the long, blue coat looked most like Ked than anyone else, but all three regarded him with confused recognition. No hostility, thankfully. If anything, they were rallying to him.

Their mouths hung open as he raised his hands in greeting. "Sirs," he said in Southern. He made a show of fumbling for his coin purse. "I seek passage to—"

The bearded one gripped his shoulders. "Esselas?" he said desperately.

Ked's heartbeat quickened. This was unexpected. But what had the foreigner said? He recognized the word.

He glanced at the clouds overhead. No, the sky. There was something in the sky he had to find. Something important he had forgotten.

His heartbeat was too loud and he couldn't get his threads to work, couldn't get his heart to slow down. He felt sick. The sky was an oppressive weight over his head, making him sway on his feet. "What did you say?" he managed.

"Esselas? Tabyz Esselas?"

Ked's vision turned inside out and he collapsed with a scream.



Into nothingness came a flash of light. An impression. A face.

“Kirin!”

He shouted the name as he flailed in the roiling dark, reaching outward with limbs he had forgotten how to use. He gripped something and latched onto it, knowing he would die if he could not keep hold.

The blackness was washed in streaks of color and shape. Thread-shape. Threads, he remembered threads. He remembered the creature singing to him, sculpting him. The storm beat against him and a tide dragged him under.

Sky! I am Tabyz Sky!

He lifted himself above the void into a murmuring silver fog where he could finally breathe. An atoll in the void sea. He would be safe there. He crawled inside and collapsed inward, exhausted. *Hide. I must hide. Can't let anything find me.* He scarcely breathed, but when he did, silver light trickled into him and out of him. He was an eddy of threadlight. A whisper.

Where the hell am I? What happened?

The storm rumbled and flashed with golden lightning and streaks of shapes with smatterings of nonsense colors. Sky kept himself deep inside the fog. The creature was hunting him. No, not the creature, someone else. Something else was out there, in the void, and it must not find him.

Why did his threadsong feel wrong?

He could hardly move, but he carefully traced the edges of himself, not letting his threads breach the surface of the fog. He recognized the organ that housed his awareness, but the weave coming out of his threadmind was going the wrong way. He was too deep inside its whorl. And he didn't have any cords apart from those in the weave itself.

I've been disconnected from my larger body?

The last thing Sky remembered was the creature doing something to his head. His face. He had been mourning for Melrim, weeping because he was about to become... what?

The creature had wanted him to do something. Become something. It had changed him and made him into a hybrid copy of itself.

A monster. He had been made into a monster.

But Sky felt no love for the creature now. Had he escaped its snare, then?

The storm calmed rapidly. The rumblings of thunder were more linear now, more musical. It was like giants speaking from beyond a mountain, back and forth with high and low voices, though he couldn't make out any words.

It was hard for Sky to catch his breath here, in the deep of the fog, but eventually he learned to take in more light than he expelled with every breath. It reminded him of the ocean, this blackness around him. There was a flow to it. He could draw light for himself but he had to wait for the right moment. The cresting wave. The high tide. He had to learn the right rhythm slowly, with patience and practice. It was easier now that the storm had stilled.

Time stretched strangely in this place. He could not say if it had been a moment or a month since he had washed ashore.

There was a sharp movement outside. The fog thinned where Sky looked, though he kept well back from the edge. A figure moved past him, talking to itself, moving in a mimicry of human shape and motion, although the figure was made solely of gold threadlight in a sea of black.

They bought it. So easy! the figure sang.

It was Sky.

No, it wasn't him. But it looked exactly like him in some intangible way. And when he sang it sounded like his gold threadsong, note for note.

The stranger was jubilant. He pranced on the nothingness like it was solid ground. *Fantastic. I can keep this identity for a few weeks. Why not? It'll be a novel challenge. The only hard part will be timing my hunts, so long as my body doesn't misbehave again.*

There was a gnashing burst of frustration from the stranger, and a slower rolling anger. Sky held his breath, trying not to leave ripples as those golden emotions washed past him into the fog, and then out again.

Not possible. Not possible for me to lose control of my body like that. I have perfect control of every thread, every cell. Something must have been damaged more deeply than I thought. If it's a problem with the weave, I might be able to repair it myself, though checking every cord might take me the entire journey. The crew would be lucky if I was kept so busy.

The figure stretched out his hands to the sides and walked forward as if trying to bridge a gap or feel for something unseen. A hand passed through the edge of Sky's fog but the figure did not react to it. Sky quivered, amazed that the stranger had not noticed him.

Everything looks perfect, the not-Sky said. As I thought, all the damage was repaired. Maybe what happened at the pier was a fluke. But there's nothing left to investigate. Nothing except my collection.

The not-Sky moved as if pulling objects toward him. As he did, large floating orbs appeared with intricate patterns etched on the surface, and they bobbed closer to him. The orbs hovered in front of his face, and he considered them one at a time. Some he dismissed with a wave of his hand, and others he pulled together in a growing pile.

I think these were spared, but the wrapping tastes off. Maybe I should open them to make sure. No, I don't think there will be time for that given how long it will take to get back to Talris. I should stick to the obvious damage.

Back to Talris? Sky sang.

The not-Sky spun. *What was that?*

Sky froze in place. He breathed the fog thicker in front of him.

The golden figure turned around, moving a dozen half-solid arms about himself while darting quickly through the void. *An echo. Nothing like what happened at the pier.* He

sang a shrug. *Another fluke? But I will see if it happens again. Maybe it's a clue to what's wrong. I'll watch more carefully this time. What had I been doing just now?*

Wisps blossomed out of the stranger's body and drifted outward. Their fuzzy edges coalesced into more copies of Sky's shape, though almost invisible, and they floated around the void like ghosts, pausing regularly and leaning as if peering past corners. One drifted vaguely toward Sky's mist before turning away.

I mustn't let them find me, Sky thought. I must not speak. I must not sing. I must be patient.

The golden figure sang nonstop as he compared orbs and sorted them. *This one was right where the knife struck. A total loss. What a waste.* He dismissed the orb in a puff of golden mist. *That one had been extra trouble to collect, too. And this one... I wonder if I could combine these two. They were siblings, weren't they? Something like that. I should make their wrappings more clear in cases like this. They are similar enough, would it be possible to patch part of one mind onto another? I think this one is intact. I might have to open both of them. Could I hold both open at the same time as the fisherman, as unfolded as it still is?*

Sky quivered in the mist.

Patch one mind onto another?

Minds. Those orbs were minds.

Now that Sky knew what to look for, he could see it. They were not unlike the cell archives he had taken under the creature's... training... but these were much larger and contained not cells, but something else. Memories. Memories packed so tightly he could scarcely believe it was possible. The outside markings were more familiar to him, consisting of stray tastes and quick memories of the moment the archive was taken, among other things.

He understood the wrappings of each one as the not-Sky observed them in sort of a slow echo, as if Sky could under-

stand his twin's thoughts only a second or two after his twin had thought them, and not before.

A blacksmith under a great white mountain, taken when the maple leaves were coming in and the river ran louder and colder. A trader and a thief, taken early in the morning before a raid, when sparrows had come to seek millet in the fields behind the lord's house. The youngest daughter of a queen, dressed in silk spun from insects and dyed in snail water, taken indoors under the light of a whale oil lamp. More and more.

So many people. How long had Sky been unconscious?

The interloper kept mumbling to himself, sending out bursts of golden thought where Sky could catch them without any effort. Didn't he realize that his thoughts were echoing so loudly through his threadmind that anyone could overhear? But then again, who would be overhearing?

And who was the interloper's master?

Who else?

The damage to this one is slight. It's a good candidate for repair. I'll try this one first. It'll be another two days, maybe three before I must take another mindcast. Until then—

Sky didn't hear another word. He was stuck on the phrase his twin had used. Mindcast. *Mindcast.*

That's what he was.

I'm not supposed to exist! He is the real Sky, and I am a mindcast archive come to life!

He remembered the creature taking a cast of his mind. A cast of his life, his memories, his entire mind, and then... nothing. He was awakened again by something else. Kyrn's face. But he had not seen Kyrn in years, not since the party Sekt had held in Rose's memory. Why had Sky seen Kyrn, of all people?

Sky turned about himself. He was not encased in an orb like the others, but this fog he had found was a wrapping of sorts. And his threads.... He moved his silver threads slowly, clumsily.

Silver, not gold. That was part of what was wrong. This silver music was too heavy for him. It made his body hard to move.

I know how to use threads. If any of those other minds had been damaged in my place, they might not have survived the storm. I'm alive only because I knew how to breathe in this atoll of mist.

He had heard enough from his twin's ramblings to learn that their thread anatomy had been damaged by a knife. That had happened recently, perhaps earlier in the day. That must have been when Sky's mindcast was jogged loose.

Will he realize I'm missing from his collection? Maybe his twin would not notice. Each item in the collection contained its own manifest. But I'm the first of all of them, and I'm the original mind of his body. He would notice such a prominent absence.

The ghostly sentries vanished. The interloper's attention, or most of his attention, had shifted outside of himself. Instead of a golden figure in a black void, there was a smear of light distorted as if seen through rough waters. Nonsense noises came through heavily muffled, landing against Sky's fog only through golden thread-echoes. Sky could only understand his twin's thread-thoughts, not his human ones.

That's not how it should be, Sky found himself thinking.

Sky was disconnected from his human body, but he dare not make any anatomical changes to fix that. The creature had not taught him how to do such a thing, so such an effort very well might kill him. But even if it didn't, his twin would surely notice the shape of his own thread anatomy changing, and he had to remain hidden.

I must eavesdrop without altering anything.

His music responded to the thought. He tensed, focusing all his threads onto a single point. He shaped the fog as he reached through it, pulling it forward to cover his outstretched threads. Then he touched the place his double had walked.

The “ground” hummed through him, and Sky sculpted his music, aligning himself to the rhythm of the hums he could feel through his twin’s music. His silver rhythms may have been foreign to him but at least they were easy to shape.

Whatever he was doing was working. He marveled that he had known how to do it at all.

His vision sharpened as if he were there in person. He perceived, clearly, the faces of strangers on the deck of a ship, and Sazstla Kyrrn standing before him, new gray in his beard, looking troubled. Sky could still hear muffled rumblings from the man next to him, a taller Leinan wearing a blue, long-sleeved jacket of foreign design. Sky’s twin was waiting for a turn to speak, and his anticipation was palpable to Sky through threadsong; his twin was no longer singing his thoughts, but he was still singing his emotions.

Kyrrn spoke next with indistinct tenor rumblings, and then the second man spoke again. This time, Sky understood the Leinan clearly.

“The next port is... is days of five. Five days.”

Hatred flashed like lightning around Sky’s mist.

Five days? Five days? NO!

The golden figure was back, and it darted around Sky in aimless streaks.

Sky left his threads outstretched, too frightened to tremble. He did not dare withdraw his touch. He prayed that the obscuring fog would hold, and that his twin would not notice the fog’s new dimensions.

The figure winked away. *No, I knew this would happen. No need to panic. I might have to hunt one of their own, but that is their own fault. Their own fault! I will survive this. I know I will.*

Sky felt his outer body smile. Whatever anger had flared inside his double’s threadsong, it had not reached his face. His gaze held the Leinan’s eyes steady. “At which point, I will be able to come ashore?” he said.

Sky knew the words but not the language. More than anything, he heard his twin's intent. The words themselves were still rumblings in the distance. *I must learn to hear with my body's ears, too.* But his strength was waning. Soon he would have to withdraw to rest.

The Leinan—he must be the ship's translator—said something to Kyrrn, who spoke again. The translator replied, “Yes, permit Ked to come to shore. At five days.”

Ked. Was that the interloper's name?

The meaning held true as Sky considered it. That's what his twin thought it meant, anyway. The translator was not good at speaking whatever language his twin—Ked—was using.

Ked thanked the man for allowing him passage, reassured him that he felt much better now, and left. He made his way to the aft of the ship and he leaned over the railing as if seagull-watching. They were still docked. Ked's threads flicked into the wood but were bored with such tastes; Ked was focused on his mindcast sorting. The ghost sentries had returned, though fewer this time.

We are on Kirin's ship, the Broken Storm, Sky thought. *But where is the ship? What port?*

Sky waited and listened, then caught the word *Galluma* through Ked's stray thoughts. They were in the Far West, then, and headed to Talris.

Ked did not know the language either, Sky realized. That was why the threadsong meaning came through so clearly. Ked was using a mindcast to speak Galluman. A new mindcast, one that was wrapped up not quite so tightly as the others in the collection. He could feel Ked's cords working on it, finding more places to fold to make it more compact. Ked was tightly locked to that mindcast, using it almost as an extension of his own mind, even as he began to sort the others.

It was an awesome power to be able to copy someone's mind and use its skills as one's own. And if Ked could change

the shape of his body.... Sky shivered as he considered the obvious application of those two skills combined.

His sensory spots are hidden. He's pretending to be human.

But Sky could tell that Ked was not using another man's shape. He was using his own. Sky's shape.

Ked's thoughts came as pure threadsong, accented perhaps by the mindcast he was using, but not Leinanso, Sky's native language. And he clearly did not understand the Leinanso or Talrish that the crew was using. That was not a pretense. Ked may have been Sky once, but he no longer carried Sky's memories.

But then why wasn't he using Sky's mindcast to try to talk to Kyrn? Wherever Ked was and whatever he was doing, surely he would have preferred to engage with Kyrn as Sky, not as some foreigner in Sky's shape.

Perhaps he couldn't. Perhaps he hadn't known that Sky's mind had once been available to him.

He would not have forgotten something like that. He genuinely never knew I was here.

Sky withdrew his touch from Ked's senses as slowly as he dared, drawing the fog back with him just as slowly. Ked's sentries did not notice. And thankfully Ked's human vision was still available to him after that maneuver, though not as clearly as before.

He turned inward, exhausted, shaken. His light was frail. He would have to steal more from his counterpart gradually and rebuild his strength.

I must find what Ked is doing and why.

Ked surely served the creature that had tortured him—they—and which had devoured the lands north of Fyrhten and who knows how many people. For that reason alone Ked should be stopped.

If Sky could learn to use Ked's senses more fully, he could understand what the Talnans and Leinans were saying, while

Ked could not. Sky would have a large advantage, and perhaps he could learn enough to cripple Ked somehow.

I will find what's wrong with me, came Ked's voice, a velvety whisper not far from Sky's mist. An afterimage of Ked drifted past him, coming within arm's reach. Ked himself was distant, still working on the mindcast collection. Sky pulled his body inward into a tight knot.

Above all else, Ked must never learn he carried the mindcast of Tabyz Sky.

5. Foreigner

The ship's doctor gave Ked a thorough physical. Indoors. Ked's light stores were strong and he could still drink reflected light through the open door, but he was not entirely free from discomfort while not under direct sunlight. The examination kept him amused enough not to care much.

Ked's light stores were more fragile than Sky would have assumed. Sky had never personally experienced nightfall with threadsong, and only understood the extent of Ked's hunger through Ked's sudden self-discipline when he crossed into shadow.

Ked had dropped all his sentries and abandoned all work in the void to focus purely on his outer body. His idle thread movements became limited. Precise. His thoughts still came through as golden threadsong, but more delicately.

It was not all reflex. Sky had the sense Ked was being deliberately over-conservative with his light.

Should I produce a scar on my scalp to satisfy them? Ked wondered as the doctor ran fingers over his skull. No, I might not remember to maintain it. It might heal itself over time since it's not attached to one of my disguises. Best leave things a mystery for them.

When Kyrn came into the room to check on them, the doctor shook his head and gave Ked a friendly pat on the shoulder. Kyrn made a gesture with his hand—perhaps indicating Ked should follow—then went out onto the deck. Ked followed him. Olmoati, the translator, was outside waiting for them.

The translator began speaking to him with quick, choppy language that Sky knew should have been Leinanso. But because Ked did not understand the words, Sky could not understand the noises. Olmoati gave a disappointed sigh, then exchanged quick words with the captain. Afterward, he switched to Southern, which Ked did understand.

Ked grew more anxious after hearing that they might not set sail until the morning after next, as he had assumed they would depart at dawn. It was some sort of logistics issue with port fees or paperwork; Olmoati could not properly explain and Ked did not care to learn the real reason. The only thing that mattered to him was the margin of time spent at sea.

Can't help things like this, Ked thought. *I can take a mind-cast every three days if I ration light. Could I push that to four?*

Ration light? Why would his hunger to hunt grow more slowly the less light he used? *Time works more slowly on his thread anatomy the less light he drinks and the less light he uses?* Sky mused. *That might make sense.*

Ked trailed the others as they crossed the deck. *Not ideal if I have to hunt twice before first landfall. I did not want to thin the members of the crew so soon, but how could I explain their disappearances without taking their places? I must remain myself throughout the voyage for this facade to work. Or must I?*

This line of reasoning alarmed Sky. He had suspected it since he'd first seen Ked's collection of minds, but this was almost confirmation.

When Sky, under the creature's supervision, had taken cell prints from those animals—delicious, delightful... his music flared with remembered desire—he had afterward devoured the animal's bodies.

But Ked took cell prints almost every waking moment. He took them from the hands of the crew, their clothing, stray hairs or feathers on the ground, pollen and spores on the surfaces of everything, and yet he refrained from devouring any-

thing afterward. That hunger for physical matter was a separate, if equally-forceful, desire.

However, a strong undercurrent in both of their music was the desire to remain in disguise. That was one of the most primal instincts Sky had yet experienced, and as clear as the sun in the sky.

No one could learn Ked wasn't human.

Sky didn't know what taking a mindcast entailed, as the creature hadn't taught him to do that before he was archived, but he doubted it could be done in disguise as a human. If not, he would be strongly compelled to silence any witnesses.

If Ked replaced the people he hunted, Sky doubted he hid their bodies in a mundane way. He must be devouring them and changing his shape to match theirs. But why play the game of replacing them? Was that for fun? Was that a means of collecting additional information? Was it to smooth over the disturbance of the hunt? Why not just kill them and flee?

The more Sky learned, the more he realized the extent of what he didn't understand. Sky and Ked were twins of a sort, but Sky's thread understanding was far less developed in comparison.

This was all speculation. Sky had to watch Ked actually attempt a hunt to learn for certain.

Will I be forced to watch him kill someone? Dissolve them with his hands? See through his eyes, feel someone else's flesh under his threads as he.... Sky's music trembled in eager anticipation. *Moonsblood. Where I am now, I'm not human. I'm even less human than Ked. I might not want to stop him if he drinks someone. Oh, blood of the bloody moon. What should I do?*

Kyrrn brought Ked to a modest cabin, where Olmoati indicated a series of cots.

"You sleep in room. Captain's room," said Olmoati.

"Thank you," said Ked.

Kyrrn nodded and left to talk to other crew members on the deck, leaving Ked and the translator alone.

"The captain knows you," said Olmoati. "From his homeland."

Ked smiled and nodded. *Yes, yes. I don't care. Whatever will maintain the captain's interest in me.*

"Your name *Esselas*."

Sky's body grew taut. *Esselas*. The Leinanso he heard through Ked was still a rumbling gibberish, but this word cut through the fog. He latched onto it, and something aligned in the mist. Those rumbles were "*Esselas*." He let out a held breath. He wanted to hear the word again.

"*Esselas*?" Ked said.

Ked's threadsong intent and the rumbles outside converged for a moment. *Ahh*, thought Sky. *Yes, a little more of this and I'll have it.*

In the void, Ked threw out dozens and dozens of hands, dozens of sentries. They scattered eagerly. *Something happened just now*. Ked's heart sped but he clutched it with threads to keep it in check. *That word again. There's something wrong with that word.*

"Sky. You are Tabyz Sky," said Olmoati in Leinanso.

Sky had understood that.

"Tabyz *Esselas*," Ked said. *Why does that word sound so familiar?* His sentries rushed faster, panicking. *I can't see anything happening. That word was the trigger the first time. I know it.*

"My name is Ked," said Ked in Southern.

The translator tapped his temples. In Southern, he replied, "You, damage? Head? Sick?"

"It's true I lost my memory," said Ked. He tapped his temples, mirroring Olmoati. "But I don't know what happened. I saw your ship, and I realized that you must have come from my homeland. Or I from yours. I want to see my homeland again. Maybe then I can remember."

I must return to my master, Ked sang hungrily. *My collection is finished. Or it will be, by the time I make it to Talris.*

Olmoati put his hands on his chest. "Homeland, Leinanto."

“Leinanto.”

More of this, thought Sky eagerly. *More words. Keep him talking.*

“Leinanto is your homeland?” said Ked. “Mine?”

“You are Leinan. I am Leinan. You see, here?” Olmoati pressed a hand flat on top of his head, then lifted it, like he was measuring his height.

“Tall,” said Ked.

“Yes. And....” Olmoati tapped the back of his wrist with two fingers.

“Dark skin,” said Ked. He juttet a thumb toward the outside, at Kyrn and the others, and added, “Their skin is dark, too.”

Olmoati shook his head and tapped his wrist again. “Dark. This, like this. Different. And....” He pointed to his eyes.

“Your eyes are brown. Black. So are theirs.”

“No. This is different. Leinan sees. Talnan sees.”

Olmoati paused and looked between Ked’s eyes. “These outlanders can’t tell, just like you can’t,” he said in Leinanso. “You may look like kin of mine, but you have the spirit of a foreigner.”

Ked cocked his head, not understanding.

Sky had caught those words, but the link was tenuous. He reached his threads outward, out of the mist.

“You look me too strongly in the eyes, and keep your feet too close together when you stand. You don’t know my Rhythm, do you? You didn’t even ask. And you have the tones of these Westerner words exactly right. Music fixed to each word, not rolling like a raft.”

Sky could understand everything. He pulsed silver music through his body, sculpting its shape, mimicking the pattern of the vibrations he touched. He had to make this understanding a permanent part of him.

“I don’t know who this Sky was, but you’re not him. It’s so obvious you don’t follow our Rhythms that I could scream. But no one will listen to me. All they can see is your skin. And

all the captain can see is his damn would-be nephew-in-law. You're a phantom, and I don't trust you."

Olmoati smiled and patted Ked on the shoulder as if encouraging him.

"Is that the language of my homeland?" Ked said.

"Yes."

"It's beautiful, like the chattering of birds. Will you teach it to me?"

"Yes."

A sudden *clang* gave Ked a start. The ship's bell must have been right overhead to have come through so loud.

Olmoati pointed outside. "Food. Noise is food. Come."

Sky trembled. *I have it. I have Leinanso back. Will I need to do the same for Talrisso, too?*

Sky's threads were sticky when he tried to retract them. But Ked's sentries would return in force when Ked crossed into sunlight. Ked was two footsteps away, one....

Sky ripped his threads away.

Ked winced. He stumbled over his next step, but then caught himself. His threads raced around his body. *My light flickered. Something happened. Again!*

Sky wrapped his threads around himself, deep in the fog.

The golden figure in the void coalesced and stood still, hands on his hips. He stared at the place Sky had touched.

I'm not here, Sky whispered. There's nothing here. Move on.

Ked's avatar hummed a frown, moved an arm slowly for the fog, then shook his head and darted away. *A sore spot. That might have been where the injury happened. And yet... it looks perfectly fine now. What am I missing?*

In the fog, Sky sank downward in exhaustion. He had to be more careful than this.

Ked smiled as he met Kyrrn at the front of the galley. Kyrrn raised an arm to lead him forward to dinner.

6. Small Places

A pulse of anxiety sped through Ked's deepness when the crew raised the gangplank. That act severed the continuity between solid ground and the deck of the *Broken Storm*.

He kept his threads tightly coiled as he stared at the receding pier, watching the people and the buildings grow gradually smaller. They moved away from him, yet his feet were planted firmly on the deck. With the fisherman's unfolded mind in his grasp, he hardly noticed the rocking of the ship as it cut through the waves, but this drifting away was an unexpected source of alarm.

It was bad enough stealing a ride on a hay wagon, which he had done more than once. This same anxiety had struck him at those times, his moving without traveling the distance himself, but at least when riding a wagon he could disembark whenever he wanted.

Would the ship escape sight of the shore altogether? The fisherman never had gone so far out to sea on any of his fishing trips, but he had also never worked on a ship large enough to have a crew of dedicated rowers, nor large enough to stay at sea overnight.

Unless I want to leap overboard and swim to shore for days, I'm committed now. Five days of this before any respite.... Well, if this proves too torturous, I could abandon the ship in five days. Take the slow path after all.

I just have to last five more days.

He had never impersonated a sailor before, at least not an ocean-faring one, and had certainly never gone beyond the

shallow waters of a reef or tide pool. Marine life was extraordinarily novel to him and therefore deeply compelling, but even then, his hunger for tastes was dwarfed against the terror of being forced to cope with anything underwater.

He could not drown. He weighed more than a human of his size would, but he could artificially maintain his buoyancy. And even if he were seized by a bad current and caught under a root like the fisherman's childhood friend Efran had been, he could breathe the air dissolved into the water with his skin, or with gills he could form at his neck, which he had grown out of curiosity once.

But when underwater, he could not maintain sight of the horizon and the land around him, and he was cut off from the map of the landscape that was carved into his shape-sense. More, the water itself strangled the potency of sunfire when he was so much as a few feet under the surface. It was perverse to be surrounded by light that had been rendered so impotent. His hunts for underwater cell prints had been frenzied and brief, and done out of desperation from lack of other options to soothe his Wanderlust.

His music didn't push him to fight these anxieties; if his master needed underwater spying, it would not be from him. Ked had been made purely to learn to interface with human beings—land animals—and to collect information about their environment—their settlements and their wilderness.

I'm cut off from land now. Nothing but bottomless water. Will I regret choosing the swift path?

The slower path would have tested his patience in the other direction. He would have had to retrace his old steps far too closely, and it would take far longer to move through the redundant places. The danger of this small space was novel in of itself, which would be an advantage until it suddenly wasn't. Who knew how long that novelty would keep his song together?

The severity of this confinement didn't strike him until he had paced the deck once in a circle. The shore was far enough

now he couldn't make out individuals, just the larger buildings.

He pulled the fisherman's mind around himself tightly.

Time to get to work. Yaomin donned the shirt around his waist; foolish to leave his skin so exposed to the sun, though he apparently had acquired a more than adequate tan—Ked rippled his interfacing cords to suppress the dissonance of his current appearance—and he sought the captain to learn his orders. But this was a foreigner's ship, and he did not know his way about. The pay must have been good to justify this strange turn of employment... but no, he had paid to be here. Yaomin looked down at himself and frowned.

Ked loosened his hold on the fisherman's mind, disappointed. That particular trick wouldn't work this time. He would need to numb himself a different way, perhaps seek other sources of novelty.

He pried the shirt off again. Best to guzzle sunfire at all times if his patience was going to be tested so quickly. He paced the deck, seeking Olmoati, keeping an eye on the shoreline whenever possible.

Ked had never learned a human language before. After his first hunt, when he had first encountered language, he had simply used that first mindcast to understand everything. It was natural for him to have done this—and a near-instant affair—and so he had maintained the practice since. But he needed to assess his damaged mindcasts, so he would need to aggressively rotate which mindcasts were open. In any case, he could not use the fisherman's mind for Southern Galluman forever; his drive for novelty would not permit him to use the same mindcast for more than four or five days in a row. He needed a pretext to "forget" Southern, and he needed the continuity of an alternative for the long term.

Olmoati was drawing water from a barrel near the front of the ship, and Ked approached with what he hoped was modest interest.

"Olmoati," Ked called. "Teach me, teach me."

Olmoati put the dipper away. "You want to learn Leinanso? Words from homeland?"

"Yes. What is this that you're doing?"

"Drink. Drinking."

Two words. Sometimes humans had more than one word for something. When using a mindcast, this sort of thing always made perfect sense, but Ked muted his grip on the fisherman's mind. He would genuinely try to understand this for himself. He brought his threadsong down to a shallow shimmer so he could concentrate using his human senses.

He waited for his music to push back, to forbid this choice, or to lean him toward something else, but he felt nothing unusual in his threadsong.

Then it is right for me to proceed.

Ked repeated what Olmoati had said. *"Drink, drinking."*

Olmoati sat up straight and folded his hands in front of him rigidly, like a doll. *"I want to drink."* He brought up the dipper slowly, full of water, and puckered his lips to it in an exaggerated motion. *"I will drink."* He took a small sip, making loud slurping noises. *"I am drinking,"* he said, sipping again. He returned the dipper and said, *"I drank."*

Ked had taken a mindprint of Olmoati speaking these phrases. He was going to take a second after the first one was full, but the translator appeared finished with the set.

"Those are words for drinking?" Ked said. He lapped at sunfire with the threads flicking through his hair.

Olmoati shook his head and raised a single finger. "No. One word is drinking. Other words are... other words." He mumbled something in his own tongue, then continued. "We change this. Small words first. Solid words." He pointed to the barrel. *"Water. This is water."*

"Water," said Ked. He copied the man's pitch exactly.

"Yes," said Olmoati. *"Fresh water. Drink water, safe."* He moved to the railing, and pointed over the side. *"Drink water, not safe. Salt water."*

"Fresh water. Salt water."

“This big water, here, this big place, is *the sea*, or *the ocean*.”

They went on in this way for a quarter hour. Ked took mindprints regularly of their conversation, but when Olmoati began to repeat old words, Ked remembered them correctly without any further aid.

Olmoati grew stone-faced as he seemed to come to the same realization.

“More,” said Ked. He had forgotten how far away from the coast they had come until Olmoati pointed aft toward the mountains.

This distraction is working!

“Land,” said Olmoati. He pointed a finger straight up. “Sky.”

Ked gripped the railing as if he were plunging through the deck to the sea.

That word, that word—!

“What did you say?” He was disconnected from the solid ground, he was floating, falling.

“Esselas. This is word for sky.”

Ked peered at the sky, the clouds, terrified they would come to snatch him up. “*Esselas... you said that was my name.*”

He flared his music, devouring sunfire as he raced his attention through his deepness, his skull, his chest. There was something important in the sky—wasn’t there? Why wouldn’t that thought leave him alone?

Olmoati let his arm fall. “*Sky. Yes. In your language, sky.*”

Ked shook his head savagely and pointed straight up, into the sky. *Into the sky!* “You said this was *esselas*.”

“One word, two things. *Esselas* is the sky, and *Esselas* is you. Leinan names are this way.”

Ked stumbled from the railing, gripping his scalp with his hands, fighting a sudden headache with threads from his head and his fingers.

I have perfect control of my body! This is not happening!

Olmoati approached him. "No, we stop, we stop. Good work. You rest now."

Ked swatted away Olmoati's outstretched hands. "I'm not ill! I'm fine!" *Remember the performance!* "No, I'm sorry. My head...."

"Yes. Yes, you rest."

The captain called to the both of them, waving them toward the captain's cabin. Reluctantly he followed Olmoati, all while his threads ran through every layer of tissue in his head and every edge of the cords in his weave. He clamped down on his music.

Indoors right after a fit. Of course.

His body was behaving correctly now at least. These fits were brief enough he might have thought he imagined them, but his threads caught their lingering impact clearly.

I do not imagine things! The captain said Esselas when we met, and I remember distinctly my attention being pulled to the sky. I couldn't have known the word ahead of time. How is this possible?

He rubbed his forehead as the captain indicated he sit on a stool near the table. He was not feigning dizziness as he slumped to his seat.

Kyrrn and Olmoati were speaking quickly in a language different from the one he had just been practicing. It was gnarled, less melodious. *I hope I don't have to learn that language, too.* He had finished banishing his headache and he took a deep breath.

Maps and other written records were drawn across the captain's table, though the captain ignored them. The fisherman's understanding did not help Ked decipher any of it. *That mind will be useless to me soon.* The papers were held down with random trinkets and mementos, all alien to him. The wooden ones and the ones with leather pieces were more interesting than the metal ones.

A small carving of a goat drew his attention most, squat and of a deep red wood. He picked it up it without thinking,

turning it over in his hands, idly taking cell prints from its center and its surface.

He caught a taste of himself in the creases.

He dropped it like a hot coal and it clattered to the floor. He sat rigid, leaning away from it like a cornered human facing a rabid dog.

The other two men fell silent. Ked's eyes were locked on the figure as Kyrrn retrieved the carving from where it had fallen. The goat was an ordinary thing, not ominous like the unseen something in the sky, yet it terrified him. It looked small in Kyrrn's brown hands.

The cell print Ked had been making wasn't wrapped yet, but he couldn't bring his music together to finish it. *Did that taste come from me, just now?* He knew it hadn't. The cell was old.

Kyrrn said something in a low voice, and Olmoati explained, "You made this. Gift for captain, four years ago." Kyrrn held the goat flat on the palm of his hand.

Ked shook his head slowly, still staring. "I have no memory of this," he said truthfully.

Olmoati mumbled a translation for Kyrrn, who returned the figure to the desk with a *clack*. The captain spoke in quick, short sentences that Olmoati translated in turn.

"You dropped it. Why?"

Ked clenched his eyes in a grimace. *Do I pretend to remember it? I don't remember it. But what reaction serves the performance? Who am I pretending to be?* He couldn't make a decision. His music felt slack in his threads. *This isn't like me.*

"You were hunter, knife hunter."

Ked sat, numb, staring at the goat.

"You made wood things. Beautiful. You made things with hands, with knives."

Ked closed his hands over his knees. "I don't remember this."

"You want to remember?"

His performance demanded the answer. "Yes." *This is a performance, isn't it?*

"You were missing. From two years ago, in Talris."

I was born two years ago.

"North of Talris, great blight. Land dead. Empty."

My homeland, the land stripped bare. Where my master dwells. Where I was born. Could it be?

"Missing people. Many people. You are not missing now."

"Esselas," said Kyrn.

Ked looked into the captain's face. The man wore an earnest expression.

"You said the captain's name," said Olmoati. "At pier."

"That's what you said I said, right before I fainted. But I don't remember doing that." *They're making that part up. But the rest...*

The two men spoke to each other in that second language.

Ked had had enough of this. "My head. Please, I need fresh air. I need to think. I'm sorry."

He fled the room and rushed to the aft deck. The shore was so far away. He was adrift in mind and body. He gripped the railing tightly as his threads flicked into the wood, trying to keep himself together.

The shore was out of reach but he could still see it. He knew where he was. Who he was. He stared at the peak of the tallest hill he could see, imagining he was not floating away, that he was still on solid ground and merely considering a point in the distance. He breathed slowly until his music evened.

He had control of himself. For now.

Am I their missing man? Am I the real Tabyz Sky?

It was possible. It was all too exact. He had found an old cell of his body, from before he was born! What other explanation was there? He knew nothing of Sky apart from a few fluttering impressions about the name itself. A remnant of memory from his birth?

Of course he hadn't been born out of nothing. He knew this. His master had uplifted an existing human and had given him the gift of threadsong and a glorious new purpose. Why *couldn't* that human have been Tabyz Sky?

I am a servant of the ancient music, he declared. *And... I was once Tabyz Sky*. It made too much sense.

Was it a bad thing?

Ked laughed a giddy, desperate laugh. Half-sobbing, he slid down the railing to the ground, flicking threads into the dust in the corners around him to ground himself. "*Esselas*," he murmured. "*Sky*." He refused to look up.

What was a name, anyway? They were noises that humans used to identify each other. They didn't matter. He wasn't "Ked" any more than he was "Sky." Ked was just a name a few humans had recently used for him, and it was not the only name he had taken in his life. *I am a servant of the ancient music. A human interface for my master*. That's all that mattered.

But if he had been Tabyz Sky once....

What am I so afraid of? This is perfect!

Sky's mind must have been destroyed when he was born, as he clearly remembered nothing—apart from wispy insights about needing to remember the sky itself—and he had no mindcast to use to impersonate the real Sky. No mindcast existed. How could have his master taken a mindcast without knowing how to interface with humans? Ked had been born to enable his master to do this very thing, once he had mastered the skill himself.

No, there was no grand mystery. He was Sky, bereft of memories, just as he was pretending to be. There was no act to perform. He could travel with Kyrn and just be himself. What could be easier?

Olmoati touched his shoulder and Ked wiped his eyes. This would be easy. All he had to do was make it to Talris.

Now that he knew what the sky had been trying to tell him, it no longer affected him. He glared at the sky, defiant. *Esse-*

las! he sang. I know who I am, and I will use you like I use everything! Neither human being nor sky has power over me!

Laughter flashed on his buried spots as Olmoati helped him to his feet.

7. Control

Sky's attention was linked to Ked's.

It had begun with the wooden goat, which Sky had recognized as his own work. He had been interested in seeing it up close again, and Ked had interacted with it because some of that interest had bled out of the mist and into Ked's music.

But it continued with Kyrrn. Whenever Kyrrn was in the room, Sky was interested in Kyrrn over everyone else, hearing him, seeing him, hoping he would reveal more information in Talrisso to Olmoati or others, and hoping he would try to explain more of what had happened in Talris.

And so Ked tried to spend time with Kyrrn whenever possible. He always kept Kyrrn within sight, and always listened closely to the words he said, even when he couldn't understand. Ked never realized he was doing it.

Sky could add to Ked's unconscious desires, as he had inadvertently with the goat, but he could also suppress them. He learned quickly to calm Ked's instinctual fear of water, though he still hated it, and he kept some of Ked's restlessness under control.

It was a matter of breathing. Sky drank in light and expelled light with every breath, and that light sustained his body in its current state—whatever that was—and kept him hidden. That light was Ked's music: his thoughts, feelings, and desires.

But Sky could also move a little as he breathed, or breathe out a little differently than what he took in. If he did it right, it layered on top of what was already there, like an amplifica-

tion. A wave added to itself became stronger. The ripples of music that emerged did not appear manipulated in any way; the music was still itself, only nudged here and there.

It was not unlike carving something out of wood. The shape was already present in the material, and he revealed it by making tiny removals and by smoothing edges. The result was still made of wood.

Ked himself never noticed Sky's manipulations, despite all the sentries he had moving across their anatomy. But anything more direct Ked noticed at once. He could never find the cause of such manipulations, nor the precise location Sky had been touching, but Sky was adamant about never giving Ked the chance to catch him.

Perhaps I can keep his hunting instinct at bay for good.

While the subtle touches were working, there was something deep inside their music that was lurking, and Sky didn't like the way it sounded. It was stalking them both.

"Teach him Talrish, not Leinanso," Kyrrn said one day at dinner.

"He wanted to learn the language of his homeland," Olmoati had countered.

"At the time he didn't know the difference. Now he does. Leinanso will not serve him in Talris."

"If he learns Talrisso from me, he'll have an accent."

Kyrrn chewed for a moment, taking in the translator's logic. "And if he learns it from me, or anyone else here, he won't. That's what you're saying."

"It would be a point of evidence for or against our... hypotheses."

"He's learning fast. Too fast, you said. Maybe he's remembering his native language."

"Perhaps."

"And you want to compare that to how quickly he learns Talrish, and whether or not he speaks it with a Leinan accent."

"I think," Bashk cut in, "that it's been nice to be able to speak around him. We'll lose that if he learns Talrish."

“We’ll have our private conversations in Tarsi, then. Or we’ll all speak to him like a man, not a ghost or an enemy of war.”

Bashk and Olmoati shared a look.

Ked had been watching them speak, but not attempting to understand what they were saying. Most of the crew talked amongst themselves right in front of him, and most went out of their way to avoid engaging with him directly. Similarly, Ked chose to ignore everything that did not directly benefit him.

Ked knew enough Leinanso now that he was able to fish out individual words in a Talrish conversation, including subtle cognates. His skill was such that a burst of curiosity would empower him to huge leaps in fluency, and he would jump to Talrish easily if he were willing to try. His skill and his memory for vocabulary was astonishing. It was his interest that was lacking.

Should I encourage his interest, or discourage it? Sky wondered.

As with most such choices lately, Sky did nothing. The more he learned to manipulate, the less he wanted to. He was growing comfortable with inaction in his pocket of mist within Ked’s void.

No, not inaction. Sky was finally becoming acquainted with *koulim*, the cold Rhythm.

What would Badger say if he saw me now? Or Father? His felsa hothead son, stopping to think things through. Though I’m so impotent here, I don’t think it counts.

Kyrrn sat Ked down to learn Talrish, but it took several minutes for Ked to realize what Kyrrn intended.

Upon Ked’s insistence, Olmoati was not to use Southern to speak to him anymore. The fisherman’s mindcast had grown repulsive to use, so Ked had packed it away. Instead, Ked had filled the space with old mindcasts to evaluate them for damage. He and Olmoati had been using Leinanso alone to speak for almost a day.

But Kyrn's Leinanso was poor, much worse than the translator's Southern was. And now Kyrn was trying to use Leinanso to demonstrate Talrish words.

What is this? Ked sang. *He cannot be serious.*

Within Ked's deepness, rage emerged as ugly pops and hisses.

I'm already trying the other one! I've come so far! And he wants me to start over?

Ked had strong instincts to maintain his performance, so he played the idiot, acting like he did not understand when Kyrn asked him to repeat something.

Ked's hunger erupted so quickly Sky could not draw it back by a hair.

Enough. This is all taking too long. I should take him tonight, him or the translator, and learn it all at once. If he wants me to have Talrisso so damn much, then I'll damn well have it!

Ked's music was suddenly stiff, laced with silver that Sky found impenetrable. Its harmonics collapsed into a single point of intense focus, a blinding white that shone from Ked's avatar like the sun. The void bent inward on itself.

Sky rolled forward, out of the mist. His music poured into Ked and empowered the blaze.

No!

Sky clawed himself back into his hiding place. Ked's music thrashed into him in waves but Sky breathed as slowly as he could without clashing with the rhythm of Ked's song. He had to pull it back to its normal tempo.

STAY—DO NOT HUNT THEM—

The fire inside Ked's avatar quivered. His avatar was frozen in place.

YOU ARE A SPY—LEARN IN SECRET—YOU WILL BE EMPOWERED—

A spy, Ked sang. I am a spy. I could learn in secret... yes, learn their language faster than they are teaching it to me. They would never guess I could understand them.

Sky's approval came as silver thrums through the void, and the weight lifted away. Ked's avatar relaxed. The burning gold music was still hot, but its focus was elsewhere, spread among other thoughts and urges. Ked sang to himself all the ways he could trick the humans into giving him information.

Spent, Sky quivered in the fog, all his attention on breathing. Existing. He could hardly move a single thread.

What have I done?

He had acted in a way that contradicted everything he had been learning about manipulating Ked. He had taken a terrible risk.

I could not have let Ked murder Kirin tonight, no matter the risk to me.

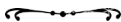
A piece of him sang that yes, he could have, and should have. He needed to live. The silver fog enveloped him like it was encasing him with silk rope. Gentle, but tying him into place.

Ked could not learn Sky was alive in his deepness!

He sang that thought to himself, caught up in the sound of it. *I must remain hidden. I must, I must...*

But it worked out. Ked learned nothing about me, though my music was so loud he had every reason to.

Why didn't he?



The immediate crisis was over, but the edge of Ked's hunger persisted despite Sky's parry. By the next morning that hunger had infiltrated all of Ked's melodies, and even some of Sky's.

Sky concentrated solely on breathing more slowly to pull Ked's song back into the spying-music and away from the hunt. Ked had gone four and a half days without hunting, but his hunger had only been delayed, not suppressed. It blazed

into the open more often, and every time it quieted, the lull was a little hotter.

Sky's music in the fog grew sharper, too. He was alert, and felt everything too strongly. His threads were too sensitive. He felt larger, like he was becoming the fog itself, not just hiding within it.

Whatever was infecting Ked was infecting him, too. The silver music wanted Ked to hunt. It was Ked's purpose. This instinct was as powerful for Sky as it was for Ked.

Is Ked dragging me into the hunt or is it the other way around? Or does it feed itself, and we are both along for the ride?

Sky didn't know why his shouts had gone unseen the previous day, but he dared not try again. Not until he understood more about what he was doing. Whispers were all he could manage safely. His silver music made it clear to him that anything more would be very dangerous.

The "learning-as-spying" trick kept Ked interested in language lessons for most of the day, in between pockets of intense interest in when they would dock, but by afternoon even that willpower had unraveled.

Sky might be able to stop Ked from killing his victim, but no matter what he did, there would be a hunt today. It was inevitable. Sky himself wanted it to happen too much.

This thought made his music fall into rhythm with Ked's. Their songs were locked together, amplifying each other. His body was a mirror of Ked's movements.

It's time— they sang together.

Ked's avatar glowed, pulling the edges of the void toward him. Sky's mist was almost on top of him, right at his back. Their songs were overlapping so much it was hard to tell them apart. Sky could feel Ked breathing in front of him, could feel every movement his threads were making.

By late afternoon Ked was glued to the bow of the *Broken Storm*, clenching the railing tightly as he watched the docks grow larger. Ked could barely hold his threads inside his body.

Hunt—mind—drink—hunt—

PATIENCE— Sky sang. **PATIENCE**— He didn't know if he was singing to himself or to Ked.

This port was more modest than the one at Wustor, but still grand. The buildings were older, with more intricate buttresses and bolder colors. Because it was not as hilly, little of the city itself was visible from the water, making it hard to gauge how quickly they were coming. Ked's sense of location had been adrift ever since the first night on the water, but this port city offered nothing he could use to ground himself; this city was adrift in his shape-sense, too. There were few trees or parks visible from the water to draw his interest.

What Ked wanted was people. The space at the back of his head was so empty it hurt.

Sky had to help keep Ked under control if he was to have any chance to keep Ked from killing tonight, and especially to keep him from killing many more people than just his target, just as he had killed three bystanders after hunting the fisherman. *But I must stay in control, too.*

It helped Sky to think human thoughts. It kept him from dissolving into that intensity and losing himself.

Koulim is the answer now, Sky thought. Not denying hunger, but knowing hunger has a time to exist, and knowing it is to exist at a later time. The patience inside anticipation, the peace before desire is embraced. He thought of his mother at winter solstice last year when she last visited Fyrthten, repeating the same phrases he heard throughout his childhood. *When we embrace koulim, we have the freedom to choose when to act in feilam.*

He'd always found the Leinan philosophies tiresome and contrived. He certainly did not embody them the way he was supposed to, he of the *kolse* Rhythm. But now, inside the heat of their compounding music, he was beginning to understand.

Thank the moon so many people tried to teach me this.

Sky was right behind Ked now, breathing into his neck like a lover. **THE TIME FOR THE HUNT IS NOT NOW, BUT WILL**

COME, he sang softly. **TODAY, YES, BUT ONLY WHEN WE CHOOSE.**

Ked's avatar trembled. *I must force myself to wait. I must strike when I choose and no sooner. I must have control.* He reached out with his many limbs, trying to smother his music by sheer force of will.

No, that was wrong. *Koulim* was not about force. It had to come through acceptance of stillness. Sky tried again.

RHYTHM IS SILENCE AS MUCH AS IT IS SOUND. DO NOT HATE THE MOMENT BETWEEN HEARTBEATS. TRUST THAT THE NEXT HEARTBEAT WILL COME.

That was too much human metaphor; Ked's attention frayed with confusion and frustration. Sky had to think of these ideas as they applied to thread-song. He had to reach their shared instincts, not just Ked himself.

EVERY SHAPE BELONGS IN ITS PLACE—EVERY NOTE BELONGS IN ITS SONG—THE HUNT IS NOT NOW—IT EXISTS, LATER, AFTER—FIRST IS SILENCE—FIRST IS PEACE—THE HUNT IS OURS, BUT IN ANOTHER TIME—FIRST COMES SILENCE—

The tension was broken. Ked shivered as the void relaxed and unfolded again, releasing Sky's mist from Ked's avatar. The fire inside their music softened to embers. Sky pulled himself apart from Ked's will and drifted backward.

So much is at stake, Ked sang. I must remember Wustor. I must remember my performance here! Act as someone eager to sight-see and no more. I am still the spy. I still have a part to play, and I must interact with these people after the hunt is over. There is yet work to do before the hunt. I will embrace the hunt when it is time. In its time. Not yet.

Sky breathed to reinforce these thoughts the best he could. It was much easier to shape Ked's music when Ked wanted the same things he did. At the moment they were allies, both enemies of their shared instincts.

It is time for me to be the spy, not the hunter, Ked sang. The hunt is later. For now...

The Balance they had achieved through *koulim* was fragile, and would not hold forever. But it only had to hold until Ked could get away from everyone. *Best not think about that part yet*, Sky thought.

Ked's outer body was rigid as the ship slowed to a stop. Several of the crew dropped to the pier, and every loop of rope around the bollards drew Ked's music tighter, threatening to unseat his newfound Balance. He clenched his eyes shut.

"Don't be afraid of this place. They are friendly to foreigners."

Olmoati's voice was unwelcome, but Ked tried to think of the Leinan's arrival in terms of his own empowerment. Olmoati approached him because the time to hunt was coming closer. This was good. They would let him ashore soon.

I am a spy, Ked sang. *There is a part I am playing*. It was harder to play-act without a persona to draw upon, but Ked's affectation was simple enough he could reason through it despite his growing instability.

"I am not afraid," said Ked with a smile. "I want to see what is here. I want to get away from the sea."

"We'll make sure you're safe."

A crack formed in Ked's void.

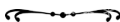
"Since you don't speak the language here, Bashk and I will stay right with you. Sometimes people will try to steal things from strangers, but we will watch you."

I am a spy, Playing a part! I am a spy! It is time to be a spy!

"Thank you," Ked said gently. Then, more urgently. "When do we go?"

"We show our papers to the dock workers, and then we will pay them. Then we are free to walk as we like."

"Good," said Ked through a tight smile.



Ked's threads were so tight against their basal cords he marveled that any music flowed through his body at all.

Olmoati hovered behind him, and he wanted to spin and kill the man where he stood. *I'll go deep into the city and lose them. I've done harder things before. Their following me changes nothing, ultimately. I'll hunt someone and...*

And repeat this process several more times. Their voyage so far was a fraction of what remained of their journey to Tal-ris. He would have to go back to the ship, that same ship, with those same tastes, and the same people, surrounded by relentless water, and escape them when they came to accompany him ashore, and do it again, and then do it again. How many times?

I'm not going to make it.

Ked tried to summon the insights he had gained a moment before, the ones that had granted him calm and patience despite being so thirsty. *It is time for spying*, he sang. *Now is for spying*. It wasn't working.

Ked stood patiently as the captain met with the dock workers and as they exchanged words and passed papers between them. He did not move a muscle as Kyrrn walked back up the gangplank. His body was perfectly still as Kyrrn slapped Bashk's shoulder and said, "It is done. Let's get them moving."

I need to be in control.

Ked's music rang as a single pure tone as he walked calmly down the gangplank. Olmoati stuttered and stumbled behind him.

"Now, wait a minute," Olmoati said. "Bashk will need time—"

"You said papers, and you said pay. These things have happened."

The translator protested but Ked kept moving, ignoring him.

"You three go," said Kyrrn. "Sky's been as anxious as a mackerel on a tightrope. I'll handle everything here."

Bashk eyed the crew, then shrugged and rushed up to the two of them.

In Talrish Kyrrn called after them, “Don’t let him out of your sight. Remember, he is the most valuable thing we are carrying.”

Ked strode forward with vigor, pleased he had understood Kyrrn’s final remarks. *There is one very good reason for me to stay with the Broken Storm. They would sooner die than fail to get me to Talris.*

Across the road from the docks were shops and apartments, not an industrial district like in Wustor. It had the feel of an old town, not planned so much as grown over time, with no sense at all to the placement of intersections. It was not busy yet, but people were starting to gather to do their evening shopping. The evening catch was coming in.

Ked worked to observe the people in an abstract way, as part of the scenery, and not as people he wanted to feel under his fingers and drink.

The presence of his companions were like brands in his mind, one on each side, boiling his patience to nothing. The two kept tightly abreast of him, no matter how quickly Ked pressed forward.

Olmoati was grumbling, half complaining that Ked was walking too quickly, and half trying to invent items of interest that Ked would want to slow down to observe. It would have been easy to slip past Olmoati alone, but Bashk was too focused on Ked and where Ked looked.

Of everyone on the *Broken Storm*, Bashk was the most dangerous. The sailor carried himself casually but his movements were purposeful. Nothing escaped his notice. He remembered things, put things together no one else could. Like Ked, he was a hunter who knew how not to look like he was hunting.

He already doesn’t trust me. This will be difficult.

“Is there a quiet place?” Ked said. “A place with plants. Trees.”

“Perhaps,” Olmoati said. “I think we could try two roads down, then inland. I seem to remember a place....”

I could drug them both. But Bashk will realize what had happened. I would have no reason to touch him, and he would remember. I need a distraction external to the three of us.

Ked’s eyes darted around, seeking a vendor or pedestrian he could touch discreetly and then have collapse a few minutes later. Best to cause a distraction for the whole street.

Or... a compromise.

Ked tapped Olmoati’s arm, thinning his blood. Then he pointed into a bookshop as if inquiring about what was inside. “What is this called?”

“Books. They are papers, bound together... oh.” Olmoati swayed on his feet and put a hand to his head.

Bashk grabbed his shoulder, then stepped forward to catch him as he slumped. Olmoati mumbled something as his head lolled.

“Ati, Ati!”

“I feel... I’m fine. Just light headed—”

Ked darted away from them at a crouch, dodging other market goers and racing up the street.

“Ked!”

Ked’s music roared with hatred. *Bashk! I could not escape his watch for even that long?*

The crowds were thin enough that they parted for him as he raced inland where the buildings were taller and the roads more narrow. He chanced a look to see Bashk following him, alone. The man must have left Olmoati behind.

Bashk kept up at an even pace and refused to fall out of sight. The streets were too long and the buildings pushed too tightly together for Ked to lose him by turning enough corners ahead of his pursuer. Bashk needn’t catch up, just turn the same corners before Ked could turn another.

At last Ked crossed into a street to find it completely empty of people. A fluke, an opportunity. He would take the chance.

He leapt onto the side of the nearest building, clutching it with threads in his palms and bare toes. The mortar held, and he carefully climbed, burning through his light, crawling upward until he reached the roof two stories up.

He clambered over the edge to the top, counting the beats in his music, certain that Bashk had been too far away to see it happen.

His body was exhausted and his music faint, but he peered over the edge just as Bashk slowed to a stop underneath him. Bashk spun in confusion.

The street ahead was long and broad, leading to private apartments tightly packed together, with no other alleys, no doorways, and no shops to hide in.

“What under the sun?” Bashk muttered. He ran hands over his head, turning about with growing panic. “Ked... Ked! Sky!”

Ked panted, needing more light, needing to bask, but he had to make certain Bashk left the area.

Bashk leaned against a wall, breathing hard for several moments, then staggered away.

Ked watched Bashk, song dazzling and triumphant. *I am better than you, but you gave a good chase. We will grapple again when the time comes to hunt and we are not at port.*

There were a few hours of light yet, but to maintain his relationship with the other crew—Bashk aside—he would have to reappear quickly. These were needs he was not used to meeting.

He took a deep breath, relaxing the threads in his body, then he let the music of the hunt smooth away everything else. He let himself fall into that hunger, that focus. The emptiness in the back of his head was a pulsing ache.

He crossed the roof to the other side, to where the rooms underneath him were facing another street. There was a hatch leading to the topmost room on that side, and he slipped threads through the creases to listen for anyone beyond. For this hunt, it would not matter who he found. He needed no

skills and no disguises, he just needed to drink *someone*. It wouldn't matter if they were alone, either, as he could deal with all witnesses easily in such a small space.

He shuddered as a strange cast fluttered through his music. *I will deal with all witnesses, I will... I will find someone alone, so there will be no witnesses. I must... find someone alone.*

He reached for the handle of the hatch, but paused once he gripped it. He wasn't sure if his music had taken a turn just then, but... it had been a while since his body had misbehaved. A few days. This almost felt the same as those times. What had he just been doing?

I must find someone alone, he sang. Yes, that made sense. Limit witnesses.

The razor sharp clarity of the hunt pulsed through his mind, honing his will and drawing away all other concerns. He would have sent threads inward to watch himself work just in case... but his threads were focused on the tastes around him, the liquid gold rushing through him, the tastes of dust and pollen under his fingers at the hatch.

Drink—hunt—mind—take—

His spearheading threads had heard nothing, so he lifted the hatch and slipped inside, slinking down the ladder into a room with a large bed and a window with closed shutters. The wall was covered in hooks with things dangling, colored rocks on small chains, metal things. Wooden stools, boxes. It was part bedroom, part store room.

He crept toward the unmade bed and drew his fingertips over the sheets. The bed had been used by a woman, pale of skin with blonde hair, old, maybe fifty. The bed was wide enough for two but he could find only the one taste.

Voices echoed to the left, either in the next room or a few rooms down. Wood creaked somewhere in the building, like someone was crossing a room. From farther away came muffled laughter and the clinking of pots.

Some noises were closer. Very soft breath. A snapping noise, then a jangling sound. Something rustling against something else. A human could not have heard any of it.

His skin was alert, his threads thick with anticipation. There was someone in the room underneath him, alone.

Interfacing cords in his fingers came to life. The sensory spots on his forehead and cheeks rose to the surface, seeking any warmth around him. He drifted toward the open stairs, which were set off by bounced light from an open window. As he stepped, he spread material to keep the floorboards from creaking. He crept forward. Slowly, slowly. He was a fully drawn bow, an ax set to fall. He moved an inch at a time. The empty space in the back of his neck was burning him up.

A chair creaked, then there was a scraping sound. The jangling abruptly ceased. The woman began humming to herself, and the hum moved toward the stairs.

Ked pulled himself backward into a corner, behind the bed, right as the woman's head came into sight.

Ked's final two spots came to the surface. He saw her soft, warm shape as she moved to the wall of hooks and reached for something.

He leapt, grabbing her and smashing her to the ground face down. She tried to turn around but he was on top of her and his hands were pressed against the back of her head.

He drowned in her mind, her thoughts, her fears... her childhood in the mountains, her father's forge, buying precious stones and setting them, rings and bracelets and endless loops of shining metal, her now-dead husband, her two children across the sea....

He laughed with the spots on his face. It had been so long... nearly five days! He needed this jeweler's mind more than he needed to breathe. Another mindcast for his collection, another....

He wavered. Something was different. Something was wrong. He couldn't see anything but the heat of her mind pooling at the back of his neck. The mindcast was done and he

was surrounding it, wrapping it with cell prints he had taken from her body. But it was wrong. He was doing it in the wrong order.

He pushed her against the floor to drink her in, but then his music ripped sideways. His body jerked.

DON'T KILL HER—

His threads moved without reason, blindly diving into her body and then out again. His scream was strangled before it could burst from his throat.

He was being rent in half on the inside, his music pulling and pushing and twisting and thrashing. The thrill of the hunt was grating noise, collapsing on itself. He could not drink her.

I must drink her—I—

SHE SAW NOTHING—SHE NEED NOT DIE—

Ked's music surged in fury. *She knows I was here!*

DISTORT HER MEMORY—

Ked, desperate to stop the screeching, flooded her skull with threads that fuzzed and rippled until her recent memory had been wiped away.

The shuddering dissonance vanished, leaving behind a keening sour chord that persisted and throbbed through his deepness.

He knelt on her back, drawing his hands up to his face to look at his palms. That wouldn't be enough. She would remember *something*. She would have bruises....

He got off of her, and brushed the places his knees had dug into, dissolving the hematomas that were forming. He rolled her over and did the same for her knees, her forehead.

His hands hovered over her face. He knew that face very well, though he had never seen it before. He had her mind hot at the back of his neck, and several cell prints to record the shape of her body, yet here she still was, alive.

It was strange that he had not taken those cell prints as he had devoured her. It was much more strange that he could not... did not want to....

I do want to drink her!

The dissonance in his music grew again, engulfing him. He wrapped his arms around himself. This wasn't how his hunts were supposed to go. His ecstasy was warped. Perverted.

He had her mindcast in his head. He had done what he had come to do. He stood, still staring at the prone body. To hunt without killing... he had never done such a thing.

What is happening to me?

The music of the hunt had abandoned him, and all he had now was a ringing gold emptiness. He was starving for light, and there was only an hour or so of sunlight left, assuming he could even find an open space to drink it.

It was time for him to be a spy again, and he needed to play the part of the long lost Tabyz Sky. He could not take the time to bask.

I don't want to do this anymore.

He was trapped. He had to return to his master, and he needed the crew of the *Broken Storm* to get him there. Something was wrong with his body—or his mind—and he could not make it back home alone, not when he could no longer perform a hunt like he was meant to.

Threadsong quivering, he abandoned the woman in place and walked out the front door of the shop, leaving it unlocked behind him.

He walked in a daze up the street. *I had asked Olmoati for a green space with trees. They might be looking for me there, if I can find one. I can tell them I panicked in the crowd and ran away.*

There was no sunfire here to drink, and no food stalls to steal from. He was so hungry.... He had never been hungry after a hunt.

He went at a trot inland. What was it that Olmoati had said? Two streets down? Who knew where he was anymore? He might as well have been human for all his shape-sense was working.

Using the jeweler's mind, he asked someone for directions. There was a small green square, a memorial park, half a mile

away. He made his way there, and arrived just as the sky changed from reds to purples and blues.

He sat below a tree, facing outward so he would be easily seen, and leaned back against the trunk. Threads from his back flicked into the tree to drink from its vascular tissue. He could steal some sugars that way. He was forbidden from drinking the moss and the grass because it would leave a mark. That music was unchanged, so some part of his mind was still working.

His music had fought against him. It forbade him from killing her, and at the same time it compelled him to. The contradiction echoed in his deepness, still sending dissonance down his threads to their tips. This was worse than a physical injury; those could be healed, and the pain banished permanently. This was something else.

He had been so busy learning those human languages and trying to fix his mindcast collection that he had forgotten that he carried a wound he could not identify. He had not suffered serious consequences until now, but this he could not ignore.

It was not unusual for him to press against his music to gain insight at times he needed to make a choice. His master had left him with more instinct than actual instructions, and he had come upon this method to gain clarity when it mattered. It was almost like asking for permission from his master directly. His music either pushed back, or it left him free to act.

But this was the first time his music had spontaneously forbidden him from doing something without him prompting the question. He had hunted hundreds of times, and killed hundreds of humans. Apart from his mysterious injury, why should this hunt be different?

This is the first hunt I've undertaken since that day, Ked sang. My music had been strange all during the hunt. What actually happened?

His music spoke to him, as if it had volition. That was... ridiculous. No, it had responded to him depending on what he

was doing. That was normal. That was how it played out every moment of his life since his birth.

He was about to drink someone and....

No, it had happened before, too. When Kyrn first started his Talrish lessons, he had wanted to kill Kyrn, and then his music rebounded and forbade it.

On the roof, watching Bashk turn around the street looking for him, Ked had felt respect for the man.

And all this time learning these languages, using his human mind and human skills....

I'm becoming fond of humans. That's what's changed.

He was a servant of the ancient music, and it wasn't healthy for him to feel affinity toward humans. His only family and his only love was his master.

He couldn't harm his own kind. That melody was fierce within him. He must have started thinking of the humans as his kin.

It might have started on the pier in Wustor, when he first saw that ship full of Talnans. He had felt an attraction toward them, and had sought them out despite the cost to himself. In retrospect that choice had been irrational.

If I want to kill humans again, I have to treat them like animals again.

His deepness prickled at the thought and he cringed into himself. His music didn't like that idea, but not strongly. It wasn't committing to the prohibition or giving him a clear line to walk. His music was becoming as indecisive as he was.

I must hunt without killing? That's absurd. But if I cannot know ahead of time whether my music will stop me from killing, I must assume that it will, and I will need to hunt carefully. This trip will be difficult enough without such a bizarre handicap.

This flaw within myself to treat the humans as people... it must be a consequence of my injury. The damage to my mind-casts is secondary to that. I must find out what is wrong with my anatomy.

Footsteps approached him, and his eyes drifted open.

"Sky?" It was Kyrrn. Bashk stood a little behind, wearing a look Ked could not read. None of the nearby lamps were lit yet, but there was enough dusk light left for them to make him out, it seemed. Ked could see both of them quite clearly.

"I'm sorry," Ked mumbled. "It was too much. Too much noise. I needed to run. I needed quiet."

"I know crowds are hard for you. You've always been like that, as long as I've known you."

Ked was too exhausted to appreciate that coincidence.

Kyrrn offered a hand. "Let's head back."

"Yes. Yes, thank you, Kyrrn. I'm sorry."

Kyrrn helped him up, and he staggered to his feet. He would have to eat several extra shares of food to make up for what he didn't drink during the hunt, and that would be hard for him to explain. He would have to go without. He should have tried to find food to steal before coming to the park.

Ked took a slow look back at the tree he had been drinking. He might have killed it for all of the resources he had taken, but it appeared fine from the outside. If it was to die, it would not appear to die for days. Good enough.

"Let's go. It's getting dark," said Kyrrn.

Ked had enough wits to try to smooth things over with Bashk, who brought up the rear. "Where is Olmoati?"

"On the ship," Bashk said. "He was not feeling well."

"Oh. I wanted to hear about books. I'm sorry I ran away."

"I will show you some of my books," said Kyrrn.

"When will we leave port?"

"You were so eager to get off the ocean," said Bashk. "Already you want to set sail?"

Ked rubbed his forehead. "I want to go home," he murmured.

"So do I," Kyrrn said.

8. Two Men

Sky had the way of it now.

He could not create new imperatives within Ked's song, but he could choose between them.

The imperative Hunt he had been able to divert with *koulim* only because there was a slower, more thoughtful substitute: Spy. As both had about the same level of importance, the switch had largely worked.

But there were no strings he could pull to produce Hunt Without Killing. There was no music for Don't Kill, or Preserve Life. The best he could manage was Hunt combined with Leave No Trace, but that was too similar to Hunt and Destroy Witnesses, which is the way Hunt was inclined to play out. The trick was to arrange things so that the victim didn't technically witness anything. That wouldn't always be possible.

And it didn't work well. Hunt and Leave No Trace were at odds. The contradiction in imperatives was physically painful to both of them and caused unpredictability in Ked's music and his actions.

I've already saved lives doing this, two lives in two hunts. I must keep trying.

And then what? Ked's long term goal was to return home to his master. What would happen to Sky then?

Why was the creature collecting minds, anyway? Given what it was doing to the land around it, and given the imperatives it had given Ked, and given what had apparently happened to Talris over the last two years....

Some of the crew were saying Talris was dead already. But Sky had hope that things were not quite over. Ked believed that he would empower the creature by reuniting with it. That meant things could yet get worse, and Sky should prevent their reunion even if it killed him.

His music recoiled at the thought of suicide, however mild it had been. A burst of heat washed through him, echoing back and forth like ripples in a pond. *I must survive—survive—*

He could not end Ked's life because it would end his life, and his music would not permit him to wish for his own death.

Could I defeat the creature somehow?

Sky's awareness rushed around himself. He had grown considerably stronger within the mist since he had first crawled inside two weeks ago, even more so now that he knew how to use the mist's silver voice to speak to Ked. He had come to feel that the mist was a part of his body.

However badly Sky had stumbled at the start, Ked had not seen any of Sky's direct interference in a long time. And Sky had done some very invasive things.

I'm not supposed to exist, much less have power over this pocket of silver music. Ked cannot see me unless I choose. An ambush, right when Ked and the creature meet again?

But Sky could not leave the mist, nor Ked's deepness. How could he do any sort of damage to the creature from such a limited space?

I must find a way. The voyage is half over, and I am running out of time. This must become my priority.

Ked himself mainly stuck to bed, feigning illness. He had only hunted once more, four days before, in Tarja, and it had gone about the same way as it had had with the jeweler during the previous hunt. Deprived of the joys of the hunt, Ked had withdrawn into himself after it was done. He had only been able to gather the will to return to the ship with Sky's careful management.

Once on the ship, his instinct to Wander could only be soothed by not using his thread anatomy at all. His hungers

grew much more slowly, even indoors, as long as he was neglecting them so thoroughly. He came onto the deck to drink sunfire once in a while, but said nothing, and showed interest in nothing. Sky stole as much light as he could at those times, but it fed Ked's melancholy, as he was not receiving as much light as he was drinking.

Ked was gaunt, though he ate everything they fed him. But surviving was more important to him than living his life fully, and he was fiercely determined to survive. His focus now was on Return Home, an imperative in his music that was more persistent than Hunt or Wander.

Sky had found another song, one that Ked had not known he carried, and it helped reinforce Return Home. If it were to have a name, it would be Sleep. But it was a deep, deadening sleep, one for a situation such as this where he was to be entirely cut off from everything for long periods of time. Perhaps the music was better called Torpor, or Hibernation. But as this thread-neglect did have a place in their weave, it did not take work to maintain. And Sky knew they would both survive it, despite their suffering, because they were meant to survive it.

Ked was dozing when Kyrrn sat down at the side of his cot. Ked was aware of the man but did not stir. He didn't want to spare the will.

Kyrrn had grown cold to him after finding him at the park. Ked had neglected to notice the change, as Kyrrn was still accommodating Ked and treating him with respect none of the other crew did, as well as continuing to use the word "Sky" for him. But Sky had seen the moment it had happened.

In the park, at dusk, Ked had said Kyrrn's name without a Leinan accent.

The very thing that had convinced Kyrrn to trust him in Galluma—when Sky had inadvertently controlled Ked's body, when he was still lost in the void—was now evidence that Ked was not Sky after all.

Somehow, learning Talrish quickly and without a Leinan accent had not done it. It had been the name.

“Sky,” said Kyrrn softly. He said the word in Tarsi, but Ked still had the scholar’s mindcast open, the one he had hunted in Tarja.

Ked grew alert but did not stir.

“I know you are not Sky, or I know that perhaps you are not. Sometimes I look at you, and I see Sky looking back. I’ve heard things from your mouth I cannot deny. You are too much like him, even when you are using the wrong language to speak, or when you speak it too well. But it’s like you are two men in one skin, and most of the time you are someone else.”

Ked’s music crawled out of dormancy. His avatar, which had been faint like a ghost, solidified into a flickering gold outline. Sky caught notes of Destroy Witnesses.

“But it does not matter who you really are. If you are not him, then you are still important to discovering what happened to him. Talris needs answers, badly. And I intend to save Talris, and you.”

Kyrrn stood but did not leave the room. In Talrish, he added, “I will get you home, Sky. I promise.”

Something aligned within Sky. He had an opportunity now to peacefully turn away Destroy Witnesses by leveraging the music for Spy and doing something that Ked would not be able to do himself, and would not be allowed to perceive. He understood, through the mist, that what he was about to do was meant to be a profoundly rare act, and one that could be done only at great need.

I need to know if I can do this, Sky sang.

His music fluttered as he reached out of the mist. He moved numerous hands around Ked’s avatar, pressing into him, almost smothering him. His threads wrapped around Ked’s limbs as if forming a second skin. Ked did not react, even as Sky began moving Ked’s threads and singing with his voice.

Sky turned Ked's head slowly, as if pained. "Kirin," he said aloud. "Thank you."

He had said the words in Talrish, using his natural Leinan accent.

Kyrrn let out his breath in a hissing gasp, but Sky turned back and exhaled as if falling back asleep.

Sky retreated at once, smoothly but quickly, trailing silver pulses as he pulled back into the mist.

He had controlled Ked's body, on purpose, and Ked had seen nothing.

I did it. I can do it. This changes everything.

Ked's avatar stood still in the void. He lifted a golden hand as if studying it. He grew even more solid.

My mind lapsed, he sang. This feeling.... This has happened before. When I nested a year ago, I lost myself. Time slipped past me, exactly like this.

Ked did not sound alarmed. This music was meant to be here, meant to be part of the connection between the two of them, the connection Ked was not allowed to see.

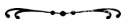
I had thought Kyrrn had seen that I am not Sky, but now I see I was wrong. I must... sleep longer. I dare not entice the hunt while at sea. I must sleep... must survive this.

Sky trembled eagerly as Ked's avatar faded again, falling into the melodies of Torpor. His light was utterly spent. This would not be something he could repeat often.

I can control his body, Sky sang. Briefly, with need, and according to the constraints of his imperatives, but I can do it.

Threadsong responded to need very easily, and as Sky was learning, it could be tricked into aligning with alternative intentions. He was getting better at bending those intentions.

How far could he bend them before they would break?



Sky let Ked's torpor relax gradually in the last few hours before their next stop, Éterhu. It would be the last stop they were to make before Fyrthten, the capital of Talris.

His music was prickly and sluggish. With as little light as they'd had to drink, it was hard for him to move. Still, he had the music for spying strong in his mind, and readied himself to counteract the hunt.

He sang *koulim* to Ked, who was a faint outline in the void. **SLEEP, THEN SPYING UNTIL THE HUNT—THE CURRENT MOMENT IS STILLNESS—THE HUNT WILL COME IN ITS TIME—**

He sang for the both of them. As their torpor dispersed, he knew that of all their imperatives, Hunt would want to emerge most strongly. Fortunately for both of them, they did not have enough light within them to sustain its melodies.

Sky was the more awake of the two, as he was always a little awake, even when Ked had faded almost to nothing. He could feel the hunt lurking, stalking him. His threads grew tight and precise in their hunger.

THE CURRENT MOMENT IS FOR WAITING—WATCHING—BEING THE SPY—

Ked's body lay rigid on the cot, and he sweat so much Mozhe, the doctor, had brought a wet rag to help him drink. Despite Sky's attention, Ked's music was on the knife's edge between Spy and Hunt. It had been too long since he had taken his last mindcast. Torpor dramatically slowed their hungers but it did not stop them.

Ked's hungers had been too neglected. If he succumbed, he would fall into a frenzy and there would be deaths.

It was a consequence of using Torpor so long to keep Ked dormant. But Sky knew how to physically control Ked's body now. He would force Ked's music into spying.

We would have had to hunt on the ship multiple times if I had not done this, and there can be no privacy here. He would have killed more than his victims. What comes next will be challenging, but this was the correct decision.

Mozhe wiped down Ked's forehead and bare chest with a damp rag.

"When?" Ked wheezed. "When do we go ashore? Please, please...."

"Well, it would have been another few hours, but there's something wrong."

"Wrong?"

"There's smoke. It's bad. We might not—"

Sky's control slipped.

Ked's eyes snapped open. He slapped away Mozhe's hands and wrenched himself out of bed.

"Hey, come back! You need rest!"

He stumbled, his body weak, then rushed out of the cabin to the port side, where most of the crewmen were staring off to the side in clumps. The sky was heavily overcast but Ked drank the scattered light as deeply as possible as he came up behind the crowd. Across the ashen sky streaked a dozen or more black ribbons, billowing upward. Smoke? Ked shoved someone away from the edge and leaned in for a look at the coast.

Swaths of the city had been reduced to gray rubble, and some of it was still actively burning. There was endless smoke from the city and from the road up the mountain behind.

Ked devoured light with the threads that had poured out into his hair and every inch of skin. The hunt rushed into him until his deepness felt it might burst. His fingertips were aflame.

"Full scale war!"

"If this is Éterhu, what will have happened to Fyrthten?"

"Who won? Us or them?"

"I don't see any of our flags."

Kyrrn and Bashk stood aside from the crowd, speaking to each other.

"Is there any point in going to Fyrthten now? Or anywhere in Talris?"

"We must try. We're so close. They need us."

“But where will we resupply? Atherlan?”

“No, they would have razed Atherlan first. We should double back, try to reach one of the colonies. Helar.”

“What if we cut the water ration—”

Ked needed to breathe, needed to touch—

No! No no no—

Ked stumbled backward, gasping so hard his vision swam. He clawed at his face to press his sensory spots back under his skin. His spots were blazing, his fingertips screaming.

Sky’s body had been pulled against Ked’s avatar as the void spun around them in a vortex of thrashing flames. His silver body was thirsty. Eager. The hunt had them both. Their music came together as he pressed himself into Ked.

Drink—mind—drink—now—

Everyone was distracted. They had to do it now. They had moments if they had any time at all.

Ked burst into Kyrn’s cabin, where the doctor was picking up the rag he had dropped.

Sky could not stop Ked. He didn’t want to. Music flowed out of him like a spring and poured into Ked. **COLLECT MINDS**
—FILL YOURSELF UP—

Ked tackled Mozhe and crushed him against the ground.

His six spots surfaced and erupted with light. His fingers pressed into Mozhe’s scalp so tightly his palms melted into his hair, his skull. Mozhe’s terror flowed up Ked’s arms. Ked was struck with the image of his own face, with six black spots flashing with hateful light.

Drink—take—hunt—take—

There was no pleasure in this, only a screaming starvation and a distant release he could almost reach. Ked raced toward that release with every thread in his body.

He guzzled everything he could touch inside the doctor’s mind. A childhood in the city, being beaten by his uncle, chains of flowers for someone who would not speak to him, his try at surgery, at herbs, his nights in the bottle, and then his days.... He needed it all.

The memories were scattered, the connections rough, but he needed this mind inside his body or he would die. His skill was tested from the speed of it, but the whole was coming together. The mindcast formed at the back of his neck as a mass of blessed golden heat, a precious weight, a pressure so welcome he could fly from the sweetness of it. The glory of the hunt swept through him, cleansing him of all his pain.

The tension in the void vanished like a sigh.

Sky's body came apart from Ked. His threads moved oddly, drunk on what had just happened. *No! What have we done?*

Ked slumped on top of the doctor's body. He breathed hard, but still had Mozhe under his fingers, delicious. He drew back his human eyes to see Mozhe staring at him in horror.

His hands grew tighter around the physician's head.

Sky had regained enough of his wits to sing to Ked. **HUNT—COLLECT MINDS—LEAVE NO TRACE—**

He had realized his mistake but it was too late. His music sang itself. **LEAVE NO TRACE—LEAVE NO—WITNESSES—**

Mozhe's body flowed into Ked. As he drank, he was granted the strength to drink faster. He melted into the physician from above, devouring the clothes that separated them. He had been shackled for so long, but he pressed himself against his prey and drew back the freedom he deserved.

Ked was blind to everything but the heat on his spots, the tastes of the man underneath him, and the desire he had been denied.

Sky's mist had formed again around Ked's avatar, feeding his desire. It was too late to keep Ked from drinking. Sky fought himself backward but he could not pry himself away. *No! Mozhe! Mozhe is dead! We killed him!*

Ked ripped cells from the physician's body to add to the finished mindcast. The body turned to ash where they touched.

Mine—mine—!

Their music moved together, and it was all Sky could do to remember himself. *My name is Tabyz Sky and I am human!*

He wasn't human. He was desire itself.

He had controlled Ked's body before. He had need now, but nothing could contradict the imperatives shining in his body. No other instinct would override Destroy Witnesses in this moment.

He could not fight the ancient music. His body was made of it. Instead, he forced himself to be there, surrounding Ked, and he looked through Ked's eyes as Mozhe's flesh crumbled. He forced himself to see.

This! This is the creature's future for mankind! It must be stopped or this will happen to everyone! To Kirin, to Reem! I have to protect them!

Another song rang through his body. A way out. Ked had never needed it, even for himself, but Sky saw how he could use it now. *Protect. Protect someone else.* He pressed his threads around Ked's body, covering him as tightly as a glove. He gathered up his thoughts, focusing on how badly he needed to drive Ked's body.

Someone burst into the room. Ked wrenched his eyes back and buried his spots, but not quickly enough. Bashk stood there, at the doorway, hatred twisting his face. Ked's half-digested slacks crumpled to the floor.

Whatever Bashk saw, it was too much!

Bashk darted toward Ked just as Ked leapt, and they grappled in the physician's ashes. Ked thrust threads into the man's body to rip apart the flesh inside, lancing through his lungs.

Sky moved Ked's avatar, drawing from the imperative he had just found: *Protect. I MUST PROTECT EVERYONE! SAVE TALRIS, STOP KED!*

Sky's music erupted into dissonance, cutting through both their music with screeching noise. "Save Talris" had been too abstract, and "stop Ked" had been too much in opposition to their other imperatives. Panicking, Sky pushed harder. **PROTECT—PROTECT—**

Sky stayed some of Ked's threads, but not all of them. Ked's movements became erratic.

Bashk flipped Ked onto his back, a hand tight on his throat, even as he began gasping hard. Blood dripped from Bashk's lips.

Underneath Sky's hands, Ked's avatar flailed. *What is this?* Ghostly golden arms reached backward, into the mist. *Someone else is here, touching my music!*

Sky's music buckled and his body recoiled. The unthinkable had happened. He leapt backward from Ked's touch. *I must not be seen!* It was too late, too late!

Ked's shock was so great that his music shimmered, unfocused, and he spun around himself. *Someone is here! Another mind, another will, inside me?*

Sky was paralyzed from despair. His greatest imperative, failed. His music was shattered. *I cannot fall apart now. Ked will slaughter everyone unless I stop him.*

But Sky could not bring himself to move. If he moved, he would be seen.

Ked had stilled and was staring at the silver mist. For a moment, the eyes of Ked's avatar locked with Sky's.

Bashk had Ked's arms around his back and was tying them up. "Demon," he rasped. "I knew you weren't—"

Ked slammed Bashk backward against the wall and Bashk grunted, dazed. Where they touched, Ked injected poison after poison. Threads raced to dissolve the rope binding his hands, and he turned—nose-to-nose with the tip of an upheld sword. He froze.

Kyrrn stood in the doorway, face grave, pointing a sword straight at Ked.

On the floor, Bashk was gasping. "He killed Mozhe, dissolved him to dust. I fear... I...." He let out a gurgling breath and was still.

Naked, Ked raised his back tall, smiling as he regarded Kyrrn's face. He let his forehead and cheek spots surface and

flicker with light. His threadsong vibrated with hatred and bloodlust.

“You were never Sky, were you?” Kyrn said softly.

“I am Sky.” Ked said. “And more.” He took a step forward.

Sky attacked Ked in the void, smothering him, wrapping around his body until Ked was muffled into silence.

PROTECT KIRIN!

Ked’s eyes rolled up in his head and his body dropped to the floor.

9. Shackles

Ked's music was molasses. He wrestled with something he could not see or taste. He was bound, pressed into stillness.

They know who I am! They all must die!

He thought he tasted hands on his body. Ropes at his wrist, his neck, his ankles. Threads slunk blindly into the fibers to break them apart. He tried to drink but couldn't taste anything. He might have touched flesh, and he could not taste whether it was his own.

His old injury made his body rebel, making his songs confused. He hated the knife back in Galluma and the man who had used it. It was then everything started to go wrong. He was a fool to have stopped chasing this strange malfunction in his music.

Master! Master, I'm sorry!

Time slipped past Ked. Moments moved over him and away from him before he could reach out to touch them.

Something was keeping him from thinking. It wasn't like before, like all those days and nights he kept himself in hibernation. That stillness, that sleep, had served him. It allowed him to maintain control over his hungers. This stillness smothered him. It was thrust upon him against his will.

No, there were two forces at work here. The stillness was part of his music, though it was flourishing when he didn't want it to. But the other....

There is someone else here! I know it!

He had seen something inside his deepness, near where he thought the wound had been, a counter-rhythm that cut across

his music as if driven with a separate mind with its own intentions. It had been out of phase with him. He had almost caught it, almost looked right at it.

There were dozens of mindcasts inside him, many disturbed or destroyed by that wretched knife. He had not yet touched them all, and did not know if all of them were accounted for.

Was one of his mindcasts alive? Fighting him?

Impossible!

He did not know what was possible anymore.

SLEEP—STILLNESS—

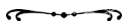
Why did that voice sound so much like his master?

That voice... it was the silver edge in his strongest instincts, and it was the thrum underlying his most purposeful melodies. That silver had been so comforting, so subtle and sweet, and so vital to his music he hadn't realized it was a separate voice until it started fighting against him. Now it asked him of things that his master would never have wanted. That silver had been hijacked by an intruder.

If I cannot trust my music, what do I have left?

His instincts were untrustworthy, his sanity suspect, and there was someone else in his own deepness, working against him. He had to abandon everything else and focus on returning home to his master, as he could not recover from this mess on his own. His master would fix everything.

No matter how much I may want to slaughter these witnesses, or keep to my disguises, or hunt yet more minds, I will do nothing unless it helps me get home.



The drums were the only constant in the dark, only ceasing during the night. Sky's senses were so smothered he could not be sure he caught lines of light around them or if it was only

his hope. There was never enough to drink. Only the drums marked the passage of time.

The drums had begun to sound again now. Had Sky's senses lapsed through the start of the shift, or had the shift just begun? If it was dawn, was it the second or the third after they had been bound?

They were dying. The brief sunfire they had touched before devouring the physician had sustained them for another few days in this new, forced hibernation, but that strength was coming to its end.

It was hard to think with language, hard to remember why he had to hold Ked back. **PROTECT—SLEEP—PROTECT—**

Reem. I am doing this for you. I will never let this monster go free.

He could not kill Ked, or cause Ked to die, but Sky would get as close as possible.

Sometimes Sky was the mist itself. Sometimes he was a human pulling tightly at strings he couldn't see, drawing from music he barely understood. He was less human the less light there was left. Whenever he was aware of himself, he imposed shape onto the mist, sculpting it so that Protect was louder than Survive. Perhaps it made a difference.

Ked dissolved the ropes around his neck, wrists, and legs whenever he roused, but these were always replaced when he roused again. The humans handling him learned not to touch him for long; there was at least one sailor who would never use his arms again.

Someone dragged his limp body along the floor. Sky let a little more awareness reach them. Sweaty bodies, men, rows and rows of rowers in the dark, though they were not rowing now. Light peeked in from the oar holes on either side, a deep red sunset.

There was light in front of him. Ked and Sky both became tightly focused on that light. Ked kept his body limp, but his skin came to life, threads creeping to the surface so they could devour sunfire the moment it touched him.

Sky shimmered with need. **DRINK—LIGHT—**

Ked was pulled into the open, with the sky wide open above him, and he was shoved to the deck in a pool of sunlight.

Ked gasped as if drawing breath after drowning. His body flexed, straining his bindings, and all his threads fled his body to drink.

Drink—light—drink—drink—

The light was shallow from dusk, but it was so welcome after their drought that pleasure drew golden trails in the void, enveloping them. Ked's avatar fluttered with strength against Sky's hands. They were both so thirsty they were frozen in place, Ked underneath Sky's touch, both gulping light as if they knew they would never drink it again if they stopped.

"So you do need the light."

Startled, Ked lifted his head to find Kyrn standing above him, sword drawn toward him, standing beside Olmoati and between several strangers.

"Light?" Ked croaked.

"It was something Bashk said to me the day before you murdered him. It seems he was right."

Ked's body jerked forward in an impulse to kill Kyrn, but he forced his body to relax and drink. *In time, in time. Not yet.*

To Kyrn's left stood a woman, tall and striking in silky white robes, wearing an intricate gold crown set with moonstones. Her hands were laced in front of her, one finger tapping on her knuckles on the other hand. At her side was a clean-shaven man in a formal white suit with a cape, perhaps a dress uniform, a hand on a silver sword hilt at his belt.

The sight cut through to Sky, and his human thoughts came together. *A priestess and guardian from the Moon Temple. Then we are in Talris! The ship is at port in Fyrthten!*

On Kyrn's other side, two men in red military uniforms were standing behind a third of greater rank. All were unshaven, and smelled of musk and sweat. These three were scowling at him.

The Hands of the Sun, the military's religious arm. It does not bode well that the Moon and the Sun are both here.

Behind them all, barefoot dockworkers were rolling barrels down toward the port side.

Ked's avatar shivered in relief. *Talris! Master, I am coming home!*

Kyrrn moved his sword higher and lower as if measuring the height of Ked's sprawled body. Ked eyed the sword tip as it moved.

"What are those marks on his face?" said the woman. Her voice was haughty and thin.

"Those marks only appeared the day we bound him," said Kyrrn. "But I did see light move across them when they first appeared, and sometimes in the dark when he was kept bound, below."

In the void, underneath Sky's grip, Ked wrestled against several competing urges, jerking and wincing under the half-formed pressures that were streaking through him. *I can't slaughter them; I'm too weak. I can't hide my spots now, as that's worse than having them seen at all. All that matters is buying time to drink as much light as possible. Everything else can wait.*

Ked's body calmed, pulsing with music that strongly reminded Sky of *koulim*.

"And he is responsible for the blight?" said the man in white.

"I cannot say. He is at least working in parallel to it. Shavid's arms bear witness to that."

"And you did not run him through and throw him overboard?"

"He wanted to come here, to Fyrthten, to Talris, very badly."

"All the more reason—"

"He is linked to the blight. He may prove the key to ending it for good."

"Or he may accelerate it," said one of the Hands.

“That is for you to determine. I am only a servant of Talris, bringing him here to you. I would not have deprived Talris of the chance to use him to solve its problems.”

Darkness crept over Ked’s legs; the shadows were growing longer. He wriggled forward.

“You see? He desires the sun,” said the woman. “And the marks on his face resemble the Goddess, her eye closed. You say you saw light move upon them?”

One of the Hands stepped toward her and growled. “If he bears the Moon’s mark, then the Sun must be the one to defeat him.”

“If he is subject to our forces, then it is our forces—”

The group began arguing fiercely.

“It was not like the phases of the moon, Grand Priestess,” Kyrn said over the din. “The light glittered like the sun on the water.”

The edge of shadow crossed Ked’s legs again.

In the void, Ked’s avatar strangled a scream. *I cannot be so plain with my own weaknesses. They’ll kill me. I must survive.*

Ked forced his body still. The threads in shadow coiled tightly against their basal cords, more and more as the shadow grew longer.

His avatar thrummed, thinking hard, moving his mind to the rhythms of Survive. His murderous urges were silent.

Sky was submerged deeply in the same rhythms. He was barely anything more. *As long as he does not intend harm to anyone. I will ration my strength and watch him.*

“We will not come to a decision today,” said the Hand. “He will be imprisoned for the night. We shall have our physicians come—”

The priestess cut in and said, “And our scholars—”

They were arguing again. Ked curled inward as the shadow touched his back. The light was fuzzing to nothing.

Threads in his scalp gathered material from his hair, pulling down strands and breaking them apart, and he moved

the dust to his face. He buried his spots, and deposited the black dust where his spots had been.

My Talrish is too perfect, Ked sang. He reached for a Leinan mindcast. Two of his earliest were native Leinanso speakers, but one was less damaged. It would take several minutes to open. He would try to have it and the physician's mind both open at once. The physician's mind was not ready for storage yet, as little attention as he'd been able to pay to it, but Ked would die if he did not try something dramatic. He folded the physician's mind roughly against itself, smashing it into a smaller shape. He winced as it cracked and its shape buckled.

"Please, don't hurt me," Ked said in Leinanso. He struggled to his feet with his hands behind his back. He shivered as if cold.

Kyrrn raised his sword at him, and Ked rolled to a kneel instead. The others stood in place.

Sunfire seeped into Ked's hair. "My name is Tabyz Sky, and this man has been keeping me prisoner."

The Hand snarled at him. "Speak properly!"

I will not say a word in Talrish until I can get this mind open!

"Please! They've been hurting me!" Ked said in Leinanso, babbling. He knew enough now not to call Kyrrn by name; it was a Talrish name, and Leinans did not pronounce it easily. "The captain knows me, or he's supposed to, but they've been keeping me in the dark. Tying me up. Starving me. They say I'm to blame for the blight but I've done nothing! They're hurting me. Please help me! Save me from him!"

"That is... nonsense!" Olmoati cried in Leinanso. He cowered at Kyrrn's side. "You absolute monster! How dare you pull this after what you did to Bashk and to Mozhe! We all saw you!"

Ked shrank inward and began to weep. "Please don't hurt me. Please."

"What is he saying?" the priestess said.

"Unbelievable," said Kyrrn, his voice murderous. "That isn't going to work. It's too late."

The man in white flicked his cape as if dismissing something disgusting. "He claims that they've been hurting him. Keeping him in the dark and starving him."

"You claim to be human?" said the priestess.

"The marks!" Kyrrn said. "You see the marks on his face!"

The Hand approached Ked and touched his face, moving his fingers past one of his forehead spots.

Kyrrn leapt forward. "Don't touch him! You'll...."

The Hand rubbed his fingertips together. "Lamp dust," he said. Ked knew from the tastes on his skin that the black dust he had left behind had been smudged off.

"No!" Kyrrn cried. "This is a trick!"

The pair from the temple and the three Hands of the Sun turned toward Kyrrn, suspicion plain on their faces.

Ked flopped forward. "Please don't let them hurt me any more. I'll do anything."

"He murdered my physician and my second in command," said Kyrrn firmly.

"And as you are the captain of the *Broken Storm*, I must take that accusation seriously," said the Hand. He wiped his fingers on his shirt. "But this claim of him being a demon...."

"This has been a waste of time," said the priestess. She turned as if to leave.

"Wait," said the man in white. In clumsy Leinanso, he said, "You claim to be Tabyz Sky."

Ked nodded vigorously.

"They said you were found in Galluma. Is that true?"

Ked's avatar tightened. *Do I claim they kidnapped me here, or do I claim they found me in a foreign land? Would they be able to verify who set out on the Broken Storm? Is it worse to catch me in a lie, or to maintain that I came from Galluma? I can't decide. I must decide!*

"I... I don't know," he said, ducking his eyes. "Something is wrong with my head. I can only remember the last few

weeks.” *That will satisfy everyone.* “I just remember pain, and darkness....”

There was a thick silence, and Ked knew he had taken too long to respond.

“An utterly noncommittal answer,” said the man in white. He had said this in Talrish.

Ked spared a glance upward. The group had grown suspicious again. *A misstep. But I am still in a better position than before, I think,* he sang.

“I see there is something to this after all,” said the Hand. “He is at least a murderer. Whether he is linked to the blight is a separate question.”

“You believe him? That I’ve been torturing him for no reason?” said Kyrrn. “Must I show you Shavid’s arms again?”

One of the other Hands of the Sun shrugged. “That could have been some disease you ran into in the West.”

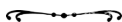
Kyrrn sheathed his sword with a snap. He raised his left arm and slowly, dramatically, worked at the glove, his face tight in a growl. The fingers on his hand were spread apart, but it was apparent they were misshapen as he loosened each finger of the glove. The glove came off and Kyrrn held his hand high, pushing his sleeve downward.

His fingers were shriveled, misshapen. Even the bones had been melted. Ugly black scars branched down from his hand down his arm, which was withered. When his fingers moved they moved stiffly.

“This is the consequence of touching him,” Kyrrn declared. “Believe me, don’t believe me, fine. But do not claim you were not warned.”

He re-gloved his hand, then made a dismissive gesture toward Ked.

“Take him. I don’t care what you do to him now. I wash my hands of this Ked. I must find myself a new first mate, and I must beg forgiveness from Bashk’s widow. Now, get off my ship.”



Once Ked was locked in his cell, Sky released Ked's avatar and drifted backward into his separate space within the void so he could rest.

The jail was not well populated. From what the Hands had said when they brought Ked inside, most of its old occupants had been conscripted. One Leinan boy, barely a teenager, occupied the cell across from him.

The priestess and the man in white lingered, as did the Hand in command of the trio that had come to Kyrn's ship. They gave him clothes to wear, and they took turns questioning him. Ked answered in accented Talrish, courtesy of the tanner's mindcast he had open.

They drilled him about the blight, and demons, and where he'd been the last two years, and where he'd been before that. He didn't remember, he said. He didn't know anything about demons or the blight, he said.

After questioning him about an hour, they left, still stuck in their stalemate. But they promised him more questions in the next few days, as well as some spiritual tests.

"You'll hang later in the week if you're lucky," said the Hand.

Ked's face crumpled in despair and he sank to the floor. His questioners locked the cell door and left.

The cell window was high and narrow, barely tall enough to stick an arm through were it low enough to reach. All through the night, Ked stood pressed against that stone wall, arms stretched toward it, and threads from his fingertips spread thick like ribbons out the window into the weeds.

He drank vines and bushes but only such that they appeared not to have grown so thickly; he would not leave dead earth behind, like there was all through the blight. In the ensuing empty space, between leaves, he spread his threads flat and drank moonlight.

It was a tiny fraction of what the sun would have granted him, and keeping his threads so extended and drinking from such a distance to his deepness left him with even less. Still, the moon was almost full and he was able to drink this crippled sunfire through half the night.

Even this much light was a luxury, and through all of it Ked did not move a single thread he didn't have to. His self control was growing frighteningly quickly.

Once his threads were cast into moon shadow, he sat in a corner of the cell. He took off his shirt and tore it into strips with his hands, then ate the pieces with his mouth. Threads tore the matter apart as he pretended to chew.

Ked had thought nothing aloud the entire time. *He must be rationing his light*, Sky thought. *Although... usually I hear something of what he's thinking.*

Ked finished packing Mozhe's mind away, then stood at the lock at the cell door, reaching inside it with thread, and fussing with the mechanism. Ked hissed and recoiled from the tang of copper in the bronze, which had briefly numbed the threads that had tried to taste it. He tried again more carefully, feeling rather than tasting, and applied a mild acid to the innards.

Within the void, Ked's avatar seemed to slowly stretch his limbs outward as if waking up from a pleasant nap. He turned about, then faced the mist.

Truce? Ked sang.

Sky was rigid with shock. Could Ked see him?

Ked's avatar turned its head, looking slightly to one side of the mist, then further away. No, Ked could not see him at the moment. At best he knew the general area of Sky's hiding place.

Sky had half believed that Ked had forgotten he had seen someone interfering. Dread crawled through his body.

Ked sang a smile. *It seems to me you want to live, and you must want to get out of here as badly as I do, so let's make a*

deal. Cease your sabotage and I will stop killing humans. What do you say?

Time passed. Ked's avatar stood still, confident, silent.

He wants me to sing something aloud, Sky thought. This is a trap.

Ked cocked his head. *You cannot lie with threadsong. This is a genuine offer. I intend to stop killing humans if you stop whatever it is you are doing to interfere with me. This would be quite the bargain for you.*

Sky's anxiety rushed in tight circles within the mist. Sky was still in the greater position of power between them, or else Ked would not be trying to make a deal.

Ked stood for perhaps a quarter hour, standing at attention, looking vaguely toward the mist. Sky couldn't fathom how Ked could keep his thoughts from leaking out over such a long period of time, as they spilled out of him whenever he thought anything at all.

He's learned to hide his intentions from me, Sky realized.

The mist shuffled outward, indignant. It flicked angry wisps of silver at Ked. *Disobedient servant!* Had that been Sky's thought?

You have been quite the unwelcome house guest, but in the end, perhaps it has been to my benefit. You've done things with threadsong I didn't know were possible. And I know now that I suffer from a very strange blindness when it comes to my own body, my own deepness. I would never have guessed. So it is you I must thank for what I am becoming now. I cannot free myself from shackles I cannot perceive, after all.

Shivers moved through Sky's body.

Ked's music beat quicker. *I feel you stealing the threadlight that is rightfully mine. I know you can hear me.*

No, you don't, thought Sky. *You're bluffing. You don't really know who or what I am. You're trying to trick me into revealing myself.*

If you can be patient, so can I. There is nothing you can do that I cannot. This is my body, and you are only an intruder.

Indignation fluttered inside the mist. *You're wrong. Silver is greater than gold, always. Your servant's music is nothing before mine.*

I will wait. My offer stands open, for now. But I won't keep to my part unless I hear from you that you agree to my terms.

This has all been a bluff. He's floundering.

The lock at the cell door fell apart. Ked caught some of the pieces in his hands, but some still clinked on the floor on the other side of the gate. No one but the boy would have heard it, if the boy was even still awake.

Ked felt at the brass hinges to apply a little oil, then swung the now-silent door outward. He made his way to the door for this section of rooms, beyond which was a hallway, possibly containing one or more guards.

Would Ked put the guards to sleep? Kill them? Drink them?

Sky's body shimmered with outrage, sending strange pulses through his mind. An angry melody drifted around the mist in circles, granting him determination and initiative that was rare for the entity he had become.

Ked's threads hummed as he half-packed the tanner's mindcast, readying the space for a new one. Throughout his body, his light fell strongly into the rhythms of the Hunt. The void folded over itself as the music of the Hunt roared awake, gathering the mist and shoving it against Ked's avatar.

A dozen transparent sentries crowded around them, watching Ked's avatar and the mist both. *I will find you—I will catch you—* the sentries sang.

Ked's hand touched the door. *My offer stands. Act quickly.*

Ked will escape whatever confinement they find for him unless he is absolutely, unequivocally proved to them to be a demon, Sky thought. He gathered himself. **I DO THIS FOR REEM.**

Sky became the Hunt.

He pressed into Ked, filling him deeply with the thrill of that fire, making it burn bright and fast and hot. Ked's sentries

fell back into his center, drowning in a new purpose, and Ked's surprise lasted no more than a moment before his whole body was focused on nothing else but his need to touch a mind and take it for himself.

His fingertips were turning inside out with desire, and his six spots erupted on his face, blinding him to everything but the heat around him. He was hunger itself, he was purpose, and he was quick, pulsing music that pulled him forward through the door.

The door smacked the wall and Ked darted through an empty hallway, rushing past empty cells and more doors. He knew the way. He was the master of his environment.

He rushed through the door to the main atrium, where he beheld shapes, warm shapes, humans that all belonged to him and would crumble under his hands.

He leapt and tackled one of them, not caring who it was, and his spots burst with dazzling joy and relief. Pleasure drowned him as he poured interfacing cords into the man's mind and devoured every thought and memory, reaching faster, devouring faster, needing it.

His skin was aflame, the emptiness in the back of his neck flooding with heat and purpose and light. He began to laugh with his voice and his spots. He was drunk with the Hunt, more alive than he had been in his lifetime.

Survival training in the mountains, playing cards, dice—Ked didn't care, nothing mattered except the Hunt—learning the spear, razing towns—Ked swallowed everything, gulping it—arresting commoners to steal from them, finding dark places to buy opium....

The mindcast formed and Ked's desire shifted focusing on the meat under his body, under his fingers. He tore through the flesh, drinking in glory and power, feeding himself, utterly blind to his outer body.

DRINK—FEED—DRINK—DEVOUR—

Ked could not break away. Leave no Trace surfaced but Sky crushed it to nothing. He pushed Ked's desires so hard he

thought he might dissolve into Ked's avatar permanently from the joy of it.

The man's body was gone and Ked lay gasping on the ground, spots flashing hot and cold from joy. He could not stop laughing.

Someone will have seen this, Ked sang, dazed. An anxious note had slipped into his music as the Hunt finally began to ebb. He turned his head into the room, belatedly reforming his human eyes.

No fewer than fifteen guards were staring at him, tables and chairs askew, one ceramic lamp broken on the ground and smoldering softly.

Ked laughed, limp on the ground as they crowded around him, and he laughed as Sky enveloped him to pull him back into the darkness.

10. Possession

Ked groaned as he rose to his hands and knees.

It was a different cell this time. This one lacked a window, though by his hunger for sunfire it must have been not long after dawn.

His music rang with the afterglow of the hunt and the fresh mind pulsing at the back of his neck. The guard. He had devoured the guard. That mind was hot and delicious to him. He had gained some strength from that fiasco, but in his frenzy he had burned a great deal of light, too. He wasn't sure if he had come out ahead.

The walls in the cell were warm with lamplight. Behind him, ceramic faintly clacked against wood.

He turned himself around to find a half dozen guards in the hallway beyond the bars of his cell. Some sat around a small table set with a lamp and pitchers, cups, and plates of bread and fruit. Other guards were standing, swords drawn, watching him. They were all silent, all staring at him.

A permanent guard. They'll never leave me alone now.

Ked came to his feet, glaring intently at them. A few of them flinched as he made his way closer. The lamp flame was a spot of warmth on the sensory spots on his forehead and cheeks, a mockery of sunfire.

So many people had seen his spots and had witnessed him hunt that he couldn't keep track anymore. He badly wanted to murder everyone in the building.

He focused his mind on his master, on returning home. No other music mattered. He had to focus on escaping.

Ked took swift steps toward the cell bars and gripped them tight. The guards rushed to their feet, every man with a sword or a dagger in his hand. Ked made sure to look them all in the face before hiding his eyes and revealing his last two spots. He filled his spots with the hatred he felt toward them and their kind, and it rippled and pulsed as heat. They would see it as glittering light on a field of black.

He laughed, long and loud, an aggressive, hungry laugh. He saw nothing but the heat from his own threadlight on his spots, but he heard a chair fall over, heard feet shuffle away from him.

He spread his arms. He was naked. He took several steps backward, still laughing, and then feigned a collapse. He buried his spots, and twitched as if wrestling with something inside his mind.

He got up again slowly, gasping, a hand over his forehead. He turned toward them meekly.

The soldiers stared at him, eyes wide. A pair of them mumbled something to each other, then one sped away, toward the door.

Ked could not open the tanner's mindcast all the way because the guard's mind was still too fresh and too large. He would need to avoid speaking Talrish for now or he would speak it with his own skill, without an accent.

He looked about himself as if realizing he was naked. He covered himself with his hands, then looked around the cell quickly until he found the pile of clothing they had left him. He rushed to the clothes and donned them quickly, taking quick looks at the guards as if embarrassed.

Once dressed, Ked shivered and rubbed his arms with his hands. He found the blanket on the other side of the room and wrapped it around him.

He approached the bars timidly. "Please," he said. "Help me." He shuddered and fell to the floor, curling up into a ball under the blanket.

Several pairs of footsteps entered the room. "He is awake?" came a male voice. It was the Hand of the Sun from the previous day.

"Captain," said a guard. "He just started laughing, out of nowhere...."

Ked peeked through the blanket at the Hand in his red dress uniform, who stood in silence as the guard explained what Ked had done. Laughter flitted through Ked's back as he huddled tighter and shivered as if with fever.

The captain of the Hand drew his sword and approached the cell. "So, demon. You reveal yourself."

Ked stilled, then stood. The blanket dropped to his feet. He brought all six spots back to the surface, keeping them cold so he could sense the warm, blurry shapes of the men in front of him.

I've played the victim, he sang. Now to show them the demon they must remove.

He used the guard's mind to speak Talrish so he would have no gaps in vocabulary. It was hot and vivid under his interfacing cords. "The day of my emergence comes closer," he said.

"And what are you?"

Ked smiled and said, "I am the blight."

He let heat flicker down his spots, top to bottom, like a gentle rain. The guards edged backward.

"You are the demon responsible for the blight?" said the Hand. "You are the one responsible, and no one else? Nothing else?"

Ked cocked his head and smiled more broadly. He reformed his eyes; he would need to see the humans' reaction to what he said to make sure he did not lose his footing in this performance.

"Give me one good reason I shouldn't run you through right now," said the Hand.

"Tabyz Sky. I am inside him, but he is still here, still alive."

The Hand sniffed. "One innocent man for all of Talris? That is an easy trade to make."

"I cannot be killed!"

Ked formed his fingers into scythes, and slashed at his left arm deeply, to the bone. It bled freely for a moment, then the sliced flesh drew together and the bleeding stopped. Within ten heartbeats the flesh was smooth as if it had never been harmed. Even the blood he drank back into his skin. It took much of his remaining light, but it was worth the shock on the captain's face and the horror that had the guards paralyzed.

"If you kill this body, you will only be killing Sky," Ked said. "Upon his death, my spirit will jump to someone else in Fyrhten, and I will slowly infest their mind and body, just as I have with Tabyz Sky. You will never find me again, much less catch me again. I know how to evade you better now."

"If you will be reborn, then why does it matter to you whether Sky lives or not?"

Ked reformed his fingers. "It took two years to gain this much control over Sky's body. I do not wish to start over with a new host."

"Why do you need a body at all?"

"Once I become fully corporeal, the blight will become permanent. I will be able to drink your bodies, all over the world, all at once, in every nation under the sun, without touching you." Ked put heat into his four visible spots. "The blight will cover everything, forever. And no one, not even the Goddess, her eye open, nor the Sun with his Sword in all his Hands could stop me! I will devour all!"

The guards were cowering, but the Captain of the Hand kept his sword level. He kept his composure well.

"Who was the prophet who touched the first Sword, and knew him to be king?" said the Hand.

Ked hid his eyes behind his central spots, and heat flickered on all six. He started laughing softly, all while ravaging the guard's mind at the back of his neck.

“Who was it that ran a message to Mostherat in the last battle of the third war?” said the Hand.

It was plain in the guard’s mind, the fifth Sword of Talris, Mostherat. He was the force behind Talris’ annexation of many nations, including Leinanto. Ked had devoured enough conquered people to know the stories he was finding were all propaganda.

“I am the blight, that which you call Gluttony. I am greed, hunger, desire. I was there, with Mostherat himself, guiding his hand, driving him into Leinanto to steal the land and the people for himself, even while he pretended it was for Talris’ glory, for the Sun. That Sword was the bloodiest of them all. He acted as the Sun’s agent, but he was thoroughly mine.” Ked was buying himself time, pulling the guard’s mind apart until he found the name he wanted. “Yes. I was there when the messenger Gorrul died at the Sword’s feet, and the Sword never thought of him again, for all the messenger appears in songs and scriptures. I had come into Mostherat too deeply, and he no longer had compassion for anyone, not even his wife.” He started laughing again.

At last the Hand’s face grew hard with terror. “Lies. You are trying to enrage me.”

Ked took a step closer. “I was there, and you were not. The Sun’s light does not reach every corner of Talris, and even the Hands move in darkness when it suits them. You know nothing of me and my work. Your scripture has been corrupted.”

The Hand closed his eyes and grew silent for several moments. He took a deep breath and said, “I have been speaking with Kyrrn and his crew.”

Ked’s smile grew more modest, but he kept his chin high.

“Why were you in Galluma? You have yet to explain that to anyone.”

“To reach their emperor. I thought he would be a better host for me, and would become a warmonger and conqueror like Mostherat. I changed my mind.”

“And why did you hire Kyrrn to take you to Talris?”

“Better to finish my work here. Kyrrn was coming straight here and with haste.”

“You needed to do all these things in the body of a random Leinan freeman?”

“I am bound to him tightly until I can emerge, or until I choose a new host to start my growth again.”

“Then we are back where we started. You are stuck here, in the body of a man, in our prison.” The Hand turned briefly toward the guards. “There is genuine reason not to touch you.”

Ked began pacing back and forth along the bars, watching them with his six spots.

“Well done,” said the Hand. “This performance was... exquisite. But I finally understand you. Everything you have said today has been a fabrication. You are associating yourself with the blight to make us desperate to deal with you quickly. But you discourage us from killing you, or moving you. You claim to be Gluttony incarnate, the blight itself, as if it wasn’t still pushing outward in the wilderness between Fyrthten and Éterhu.”

Ked raised a hand, half curled. “Do you want another demonstration?”

“You are a demon,” said the Hand. “But you are not the blight, nor are you one of man’s four sins fighting to become corporeal. What an absurd thought. Despite your gross misrepresentation of scripture, you do not know our theology very well. You need something in Talris, perhaps at the center of the blight, which you can mimic with your hands.”

Ked’s deepness grew cold. He forced himself to keep pacing.

“The boy across from you saw you pressing yourself toward the window for a full half the night, as if trying to reach the Goddess’ eye, among other strange behaviors.”

Ked stopped and his eyes came back to the surface. His palms itched with desire as he eyed the cell containing the boy, several cells down.

“Now you are being honest with me,” said the Hand. “You are trying to mimic a human under possession by a demon, and pretending to emerge more strongly as one or the other to either earn our sympathy or frighten us into action. These marks on your face, for example.”

He shoved his sword forward into the cell, past the bars, pointing at Ked’s head. Ked took a step back. A beat of fear flickered over his spots.

“They rubbed off in my hand when you were putting on the act, to strangers, that Kyrn had only imagined a demon, and that you were the poor, wronged Tabyz Sky suffering from memory loss. Now you cannot deny those marks are a part of you, whatever you are, and so now you bring them out on display to intimidate us.

“You cannot control yourself. You run on a rampage when your patience breaks, and then you have no choice but to cover it up with whatever you invent in the moment. You are becoming more desperate, not on the cusp of permanence, but death.” He gave the sword another thrust into the cell. “And despite the display you gave us with your arm, you do not appear to like swords much.”

Ked grabbed the blade with his hands, letting the edge cut into the flesh of his fingers, then pressed the point against his chest, straight into his heart. Inside his body, threads and cords slithered away from the stinging metal, rearranging his tissues and drawing his heart to safety. He pulled the sword deeper into himself, bleeding furiously.

Ked’s spots flared. “You... know... *nothing!*” he roared.

The captain of the Hands yanked his sword out of Ked, and the guards backed against the cell on the other end of the hallway. They stared at Ked in abject horror as he laughed, closing the wound and draining the blood out of his shirt until all there was left of what he’d done was a slice in the fabric.

Two of the guards fled. Another shook so badly he dropped his sword, then ducked to retrieve it.

The Hand of the Sun scowled, his eyes white with fury. "I know," he said tightly, "that we have you in custody. I know that all your talk today was meant to drive us into giving you a full and proper exorcism under the Sun, and I know that you must not get what you want."

Ked pressed against the metal bars of the cell, chuckling deeply.

"As loathe as I am to say it, we will do the ceremony under the Goddess' open eye. The moon will be full the night after tonight. Perhaps that was the Sun's design. I will not let politics get in the way of protecting Talris from you."

The Hand's arms shook as he sheathed his sword. He turned and marched out of the prison.

Ked slunk to the floor, deepness trembling from exhaustion. He buried his spots, too weak to play the demon any longer. *The moonlight! They will not bring me into the sun! I must wait one and a half days, and then only moonlight?*

"Please," he said. "Water. Food. Please."

He had dramatically run down his threadlight, and would have to go back into hibernation to survive the next few hours, never mind the next day and a half.

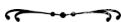
In the moonlight, particularly under the light of the full moon, he would have enough strength to break free of them, no matter what else they did. Here in the dark he could do nothing.

One of the guards tossed him a heel of bread. He forced himself to stay in place as it bounced toward him, and he reached for it with his hands, slowly, agonizingly slowly. He wanted to snatch it and dissolve it in his fingers. Instead, he took it and broke it into pieces to chew with his mouth and his teeth.

With the strength he drew from the bread, he set tissue at his throat to begin working, making a scent that would attract rats. He had already seen a few in the corners of the jail, crawling inside other cells to find leavings from other men. If he breathed long enough they would come. It no longer mat-

tered if rats were seen coming toward him and not seen leaving.

One and a half more days of this!



For the first time since Ked had devoured the guard, Ked's avatar spoke to Sky directly.

You must want to live, Ked sang. The music demanding I survive is too thick in my deepness. You must see that fighting me will only cause us to die. You must!

Sky stirred. He had become the mist again, thrumming Survive. He had lost track of time.

Ked was naked, curled up on the floor of the cell. His threadlight was dim enough he shivered from the cold.

Sky had little will now except Survive and Return Home. The more he had fought it, the more he tried to sing Protect, the stronger the other music became, and he did not have the light to fight it anymore. He couldn't remember why he had wanted to.

LIVE—WE MUST LIVE—

Sky was at his end, and his thoughts were gathered to the blight, to the creature. He needed to return home as badly as Ked did. If he was to die, it should be in the creature's arms. He felt drawn to it as if called in a distant dream.

Ked's song is infecting mine again, came a stray thought.

There were six guards now, three with their full attention on him, and three chatting to themselves in low voices and playing dice on the table. Two swords were pointed at him.

Please, said Ked. *There is a song I thought was mine, but I cannot sing it. It was silver, so perhaps you can. We must form a nest. There is no light for us to drink in this place, but we should make thralls from these men and from the rats and the roaches and whatever else will come.*

THRALLS— sang Sky. **NEST—**

The words fell out of Sky's music as he tried to hold them. He reached his body around the part of the weave he was meant to touch, but could not find the music he was looking for. It was missing. Too much of his body was missing.

He tried again. He could sing the start of it, the gathering of strength from his servant, the will to override their shared body, but the next notes died just as they started to form. Sky fluttered back into vagueness.

Ked's attention turned away in disgust and disappointment.

Half a dozen rats came to Ked throughout the afternoon. The guards noticed after the first few, but they did not stop them from crawling into Ked's cell and toward his body. Whenever a rat approached Ked he caught it with his hands and drank it with thread.

Ked had already eaten his clothes, but when they brought him another set he ate those, too. The blanket was long devoured, eaten after the Hand of the Sun had left. Between all this, the rats, and the crusts of bread they gave him for breakfast, he regained some amount of strength.

Ked spent most of his time in the corners of the cell, devouring grime and fungus as far as he could reach.

After he could reach no more, Ked sang to himself broken, half melodies that Sky could almost remember. Wanted to remember. Ked was making something at his fingertips, strange shapes that reminded Sky of mushroom spores.

Another rat approached, and Ked snatched it and held it tight. Instead of drinking the animal, Ked injected his spores into its blood. The rat wriggled in his hands as he kept hold, and he didn't release it until he caught the taste of the spores settling into tissues near its brain. Ked set it free. It scampered out of the cell and out of sight.

Ked's humming grew satisfied, but Sky prickled at what his servant had done.

That is for me to do, not you, Sky thought fiercely. He shook himself, tried to remember who he was. His sense of self was a blur.

Ked had made enthrallment spores, recreated from a taste Ked remembered from nesting a year ago. These, by Sky's judgement, would only work on rats. The spores would spread through the rat's body, corrupting its mind and increasing its hungers, then the infected rat would go back to its nest or otherwise chase its own kind. It would bite others to spread its spores to them, then it would fill its belly with food and return to Ked, following the summoning scent Ked was making.

Badger's hunting dog, Digger, had bitten Sky outside of Fyrthten more than two years ago. That's one of the last things Sky remembered before he had suddenly regained consciousness inside the creature's coils, deep in the blight.

I was a thrall, thought Sky with a shudder. *The creature decided to use me instead of drinking my body, but similar spores had once infected me, too.*

The understanding to create spores was part of Sky's missing music, but through his silver insight, he knew they were not supposed to be used like this. The spores' aggression was to be tuned carefully, and the species chosen strategically. For Ked's purposes, they were not to be used at all except when growing a nest, and even then only in an emergency and at Sky's discretion. Ked's attempt angered him.

Sky rolled around within the void. *I keep thinking thoughts and feeling emotions that aren't mine.*

The missing instinct was a sore spot in his mind, digging into him like a burr in his skin. That part of the weave must have been too damaged to be repaired, and too complex to be recreated from what was left.

Ked had experienced the growing of a nest indirectly, and he sang to himself the memory of that nest, trying to remember how the nesting process had begun, trying to get his body to start it now. But Sky knew Ked did not have the authority to sing that music, and never had.

Ked cannot use silver music at all.

The silver that Sky let bleed through to Ked's gold music was, in a literal sense, Sky pressing his authority onto Ked to make him obedient. It pushed his gold instincts from strong to irresistible.

My music has more authority than his.

Sky had thought of Ked as his servant a few times by accident, and then a few times deliberately. At this point, Sky could no longer deny it. He was *above* Ked. Ked had his mission, and Sky did, too. The gold and the silver music were separate things, even if they were both born from the same weave.

I must stop lying to myself. I know what I am.

This atoll in the void where Sky had washed ashore was no mere pocket of instinct. It had had a will, once, but that will must have died when Ked was injured.

That silver flesh deep inside the whorl of Ked's weave was a tiny copy of the creature itself, invisible, carrying a subset of the ancient music meant only to keep its servant on task.

When the knife struck Ked's core, or afterward, in the rush of the repair the silver flesh had attempted, Sky's mindcast must have become dislodged. It had contained both a will and the understanding to use threadsong, and so the damaged silver flesh had welcomed him, and they had grown into each other.

I am Ked's overseer, and he is my servant.

That would explain why Ked's disobedience frustrated him, why it was wrong for Ked to be inventing things he wasn't supposed to be able to do, and why it was so easy for Sky to reach out and override what Ked was doing. Sky could not be seen, no matter what he did, because he wasn't supposed to be seen. Ked was never to learn he existed.

Or... Ked wasn't supposed to. Sky's most primal instinct was to hide, so there must have been some danger that he would be discovered eventually if he interfered too much. But Ked was getting better at all sorts of things that were supposed to be beyond him. What would happen when a servant learned

it was subject to such a powerful leash? What would happen when Ked found out, given what Sky had done to him?

Ked was growing more complex, but so was Sky. Overseers were supposed to be passive, waiting and watching, and interfering only when necessary. Sky was not passive so long as light was given to him for his human mind to work.

When first giving him threadsong, the creature had connected his human brain to a gold threadmind. Here, inside Ked's deepness, he was a human mindcast connected to a silver threadmind. His two halves worked well together. The overseer's music was *kolse*, inclined to watch and be patient, and Sky's human mind was *felse*, inclined to action and impulsivity.

I am whole like this.

Sky reasoned with himself: he did not need to return home to fuse with the creature to become complete, because he was complete as he was.

But he had to accept that his imperative to return to the creature belonged to him as a part of his larger music. Fighting those feelings only made them worse. He had to experience that music, acknowledge it, and set it aside for it to exist in its time. He had to be patient with himself.

And his thread half, so prone to inaction and passivity, had to become more willing to take action. When he came to a decision he had to commit to it, not because he was forced, but because the time had come to act. And he had to learn that sometimes he would need to act even when he didn't want to. It took both sides to achieve Balance.

I've become too damn religious.

He sang these thoughts to himself, and he came together more tightly. He was at peace with himself for the first time since he had come to consciousness within Ked's deepness.

My overseer's flesh expects to meet the creature again and rejoin with it. There is music for this... coming home, this fusion of minds. That will be my chance to defeat it. And I

must defeat it if I am to stop the blight and protect Reem and the others.

Threadsong could be tricked, and instincts could be bent. But the creature was much larger and much older than him. If Sky had authority over his servant, the creature surely had authority over an overseer. If it compelled Sky to come home, he might not be able to resist.

How do I create instincts from nothing? He moved his threads over the weave, finding a place between the bulb at the center of the whorl—his body—and the most gnarled part of the knot. There was something malleable there. A song was coming to mind. He would have to explore that junction further, provided Ked could find more strength for him to steal.

Ked was starting to go over his mindcast stores again, collecting the damaged ones, the ones that could not be opened correctly. He laid them out in a row, touched them all one at a time, and then he began to break them apart.

Sky watched in shock. Ked's avatar winced as he did this, shuddering with grief, almost weeping, but he did it to the rhythms of Return Home. *Master, forgive me, but I need the light too badly. Better some of these reach you than none.* It was one of the few thoughts Ked had let slip from his mind in the last day. *Master, forgive me!*

Mindcasts took light to keep alive. It was why Sky's humanity suffered when Ked was starving. Apparently Ked had decided to cut his losses.

Ked was adapting. Sky would have to adapt faster.

11. Loves

More rats came in the night, then more. The guards, though they were used to strange happenings involving Ked, stopped their conversation cold when two dozen rats came at once, each weaving as if drunk, crawling straight to Ked's body in the corner of the cell.

Sky's threads coiled flat against his body when he realized the rats had hairless faces with black welts above and below their eyes.

Thralls.

While Sky had been enthralled, traveling through the blight two years ago, he had recognized animals that bore the same marks. They had all traveled to the creature together, knowing not to harm each other. He had forgotten that.

Best not to remember those times. I did not have control over my mind then.

In the corner of the cell, Ked was playing the part of the demon, and was showing all six spots. He took in all the rats that came to him and crawled on his body, and drank them with his hands and his skin, all while laughing softly. The guards gave up playing cards after that.

One of the guards had managed to catch one of the enthralled rats in a sack. "Do you think the Hands have a bounty for these?" he said, lifting the sack to show it off.

Ked stood, six spots flickering with heat, and walked toward them ominously. "Hserryn," he said in a soft voice. "Let it go, or I'll tell the others what really happened to your cousin last year, the poor woman."

Stone-faced, the guard untied the sack. The rat leapt out and darted toward Ked.

Ked knelt to let the animal run into his hands, and he pressed it into his sternum. Threads from his chest drank in the rat until it fell as ash between his fingers. He laughed, then returned to his corner.

By the time the guards changed shifts in the middle of the night, the flow of rats had already trickled to nothing. They must have exhausted the local population.

Ked buried his spots again when the guards changed again at dawn, switching to his human persona to beg for extra food, but the guards gave him his normal share and nothing more. They refused him more clothes.

The matter Ked drank became threadlight of poor quality, but as he had half his music aligned to Torpor, he was still making small gains. With the sudden dearth of rat meat, Ked would have to find something else to eat soon.

He was trying to remember the shape of the spores for insects, mostly flies, when all the guards rose to their feet. Two figures in pale gray robes walked into view. Moon priestesses.

Ked's attention came into sharp focus as the women exchanged a few quiet words with the guard in charge of the shift. His thoughts spilled out of him. *They've come to get me already? It's barely noon.* His music rose in tempo. *Soon—light—soon—*

The guard's mind was still bright at the back of Ked's neck, and though the man hadn't known much about the women's religion, he had known enough to see that these two were not well ranking. Their cloaks were too plain, and they wore no head ornaments. The taller one had a teal blue collar peaking out from underneath her robes, which was surely not allowed.

Ked came to his feet as the two women approached him and dropped their hoods. The taller one, the younger one, looked into Ked's face with concerned recognition.

A simple face, with turquoise earrings and dark hair pulled back in layers over her ears. Bright, clear eyes.

Sky flailed around the void madly.

It was Melrim.

Melrim was standing in front of him. In front of Ked.

NO! Reem! She can't be here! No, no, no! Ked will kill her!

Sky gripped Ked's avatar and smothered it. He touched everything, pressed his music down hard, howling with silver despair.

"Reem!" Sky cried. "You must go! Get out of here now!"

Ked's avatar burst with intense rage. His light burned hot and his threads pressed backward into the mist.

NO! I MUST—I MUST—

Sky released his grip on Ked's body and ducked inward, writhing, cowering. *I can't be seen, I can't be seen... but Reem is here! I can't let him hurt her! I must act but Ked will catch me and kill me if I do!*

Ked tore through the void, sending sentry after sentry into every dark corner around Sky's mist. *Interference. It happened again. It happened again! I lost a second or two of time. Lost complete control of my body.* All the sentries belled at once: *Where are you?*

In his outer body, Ked blinked his eyes and felt at his head. He smiled weakly at them, and spoke in accented Talrish. "Please, will you get me food? They've been starving me." Ked reached his hands toward the bars but the women stepped backward.

The guards were looking at Ked strangely. And Melrim... Melrim looked as if she had just seen Sky was dead.

"Why isn't he wearing anything?" said the shorter, stouter woman.

"He kept eating his clothes," said one of the guards.

"Eating them?"

"He's the blight," rasped a second.

"Sky?" said Melrim. She said the name tenderly.

Sky's heart broke. *I'm here!*

"Yes?" said Ked.

"You don't... know me?"

Ked gave a cringe of a smile. "I'm sorry. I've lost my memory. I get headaches. I remember things sometimes, and forget them other times."

"You knew me a moment ago."

"I did?"

No! Reem, no, don't tell him what I—

"You said...." Melrim shook her head as if clearing her mind of a dream. She looked intently into his face. "Stars, but you do look like Sky."

"That's because I am Sky."

"They say you're a demon."

"I am possessed, yes. But I don't know much about it, I'm sorry. They're going to exorcise me tonight."

Melrim nodded absentmindedly. She looked between his eyes as if searching for something.

"Why are you here?" Ked said abruptly. "You're not here to fetch me for the ceremony. There would be more of you, and it's too soon."

Melrim glanced toward the other woman. The older one had not been watching Ked, not the way Melrim was, and not the way the guards were. Most of her attention had been on Melrim.

They're not here to let me out. Ked's disappointment gnashed at itself, building up into harmonics of confusion. *But why—why—?*

"You're here for me specifically," said Ked. "Sky, not the demon." He paused in front of Melrim, then looked pointedly between the two. "I should know who you two are?"

The older woman said, "I am Serro of the third agate. You do not know me. But she...."

Melrim's eyes were wet, but she held her chin firm. Her voice was steady. "I came to see if you remember me. I had to see you for myself."

So fierce, Ked sang. A lover, for certain. What was the name?

Ked touched a mindprint, one of the ones he had taken of Kyrrn's conversations later on in their voyage, after he had started teaching Ked Talrish. Kyrrn had hoped to jog some of Sky's memory, and Ked had captured some of these moments.

Within the void, images and sounds began to form as if a reflection of reality on water, crisp but shimmering, and distorted on the edges. Kyrrn's face was in the center of the image, and perfectly clear. It was dark, and they were sitting in his cabin on the *Broken Storm*.

"You met Melrim when you were both children," Kyrrn was saying. *"My brother Sekt is her father, and when you two...."*

Melrim. That was her name. But a Leinan wouldn't say it correctly. Mel Rim? Mellim? Perhaps a nickname.

"Mel," said Ked.

Melrim's face fell.

"I'm sorry, but I don't remember you. But Kirin mentioned a lover to me, Sekkla Mellim." Ked tried a reassuring smile. "He was trying to help me remember my past. I had only guessed who you are. Forgive me if I had it wrong."

"As you said, you remember things some times, and not other times." Melrim's voice was pained, but she hid it so well Sky might have been the only one in the world who would have noticed. "Yes, I am Sektla Melrim. And yes, we were engaged. We were going to meet at Fox's house to elope, but you disappeared."

"Fox?" said Ked. "Tell me more about Fox. That name is familiar to me. It's so rare for me to remember something as simple as a name."

Ked's avatar pulled a mindcast forward and turned it over. It was the other Leinan mindcast, the one he had identified as the more damaged of the two. Its markings were clumsy, but under Ked's touch the symbology was clear even to Sky. The

taste of a red fox, the feeling of a hunt, and the shape of a metal edge, perhaps a knife.

Sky hadn't recognized the markings until Ked handled them; he never could identify Ked's mindcasts, any of them, not until Ked began touching them. That's why he never knew —

Salit Fox is dead? Sky pressed threads over his body, trying to soothe himself. He imagined Fox, under his fingers—Ked's fingers—imagined his face melting and crumbling.... *It must be another Fox. Another knife hunter, somewhere in Fyrthten.*

There would be no other. Salit Fox was dead, devoured by Ked.

Could it be the same man? Ked sang. His voice was so plain, so detached. He spoke as if about shoes, or an old rag.

Ked still had the guard's mind open, but he closed off the tanner's mindcast, which he had partially open, and he shoved it aside to exchange it for Fox's mindcast, which he drew up toward the back of his neck. He sang a chastisement to himself for doing such a poor job archiving Fox's mind, then put it into position. It would take time to get open, and there wasn't room to open it fully, but it would not have to be properly open for the most vivid memories to surface as scattered impressions.

"Fox, Salit Fox, is your brother-in-law," Melrim said. "Or he was. He disappeared into the blight not long after you did."

Sky trembled, hovering over Ked's avatar, ready to strike, needing to weep with his whole body. *So many dead, all devoured by this monster wearing my flesh! If I don't defeat Ked, end the blight, and kill the creature, it will never stop. Oh, Fox, my kin-brother!*

"I left the temple to meet at Fox's house on the day we agreed, but you never arrived. You and Badger had been in the mountains for one last hunting trip, Fox said. He told me you had wanted to have a little more money before marrying me.

The mountains had not yet fallen to the blight, or perhaps they had and none of us had known it yet."

Ked nodded, unwrapping the mindcast labeled "fox" as quickly as he could. He took a mindprint of what Melrim was saying. *Thank you, priestess. I can use this to remember being Sky for someone else.*

"So when you never came back, Fox and I went looking for you. He took me to Badger's cabin. Do you remember Badger?"

"Badger," said Ked. He had interfacing cords pressing hard against Fox's mindcast, and felt his way around. Yes, there was a man named Badger here in this mindcast. An authority figure. He caught a curly beard, a portly belly, and scars on his hands.

He touched that image and pressed deeper in every direction from there. He found more connections, more links with other things. His music sped in delight as he caught the image of his own face in these memories. He pried open the mindcast a little more.

Sky's body was so tightly wound he thought he would snap in two. He wrapped his threads around Ked's avatar, though he kept them limp. Ked, ignorant of this, kept working.

"You don't have to give up carpentry to do this. You'll always have your art, no matter where you are. But you need a serious career if you want to support Mel Rim."

"If she'll have me."

"Give her a reason to marry you, then. At least come and meet Badger tonight, all right? He's rough around the edges but he's been a wonderful teacher..."

"Badger," said Ked. He had his thoughts in place, but had to align them just right before striking, like aiming a knife. *I must invert the speaker and the listener.* "Fox introduced me to Badger. I wanted to continue with my wood working, but Fox said that I'd need something better if I was to support you."

"Yes! Yes, that's right!"

I've got her, Ked sang eagerly. I just need a little more.

He worked the mindcast open wider. It was almost to the point where he could use it like a mind instead of a chain of memories. *Ah, Fox had been enthralled when I caught him, he said with a shimmering laugh. That's why this mindcast looked so damaged. There was almost nothing left!*

A memory came to Ked's mind, one of his own. His first hunt, his first human catch, how precious! How clumsy he had been! He was standing on a hill between two dead trees, looking down into a gorge, where the gasping, coughing human hunter, half delirious, was calling out a word into the wilderness: "*Esselas!*" The man had black welts on his face around his eyes. Delicious.

"Fox and his hunting party went on ahead," said Melrim. "And I stayed back in the cabin with my chaperone at the time. We had to turn back when we ran out of food. No one from Fox's hunting party ever returned to Fyrthten."

Ked looked at Melrim tenderly. He had found more to use. Another connection, another memory.

"Fern, my dear heart, I'm so proud of you. He's beautiful. Let's name him Raven. I don't care what the priests say..."

"What of my sister?" Ked said. He came toward the bars and lowered his voice, making it harder to hear him from a distance. "What of Fern?"

Melrim came closer. "Fern stayed at home during all of this, so when I—"

Serro wrenched Melrim back at the same instant Ked stepped forward to strike.

Sky closed himself around Ked and leapt their body backward.

"No, Reem! Don't let him touch you!"

Sky fell backward against the floor, landing square on his back. His head cracked on stone, but he had no skull to split; his structural fibers took the hit and bounced back together.

He gasped. He was too large, too slow. He moved his limbs about himself wildly, then forced his human mind to relax and find its habitual movements.

He had used Talrish to speak. He knew he had a strong accent. That might do well enough as proof.

There is no such thing as proof when it comes to Ked!

“Reem,” he said. He struggled to his feet. “Reem, don’t listen to him when he says he’s me. He’s lying.”

“Sky?” Melrim said.

The room stared at him. At *him*. He was seen. He used thread to calm his racing heart. *I’ve made my choice. I must commit to it now.*

“Ked is a... a demon who hunts people and steals their minds,” Sky said. “He was using Fox’s mind to pretend to be me. He has Fox’s mind, he killed Fox!” He put a hand to his mouth. “I didn’t know. I only just learned, when Ked touched....”

Focus! I must focus.

“Ked has killed hundreds of people,” said Sky, more slowly. “He drinks their bodies, and steals their minds. He uses the harvested mind to impersonate them, and he changes his body to match their shape. He can look like anyone. He is a....” What was the Talrish word?

“Shapeshifter,” Melrim said.

“Shapeshifter. He’s lied about himself to everyone. He is not the blight. He is not Gluttony, or whatever else he’s been saying.”

“If he is not the blight, do you know what the blight is?” said Serro.

“Yes. A monster. A creature. It wants to eat everything. It puts spores in the air, and these spores touch animals and make them want to feed it. Like the rats.”

He pointed to his forehead, and pulled his spots to the surface. Serro gasped.

"This is the monster's mark. Its servants and things it has enthralled will look like this." He buried his spots again, wincing at the light it had taken. There was so little left.

Melrim's face was intense. He knew that look. She would remember every word, and would piece together more things besides. *I love her so much.*

"The monster touched me and made me into its servant. Its spy. My body... became Ked. My mind was put into storage." His eyes welled with tears. "I'm sorry, Reem. I'm not really here anymore."

"You're one of these stolen minds? Are you dead?" Melrim approached him, touched the bars with her finger. "Please, tell me—"

"Stay away!" Sky fell backwards to the ground, then clambered backwards on his hands and feet until he hit the wall.

"Sky, are you dead?"

"No, not like the other minds are dead. I am different." He pushed back on the wall to help himself climb upright. "But Ked doesn't know about me. Please. It's the only reason I'm still safe. He thinks my mind was erased when he was born. He must never learn who has been interfering with him. Please."

"Yes, anything."

"Tell him that it was Fox that came to life. He was using Fox's mind just now. He will believe you. I'll make him believe you.

"But listen, all of you." He turned to Serro, and even the guards. "Sunlight empowers him. Sunlight, and even moonlight. Even moonlight! He needs this light to live. He has been counting the minutes until he is brought outside. But the Hands and the Temple want his exorcism to be in the open, and you must not—you cannot let—"

Sky shuddered. His music warped, pressing on him its imperative to Survive. He pressed a hand to his chest.

Ked's avatar twitched. It grew warm under his touch, then hot.

"I—I cannot ask for my own death, it seems. My grip is slipping. I must go soon."

"Keeping him in the dark will kill him?" said Serro.

"Without food, he—" Sky's body sagged as Ked surged, striking outward with hateful gold light, but Sky pressed back and stood straighter. "Do not ask me this. This is already... too hard. I must hide now."

"Wait, Sky," said Melrim. "How do I help you?"

Sky sat cross legged and leaned back against the wall. Threads from his back tasted it. "You can't. I must fight him alone." He exhaled, preparing himself for a rebound from Ked's music within the void.

"But how will you escape him?"

"I cannot. We are too attached. Besides, I am the only reason he is here in this prison, and not escaped into the blight. I fight him at key moments. Disable him." He tapped the center of his chest. "Remove me and Ked will no longer have a jailer."

"I lost you already, two years ago. Do not ask me—"

"I am doing this for you! I have accepted my fate. I am willing to use myself up if it means Ked—"

"Do not make sacrifices I did not ask for, and then say it is all for my own good!"

Sky pressed his eyes closed. "Reem, this *is* for your own —"

"No! You are doing it again! Have you even looked for a way to unseat Ked, or have you gone straight to being the martyr?"

Sky stared at her, his mouth hanging open. "Unseat him?"

"You have power over him. And that power is growing, isn't it?"

"He is growing, too, learning—"

"You are different from the other archived minds, you said. Ked doesn't know you exist. And the body he is using was your body once. Are you really telling me there isn't a way for you to usurp him?"

Sky's silver music trembled through his mind, through his grip around Ked, through his back and up his threads to his skin and his fingertips.

"I don't know," he said honestly.

"I refuse to live without you. I've tried that already."

"It's not a matter of unseating Ked," said Sky. He pointed away from him, toward the north. "If the creature is not stopped, too, then the blight will continue. When Ked does not return, the creature might make another servant to repeat Ked's mission. It's a miracle I woke inside Ked's mind to create obstacles for him. The same thing will not happen to another of its servants, ever."

"Then, how does one defeat the creature?"

"The creature cannot be approached, and cannot be touched. I have gained some power inside Ked and perhaps I can do something to it, but I cannot ask you to help me reach it. You must not trust any such desires coming out of my mouth. Not mine, and especially not Ked's."

"I don't care about ending the blight. I care about you!"

"None of us are safe unless the blight is ended."

Melrim grimaced, then eyed Serro. "Sky, there's something you should know. They weren't going to tell you this."

"Melrim," said Serro sternly.

"But they don't intend to give you an exorcism. Not a real one. They intend to throw you into an oubliette and pour boiling oil over you, then bury you. They won't let you into the moonlight at any point."

It took time for this news to work its way through Sky's mind. His threads sank, flaccid, growing dull against his body. "Then there is nothing I can do. I go to die, after all."

"I thought you couldn't desire your own death."

"No. I cannot advocate for it, and I cannot accelerate it. But I can accept it, especially if it will mean you are protected by it."

"I can do something to distract them. I'll give you the opportunity to escape on the way to the oubliette."

“Please, do not do this. Reem... it was a long chance that I could affect the creature at all. Better that I keep you safe from Ked, and better I do not risk Ked empowering the creature by meeting it. My death will mean something if it means Ked dies, too.”

“If I can convince them you’re really Sky, and not just a demon pretending, maybe they will reconsider. They didn’t even try to ascertain that you’re you! I had to sneak in here—”

“No, Reem. You must get as far away from Talris as you can. Find my family in Leinanto. They will take care of you.”

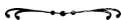
“It’s not over yet. Sky, please don’t give up.”

Ked fought fiercely, screaming through the cracks in Sky’s grip.

Sky smiled at Melrim, wanting to hold her and never let go. “I have been here too long. I must go or he’ll kill me. It may already be too late. But remember to tell him it was Fox you were speaking to, not me. I love you so, so much. You must live.”

“Sky, don’t give up! Please!”

Sky’s body slumped to the floor.



Ked burst from his tethers, roaring with gold violence outward from his deepness and down through his back.

He bore his threads like swords, charging over the skin of his core, slinking through the cracks, seeking anything, any sign. This was the most serious invasion of his music yet and he would have vengeance.

I’ll kill you for what you’re doing to me!

Time had overstepped him again. He didn’t know how long it had been, but it must have been several minutes, during which time he had been brought down to nothing. He had carried no thought, no sensation, and no will. Smothered to nothing!

I will never rest, never....

His threads seized, shrinking and coiling themselves against his will. He was too starving to keep this up. The intruder had used about a quarter of the light he had been hoarding. *I am going to die. This intruder is going to kill me and I can't even tell who it is!*

He opened his human eyes. He was lying, half-sitting along the back wall. The two priestesses were here, and their faces were wearing strange, stern looks.

"What happened?" he said. "My head... I think something must have happened. I can't remember it." He moved a hand over his face, then held himself up against the wall to stand.

Melrim's face grew sharper, almost angry.

"Did I... say something to you?" Ked said softly. He pushed himself off from the wall, creeping forward, slowly, like a cat crawling through tall grass. "I say things in my madness. I don't mean them. I'm sorry if the demon came out again."

Everything depends on what happened while I was unconscious!

"Did I say something strange? What did I say?" he said. He was losing his grip on his voice. He had to keep himself calm and sound like the victim now. "Tell me, please. Melrim, please?"

Which language was he supposed to be using? Leinanso? He had the hunter's mindcast open, or mostly open, but he had been using his own skills. He must have been speaking Leinanso. He hoped he had been. Anger blurred his memory.

"It was like you had become someone else," said Melrim. "I've never seen anything like it."

Ked rolled his head back and forth as he stared hard at her face, seeking hints of emotion about what had just happened. Her demeanor was completely different. She was determined, if anything. She had come to a decision. About him?

"Someone else?" he said as gently as he could. He strode closer. "My love, who was it? Tell me."

“You became Salit Fox.”

Ked froze in place.

Fox? The hunter? Confusion swept through his back in dissonant waves.

“I became Salit Fox?” he said. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“You said things. Sky, it sounded so real. You were speaking as him, remembering things...”

He turned his full attention to the hunter’s mindcast, which sat in place at the back of his neck. It was most of the way open. He touched its edges over and over again.

It can’t be this, it can’t, Ked sang. *It is ordinary. It is nothing. It is dead!*

It was his first, and worst, mindcast. He had been clumsy with inexperience at the time, and since the hunter had been a thrall at the moment of capture, his mind, memory, and motives had been warped. It was too small. Misshapen. But none of that explained the thing coming to life.

It was this, the whole time? Ked sang. *This hunter has been the one stealing my body? How could it? It’s not possible.*

Mindcasts couldn’t come alive, he was certain. And yet... he had sensed another will inside his back. He had suspected it was a rogue mindcast more than once.

The woman said that he had become Salit Fox. What better proof did he need?

Ked smothered the mindcast, working to wrap it into darkness. *You are supposed to serve me! You are dead! You belong to me!*

Could the knife have damaged it in a way he could not detect? Could it have removed some layer of protection he was not aware he was applying? No, he was his master’s sole human interface. No one in the world knew how to make human mindcasts better than he did.

It must have been the knife. It couldn’t have been something I did wrong, even as a newborn. It was the knife!

Ked pressed himself against the bars to get as close to the woman as he could. "If I sounded like Fox, then you must know... it was my madness. It wasn't real. You know that, don't you? I was remembering Fox, you see? I could remember him so clearly for a moment I thought I was him."

"But you remembered things that Fox said to me when you weren't—"

"Fox must have told me those things," he said sharply. Too sharply. He forced his voice into a warm whisper. "Yes, that's all it was. It's because we were so... close."

"Yes, you were quite close."

"Yes, I had just gotten confused. It's my madness, you see."

"Yes."

Ked put on his best smile, but his interfacing cords hovered around the hunter's mindcast, needing to use it, but afraid to touch it. *Is my fate tied to this woman believing I am Sky? Have I done enough, or do I need more? Do I need to use the hunter's mindcast again? I can't. I don't dare. If the hunter is my intruder, I cannot give it power again!*

He stretched his arms out through the bars, reaching for her as if wanting to hold her and comfort her. His hands were shaking.

"Please," he said. "Give me something more to eat. I'm starving."

"Yes, give him something more to eat," Melrim said.

"Priestess," said one of the guards. "He's been eating clothes, blankets, and rats, and almost double the normal prisoner ration. How much more do you think he needs to eat?"

Melrim gestured at Ked, up and down. "Look at him."

Ked's cheeks were sunken and his arms nearly bereft of fat. *Should I pull my skin against my ribs? No, not worth the light it would take.* He looked thin enough as he was.

"You could give him a little more, couldn't you?" Melrim said. "What is he going to do with a full belly that he can't do like this?"

The guards stared darkly at her. None of them moved.

She would not be advocating for feeding me if she thought I was solely a demon, Ked sang with relief. I passed their test, despite the sabotage.

Serro snatched a loaf from the table, ignoring the guards' protests, and strode up to the bars. The pair of guards standing at the bars readied their swords to thrust them into the cell.

"Stand back, Sky," said Serro.

Ked stepped backward, eyes locked to the bread, until he hit the stone wall behind him.

Serro tossed the bread through the bars, and Ked darted forward to catch it. He fumbled it and scrambled to catch it, then clutched it tight to him. "Thank you." Threads from his hands and his chest were already working on the loaf, dissolving it from on the inside.

"I look forward to tonight," Melrim said. "They'll cleanse you of this demon, and then we can be together again."

Ked broke the bread into pieces with his fingers and stuffed them into his mouth. Threads from his cheeks and tongue tore the sugars apart and poured tiny gulps of light into his back. "Yes, I await eagerly for...." When he looked up again, the women were gone.

Ked slumped to the ground, shaken, starving. He had to bend all his will into eating like a human, or at least appearing to. Once the loaf was gone, he curled into a ball on the ground, shivering from the cold.

The rogue mindcast was still there at the back of his neck, foreboding, heavy as a mountain in his mind.

The guard's mind is too large to store, he sang. But I'll need to remove the hunter's mind to make room for the tanner so I can still speak Talrish with a Leinan accent. But is the hunter's mind safe to touch? It must be put back into storage. I have no choice. I must store it.

Ked had never been so frightened in his life. He moved his interfacing cords toward it but could not close the distance. What if touching it was what gave it power over his body? He

had been gripping it when he had lost control of his body and mind for several solid minutes!

It was that ship. That's when this all started. Not the knife. It was the sight of those Leinans on that ship, right before the knife struck me. Maybe even then I had this mindcast in mind. Maybe I had begun to favor it in my stores, and had begun to think about using it.

I must not touch it. I... I need to touch it. I must remove it.

He touched a cord to it and traced the edge of it. Nothing happened. He still had control of his music.

If it was taking over my body, I should destroy it. Rip it in half. I won't need to touch it long for that.

He recoiled from the idea. Destroy part of his collection? He had destroyed several mindcasts already, under great pain, but it was vital he preserve this one to show his master. What if his master needed to know that human mindcasts could come to life? What sort of servant would he be if he destroyed such important evidence, when his entire purpose was to enable his master to make and use human mindcasts? Yes, he should keep it.

I know what my problem is now, at least, Ked sang. He touched the mindcast and began folding it back against itself. Everything will be better from here. I must not even think about using it again, and I'll be in control.

He pulled it out of its place at the back of his head and dragged it along an interfacing cord to the mindcast stores near his deepness, watching it closely every moment. Once it was almost in place, he pearled it, leaving an opening for his cords to continue to keep it alive, but blocking off the rest of its surface so he would not touch it by accident.

I'm starving, but I'll be safe now. My intruder is in captivity.

12. The Open Eye

It was some hours after dusk when a troop of the Hands of the Sun came to collect Ked.

Ked lay curled up by the cell door, one hand reaching past the bars, half hoping one last rat would find him. The Hands crowded around his cell, blood-red trousers tucked into black boots.

“Get up.” It was the captain of the Hands of the Sun.

He pulled himself to his feet, keeping his spots hidden, too exhausted to be anything but the meek human prisoner.

The captain eyed Ked’s genitals and said, “Why is he naked?”

“We gave him clothes,” said a guard. “Twice. But he kept eating them.”

A disgusted sigh. “Let’s get this over with.”

Several swords and a dozen or more spears were raised toward him through the bars, and a guard unlocked and opened the cell door. Five leather-armored soldiers rushed inside, four carrying daggers in each hand, but the last with a metal collar attached to a pair of chains.

Ked held up his arms. “You don’t have to do all of this. I’m going to cooperate.”

The metal collar was rushed around his neck and locked, then the armored guards thrust their daggers behind him until he came out the door and into the hoard of spears and swords.

Ked’s song prickled and twisted with a hunger he had not allowed himself to feel in days. *Light—drink—soon—*

“Move.”

The crowd marched him out of the jail, Ked shaking from hunger and fatigue. *Almost there! Light, very soon—light—*

His pace was dictated by the spears behind him and the armored guards holding the chain in front of him and behind him. The metal ring around his neck dug into his flesh.

He stepped carefully on the stone, snatching bits of dust to drink with each footstep. There was nothing to drink. He was fooling himself. But he could not keep his threads from tasting, from hoping.

He was at death's door. Much longer, and his mindcasts would begin to die. He had almost no fat reserves left, and not much muscle. He had even begun eating through his structural fibers, though his body weight was so low that thinning them did not affect their strength.

They passed the first door into the hallway before the atrium. *Soon—soon—light—drink—* Ked's threadsong had been passive for so long he wondered if his threads would know what to do with the moonlight that struck his skin.

The final door. Closer, closer. He jerked forward despite himself but was caught by the metal around his neck. He fought back a whine.

The guards in the front opened the doors to the outside, revealing a crowd of white cloaks under the pale glow of moonlight. Priestesses.

Ked's spots came to the surface against his will. He held onto his eyes, convincing his song that he would get more light if he could see than he would if he had another pair of spots drinking. Only a few strides left. Serro, the man in white, and the grand priestess were outside, in front of him. He fought the impulse to charge forward and drink them all. He wanted to flow into their bodies.

Two more steps. One.

He was over the threshold and he darted forward—into a shadow.

He turned upward and yelped. A square of black blocked out the sky, the moon. The only light he could reach was a thin

blue at the west, and a smattering of stars around the edges of the horizon.

He spun in horror, looking about the crowd. Several Hands of the Sun were carrying aloft an enormous black canopy directly overhead.

They intended to keep him in shadow!

"The moonlight!" he cried.

"So eager for judgment," said Serro. "The Eye will get a good look at you soon enough."

Ked could not help himself. "When?"

"When we get to the oubliette."

The oubliette? What is that?

Ked found the word's meaning in the guard's mind, a special room containing a deep, dark hole, several stories deep, where they put prisoners they intended to leave and forget. A wretched fate for a human, and a death sentence for him.

It would be a permanent darkness, down in the ground, and there would be no one to feed him or become tricked into helping him. He at his best could escape a place like that, scaling the walls with thread and breaking out the grate with force, but not when minutes from death.

Ked tugged against the chain at his neck but the chain carriers tugged back, holding the chain taut on either side. The spears arrayed in a circle around him pushed closer.

"What of the exorcism?" he cried. "Please, the light! Please, I need—"

"You see now, Grand Priestess, that this was the correct choice," said the captain of the Hands of the Sun. He smirked at her.

The grand priestess looked on coldly. "Onward," she called.

Ked could hardly stand, and they wanted him to walk? "I need food. Please. I can't walk. I'm dying."

"Food?" said the priestess. "You, who claim to be Gluttony incarnate. I ask you, do you see the people around you now?"

The crowd was a mess of hot faces and warm bodies to his spots. Commoners of all sorts, some carrying torches. Old and young, most poorly dressed, and most with murder in their eyes.

They were lined up on either side of the road in front of them, so thick he could not see the end. The guards in front of the line had to push them back to make room for their parade of spears and chains.

"They know you are the cause of the blight," said the priestess. "Yes, you may have food, demon. You may have as much food as they have had today."

Minutes weighed on Ked like hours as they trudged up the cobblestone street. After each step, he could not say whether he could take another, but the hope of light at the end kept him going.

He shuddered as a mindcast winked out within his stores. *I'm going to die*, he sang, then he silenced his thoughts. He did not want to spare the light to think them.

He was supposed to have dominion over these animals, but now he would live or die at their mercy.

After only a few grueling minutes, a murmur rushed through the crowd. The soldiers on horseback in the line set their attention on the masses, holding their torches higher.

The parade did not pause until a red glow flickered down one of the alleys to the north.

A call cut through the whispers, then again louder. "Fire! Fire!"

"Attack! The Rhunans are attacking!"

"Fyrhten is burning!"

The crowd's rumble grew louder.

The crowd pushed and pulled on the soldiers' line like breaking waves. The soldiers pushed back, creating space, but it was pandemonium. The crowd's numbers were greater.

"Fire! Fire!"

Down the street, flames leapt over the roof of a building. The soldiers on horseback turned about, then raced toward the fire, spears high.

“Hold the line!”

The canopy overhead jostled, then slipped.

A splash of light on his spots, his hair. Ked gasped at the shock of the ice in his back. A sparkle of gold, one more breath he could take.

He ducked forward and away from the canopy, which rocked overhead. Another splash of moonlight, another breath. The fabric plunged on top of him, over his face and his back. Threads devoured the silk where it touched him, creating holes like it had been burned. As the holes grew bigger, he drank from the light that crept through. Another breath.

One chain went slack; the crowd had shoved its carrier away. The circle of spears was broken, scattered by the crowd fleeing the fire.

A cord severed in his shoulder—a spear had struck him. He grabbed the shaft and it splintered and crumbled in his hands until it fell to pieces. He tore the spear tip out of his arm and knocked back the broken shaft, sending the guard carrying it stumbling backward.

The severed cord screamed at him but his threads were too brittle to push the ends back together. Blood poured down his chest but he could not keep the edges of the wound closed, could not silence the pain from his skin and his muscle. His deepness shuddered and his eyes flailed until they locked onto the guard, who was holding up the broken spear shaft in disbelief.

Ked tackled him to the floor. His hands were all over the man—the animal, the meat. Heat, warmth, life, fire... flowing, pouring up his arms. Alive. He was alive again. Gold roared awake within his deepness as he writhed on top of his prey.

His threadsong had been honed by days and weeks of starvation. Not a move was wasted. Not a flicker of gold missed drawing something greater back. The guard shrank against his

bones inside his leather armor, flowing into Ked's body. Ked had never devoured so quickly or so well. In moments the guard was desiccated.

His bleeding wound closed. His threads were strong enough now to reconnect the severed cord, and he sent pulses through the cut until the echoes came back clean. He fused the seam, and with an icy shock his music was whole. He filled himself with music and light until he was *alive* again.

Ked's neck was wrenched backward and his arms pulled straight, but what was left of the guard's body was fused to his hands and was lifted upward with him.

One of the chains went slack and skidded along the ground. The other chain pulled him sideways. His four visible spots burst with heat as he dropped the corpse and dashed backward toward the man holding the last chain.

The chain carrier dropped the chain and shoved another guard in front of him. They were fighting each other to flee Ked now, creating an empty space around him. The chain clattered as Ked raced forward.

Ked caught the cloak of one soldier, but the soldier ducked underneath it and pulled it off before scurrying away. The cloak fell limp into Ked's hands, and he bunched it up as his threads tore through the fibers, drinking it to ashes.

Threads were thick in his hair and under his spots as the moonlight caressed him. As sickly as that light was, it soaked into his deepness and made his threads supple.

The spear carriers had fled, and the horsemen and the priestesses were gone. Only the captain of the Hands stood in the empty space, sword raised, his face determined.

Ked dove into the crowd in the other direction, gathering the chains and held them against his body to keep them from being trampled upon and dragging him under. Those that knew who he was could not get through the crowd to get away fast enough, and in moments he was one of the throng, pressed between everyone. He buried his spots.

He heard the captain's voice behind him, but the words were covered by other muttering, other cries.

He made changes to his body as he went, large, broad changes that would be apparent in the dark. His face smoothed, his cheekbones grew rounder and subtle. His lips plumped. He drew in his genitals and filled out his breasts a little, then a little more. It would only take a few of these changes to confuse the captain of the Hands, and he only needed to delay the man's sword a few seconds. Far easier to shape his flesh than to work at the iron while moving. He went slowly to spare his strength, emphasizing his breasts, as they would create dramatic shadows.

To feed his efforts he stole meat from every human he touched, flicking threads in and out of clothing and skin. Some humans were still working their way toward the soldiers to fight the demon that had caused the blight, and others were running from fire, or from soldiers. There was no direction to anyone's movements. Some humans he drank from deeply, which would cause pain and leave scars, but who could say who was touching who in the horde?

His chains would betray him as a prisoner of import, and would identify him to the captain of the Hands no matter his appearance. And the chains in his arms were encumbering him as he tried to maneuver through the crowd.

He spared a moment to step off to the side of the crowd, not quite under a roof's shadow, and touched the chains on either side of the collar where they attached. He fought the bite of the iron as he rusted the first links as fast as he could with moonlight alone. So slow! Iron was easy to destroy, but his light stores were dangerously shallow, and he could not act recklessly even with this metal. After several gut-wrenching moments, one link was broken and the chain dropped to the ground, then the other. He touched the collar at his neck, but the hinge and the lock were too complex, the metal too numbing, and he did not have enough light to work.

He had lost track of the captain of the Hands.

He darted back into the crowd, ripping the shawl off of someone and darting between two others, and used the shawl to cover his head and shoulders. He almost dropped to the ground from the loss of light, and almost digested the offending clothing out of reflex, but he clamped down on his hungers.

He wove through the crowd, heading vaguely northward and uphill. After a few more minutes he found his way to a decorative fountain in a large open square and a clean view of the open sky. The crowd here had thinned almost to nothing.

He wrapped the shawl around his neck like a scarf so threads could crawl through his hair and drink. His hair was not long enough to match the rest of his disguise well, but he had run out of matter to lengthen it. Shops were plentiful here, some still open, unaware of the chaos around the jail. Was there a butcher's shop? A tailor? Fyrthten was deep in famine, and its granaries were empty. What else was there for him to eat? He would settle for the leather in a cobbler's shop. He'd best find a dress, too, as being naked in the middle of the night was suspicious enough.

He had enough light now that he was comfortable drawing deeply from the guard's mindcast, wearing the mind while he thought, *North, out of Fyrthten*. He regarded the buildings around the square and knew where he was, and knew immediately which turns to take to find the Westwort Bridge, the easiest way over the Fyrth River.

North was the blight and his master. If he could make it out of the capital, no one could stop him.

The guard knew a tailor's shop nearby and he strode toward it. He could drink the silk on the way out. Or better, the cotton, if the shop were rich enough.

Boot steps sounded quickly behind him and he rolled just as a figure in red rushed past, sword gleaming.

Ked buried his spots and came to his feet, angling his chest so his breasts would be prominent. He walked toward the cap-

tain of the Hands, swinging his hips to make them more apparent, as the man straightened for another swing.

The sword dropped. The captain stared at Ked's breasts, then his hips, then the collar at his neck. "You... you are not...."

Ked rushed him and grabbed his neck with one hand and his sword arm with the other. He gripped tightly, spreading threads deep.

The captain's eyes bulged and he grasped for Ked's arm.

Ked drank.

The man dropped, Ked still gripping tightly, and then Ked was on top of him, pressing into him. *My last obstacle*, Ked sang with glee, devouring the man, burning him into light and life in his back. *At last I am free from you wretched animals!*

His spots surfaced and flared in delight, but he held onto his eyes to look around the square, even as he was lost in the music of drinking and silencing witnesses. A woman in a blue dress, a pair of young men on the other side of the fountain... the other humans around had fled. These last few would not hurt him, not like he had been hurt in the last few days, and so he would let them live. It would take weeks to chase every witness of his actions in Fyrthten after all, and he would entertain no other purpose except returning home to his master.

Ked drank deeply, down to the bones, confident in himself despite being out in the open and observed by multiple witnesses. He would have never done this for any of his previous hunts, but he had a much better sense of what was truly important.

His recent ordeals had forged him into a much sharper blade, twice the servant he had been before the *Broken Storm*. His threads moved perfectly, his music efficient and intentional to the note. Before, he had always been blinded by his pleasures, and he never would have thought of checking his surroundings while drinking so deeply. He had almost died once for that hubris.

His spots tingled with pride. He would choose which music to sing, and be the better servant for it. If he had been a bludgeon before, now he was a scalpel.

The captain was thread-ash and a mess of red fabric and metal trimmings underneath his body, and he stood, fire rushing through his threads. He closed his eyes and turned to the moon, letting its light settle on his naked body. He gave a long sigh.

Once out of Fyrthten, no one could stop him. He would suffer no more delays.

I'm coming home, Master!

Ked glanced around the square again. The woman in blue was still there, perhaps watching him, but he ignored her and made his way to the tailor's shop. He was sharply aware of the eyes of all three witnesses in the square, the woman in blue and the two others. But they didn't matter anymore. He would drink his fill of silk and then if the woman in blue saw him again....

Ked stopped short. *Who is that woman?* His thoughts were bending toward her. She was important.

Slowly he turned toward her. She gave a start.

He had no reason to think of the woman, but his mind was aligned toward her. He wanted to keep her in sight, needed to see who it was. He recognized the touch on his music now.

Rage bubbled outward from his deepness. *My mind is being manipulated.*

He should leave. Ignore her and leave. Leave, leave—

The thought had rebounded so quickly that Ked's music jerked back. The touch on his music was no longer a subtle hand. This time he was being tugged.

Threads raced toward his mindcast stores, scouring the pearly mindcast of the hunter. It was isolated. Dormant. The cords tending to it were dormant. That mindcast had always been dormant.

The hunter was never the intruder!

Ked's spots burned as he stormed toward the woman in blue, who ducked behind the building. His feelings were crashing against themselves, his will and his music at odds. He had to end this.

"Who are you?" he said.

Ked caught up with her quickly, and he yanked her shoulder back and spun her around to face him. She stumbled backward onto the ground.

She was young, her hair pulled back like a Talrishwoman of the merchant class. Turquoise earrings, a plain face, blue and white silk embroidery at her neckline... all these things struck him as familiar.

His mind was sluggish. He knew the face, but it was out of place.

She clambered to her feet and backed away from him. But her jaw was set. She would not flee him. She knew him.

I know I have seen this face! Why can't I remember?

The blue dress struck him strongly as something he'd seen recently. He had seen a spot of a blue cloth at the jail, but it had been buried underneath a white robe, almost hidden.

"From the jail. The priestess," he said with surprise. "But why would my music...."

He was on the cusp of understanding something, but his thoughts were distorting, sinking as if wet clay. An external force was muddying them.

He pulled a name out into his mind, but it came as though through tar, sticky and black. "Melrim. You are Melrim." It had almost hurt to say the words.

She backed away from him but kept him in sight. She reached sideways for a broom leaning against the wall, then snatched it as if it would protect her.

"You're important to all of this," Ked said. He crept closer, forcing his mind through the fog. "You're the most important piece yet. The jail... that's when the interference struck me the hardest and the longest." He had to use human words and

human thoughts to think the logic through. "But you're nothing. You're not important."

She had stepped deep into shadow and Ked hesitated, one foot in the air, suddenly unwilling to enter the shadow after her. *My light stores*, he sang in panic. But they were stable, even if they weren't strong. He had just fought harder with less, hadn't he? *This reluctance is artificial!*

"Enough!" he cried. He darted toward her, fingers spread, intending to drink her down to nothing.

DO NOT TOUCH HER! DO NOT HARM HER!

He slowed to a stop, body rigid, eyes wide, as his music scattered as if struck by a gong, and then came together again with a crash of pain.

His body collapsed.

Agony, agony! He screamed with his spots and his throat. He was thrashing threads and chaotic music.

This pain was different. This was raw, interminable pain that struck him at the very soul of his threadsong. He was crippled under a new instinct, a new need as strong and as urgent as any other he had ever experienced.

He could not harm her. He couldn't want to, even though he needed to so badly. He would sooner die, would sooner turn on his master than set a single thread to her to harm her.

And yet his other music demanded she die. Both desires existed together, a dissonance that he could not escape. The contradiction lanced his music like rusted knives, paralyzing every thought. Neither music could be denied, and yet both songs declared themselves superior, a sputtering, slicing dissonance.

Why—why—? he sang. It had been his master's voice, touching him, carving that desire into him, just like his master had done on the day he was born. But why would his master forbid him from harming this woman? This one woman of all human beings in the world?

He focused on the only desire that truly mattered, his collection of minds and his master out in the blight. *I must live! I*

must return home! After a moment, the contradiction lessened enough for him to come to his hands and knees. Yes, the only way he could fight the contradiction was to release the desires opposing the new one.

He was the better servant now, and he knew how to choose one song over another, and yet it was the wrong song yielding. This new, abhorrent desire was too hot, too potent. It burned through his back. To keep his sanity, he had to surrender the others.

I must return to my master. I will never harm her, but I must return to my master.

I will go home.

The song to return home was compatible with the new one, and so he pulled it strong, using it to reorient himself. His shaking body stilled.

Panting, helpless, Ked looked up at the woman's face—her face, so determined, as if she knew who he really was. She held a broom out in front of her like a sword, as if she held a speck of a chance against him. She was terrified, and yet her face was set. She actually intended to fight him.

She saw what I did to the captain of the Hands not moments ago. What does she think she is doing, confronting me like this? Why is she so obsessed with—

Ked's spots blazed. He let out a long hiss through his teeth.

It all came together for him in that moment. She, so determined to face him, and his intruder....

"It was Sky," he said, voice full of velvet. "It was only ever Sky."

The thought was slippery. That was proof enough. He spoke aloud to work himself through the logic.

"Sky made me want to hire Kyrn. Sky kept me from killing Kyrn, or anyone else. Sky *struck me*—" He climbed to his feet, body rigid. "—so that I would be imprisoned here. He *wanted* me imprisoned! He *wanted* me to die in jail. Sky was the one that took over my body when you came to my cell,

and... and he must have said things to you. Why else steal my body so long?"

He looked into her face with his dawning understanding, and her eyes widened with fear. She was more afraid of him now than before. *I'm right!* he sang.

"And now here he is, willing to reveal himself to me, just so that I never touch you or...." He wrapped his arms around himself, giggling, and said, "I cannot even think of bringing you to harm, not even indirectly. I... can't even fantasize."

"Give Sky back," said Melrim.

Ked belted out a laugh. "Give him back? I can't find him. I've been looking for weeks! He is utterly, completely invisible." He pressed hands flat at his chest, under his breasts. "And... and now he's speaking to me with my master's voice. He is nowhere and yet he is doing everything he's not supposed to do. Do you think he would still be alive right now if I could *find him*, just like that?"

She already knew Sky was present inside my body. Of course she did. They spoke to each other. That's why she followed me.

He lifted his arms and spun around in a circle, cackling madly.

"Your love wants you to come out, Sky! Sky! Will you not show yourself now?"

Ked pressed his shaking hands over his face, fighting sobs, then forced himself to relax. Threads soothed his blood and calmed his heart. *Master, my master*, he sang. Only one song mattered now. His body stood taller. He balled his hands into fists and brought them down to his sides.

He stared at her, hating her, unable to act on that hatred. He drew his mouth into a small smile.

This woman didn't matter. Even Sky didn't matter. Ked's mission was almost at its end, and he would let nothing else stop him.

He turned and walked away from her.

She followed him.

He could not help but be aware of her soft footsteps behind him. Even now, as he trudged up the square to the road he knew he would have to take, all of his focus was on her and how close she was to him. He at least knew now that it was not his own interest guiding his thoughts.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he barked.

“I will never let you out of my sight again.”

“Why?” he said. He turned to face her.

She was still carrying the broom in front of her like a weapon.

He grabbed it from her and held it horizontally with both hands. Under his palms, threads digested the wood until he crunched his fists into the rotten portions. The wood clattered to the ground in three pieces.

“What do you think you could do to me?” he said. “Do you not understand what I am?”

“I know what you are.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I know that you can’t hurt me.”

Ked set off at a run. If the woman would not leave him alone, then he would leave her behind. He was strong enough now to outrun anyone, much less someone encumbered by women’s clothing.

“Sky’s absence will harm me!” she cried.

His song shattered.

He tripped and skidded across the cobblestones. Threads healed the abrasions on his breasts and his knees, and he tried to get up. His body shook, his threads twisting over themselves. He couldn’t keep himself steady.

“No... don’t say that. Don’t say it.”

Her voice drew closer. “Sky’s absence will harm me.”

Ked turned himself over just as Melrim strode up to him. She stood above him and cast a shadow across his chest, victory on her face.

“Ked, Sky’s absence will harm me. You must let him out.”

Ked scrunched his eyes shut and shook his head. "Stop it. Stop talking." He put his hands over his ears.

She's lying! She's lying! Ked sang desperately. But what if she wasn't?

"I will be in great pain. Not just the pain of loss, but the pain of being a widow in all but law at my age, banned from the temple, with no other prospects. A life of poverty, illness, and starvation. Especially now, with Talris in famine. Suffering every day."

"That's not—" Ked started, but he winced. His music would not be convinced. *I cannot let her come to harm!* Sky must have been forcing the point, driving his music faster into anxious circles. His own music was suffocating him.

I must free Sky, came a thought, and at the same time he cried, "I don't know where he is!" His music didn't care that what he wanted—what it wanted—was not possible. All there was through his back was the pain of a need denied.

"Let him out," said Melrim.

Ked curled over himself on the ground. "I can't! I can't! I don't know how!"

He didn't know where Sky was, and he didn't know what Sky was. Sky must have had threadsong to do what he was doing, and he must have had a mind, a will, and he must exist somewhere in Ked's back....

Ked's thoughts turned immediately to his weave, to the knotted whorl. He had thought he had seen movement there before, but he could never make anything out. When he pressed harder, it was all the more obscured. It was as if he was blinded by a white fog, seeing and hearing nothing, feeling nothing.

What can I do without knowing where Sky is?

Threads at his threadmind were tingling, preparing for something he had not anticipated was possible. The empty space at the back of his head rang, empty, pulling at his human mind.

YOU KNOW WHAT YOU MUST DO, came a godly voice.

Ked's eyes widened. He shook his head, but his music drew together, focused as if after a hunt, as if he were about to take a mindcast. The interfacing cords in his neck trembled awake. His face flattened into six quivering spots.

Could he take a mindcast of himself? How could he? He was more than a human mind alone. His threadmind would need to be archived, too, and both halves attached to each other.

At the thought, his music rushed faster. There was music for this act, but why would there be music for archiving himself? His deepness was rising, coming into glory as if polishing himself, finishing himself.

This music would end him, and it was to be his greatest joy, but now it was perverted, warped for Sky's purposes. This wasn't the right time. He needed to be with his master. His master needed to sing this to him!

Please! I need to get back to my master!

An idea came to him that would allow him to survive.

He caught the thought before it would form itself fully, and he pushed it downward and into his body, letting it circle through the threads in his arms and his legs where the thought would be slow and safe from Sky's ears. He let the music of the thought creep into his threadmind to wash away this other need, this desire to archive himself he hadn't known he carried.

His body sank against the ground and his eyes drifted shut. The space at the back of his neck cooled, growing inert.

He would live, and he would fulfill the music Sky had imposed on him.

"There is another way," Ked said softly. He drew back his eyes.

"Oh?"

Ked sat, exhausted, and drew himself against his knees. "My master would be able to extract him."

"The creature in the center of the blight?"

Ked winced, then pressed away his dread at the thought that his master was discovered. This woman could not harm it; her knowledge was not dangerous to anyone.

"My master," he said. "It made me out of Sky's body, but just as I can shape myself, it can shape matter out of itself and what it can drink, and it can form a second body for him to inhabit. It alone has the skill to do this, as well as the vision to find Sky and pluck him out."

Melrim crouched in front of him and looked into his eyes.

Ked met her gaze. "You get Sky back, just as you want, and I can return to my master with my... collection, just as I want. Neither of us need suffer any longer."

"Sky, is this true? Will this work?"

Ked scowled at her. She was looking at him, but not looking at him. *I feel violated.*

"I sense no resistance to this idea," Ked mumbled. "Know that I cannot propose something that would harm you. I cannot trick you into becoming harmed, either, nor harm you indirectly. This will be perfectly safe for you."

"Why would I be harmed by you asking the creature to do this?"

He stood and rolled his shoulders, craning his neck in all directions to loosen his tension. He sent a shimmer of gold through his body to clear his mind.

"Because you must come with me," said Ked.

"Come with you into the blight? Through the devoured lands, where spores enthrall animals and change them—"

Ked held up a hand, smiling sharply. "Please," he said. Never mind how she knew about enthrallment spores. He could take no more imperatives broken. *Did Sky tell her about that? How long did Sky speak to her?* "I will keep you safe from everything. I must. But I need you along or my master won't understand why I am asking it to do this enormously wasteful act. Growing a body from nothing is not a small thing to do. There is a reason my master did not want to do it when it created me."

“Meet the creature?” she breathed.

“You will be safe. You *must* be safe. You can rest assured that I—that I will—” He grimaced, hating the idea even as he said it. “I will *defend you from it!* Defend you, a human, from my master, the God of all life and light in the universe! You have no idea how disgusting that idea is to me. And yet I have no choice. I don’t dare leave you here now that the Rhunans are attacking Fyrthten.”

Melrim made a funny cough. “The Rhunans aren’t here. That was me.”

Ked just stared.

“I started a fire, then Serro and I ran around the streets saying they were attacking. I just wanted to create panic so you could have the chance to escape. Serro was the only one—”

“I don’t care.”

He stalked northward, once more toward the tailor’s shop. He would need a good long meal to feel strong again, and a whole day’s basking to feel clean again. He would get neither.

Footsteps approached him and kept close behind. Ked smiled in dull relief.

“Ked,” said Melrim. “Will you please put some clothes on?”

“That will be our first stop.”

13. Into the Blight

How long have you been twisting my desires, Sky?

Sky sat in the mist, his mind folded over itself in a strained calm, watching Ked stare back at him. Ked could not see him, not really. But Ked's avatar sat right in front of what he could not see, looking straight into its center. Sky felt exposed.

Sky's thoughts were a faint silver whisper inside the mist. *I am not in immediate danger, despite how this feels. If he could reach me, I'd already be dead.*

Ked's probes were improving. His ghostly golden sentries were focused on the mist, reaching for its edges and learning where their senses stopped. Once a thread found a place it could no longer perceive, it pushed deeper, feeling at the invisible space, then retreating with a fixed shape as if it had formed a mold.

That approach is futile, thought Sky. *I think.*

He would have to trust his overseer's music to make such judgments, but Sky and Ked both were forging new ground when it came to what could be done with threadsong. Ked might very well work himself past Sky's innate protections eventually.

Any action Sky might take to stop Ked would make it worse. So Sky sat in silence, immersed in *koulim*, accepting his current stillness.

Ked paid scant attention to his environment as he removed the iron collar from his neck and drank all the silks in the tailor's shop. He stole masculine clothing, as he had taken Sky's shape again.

Melrim spoke to Ked occasionally but Ked never answered.

It was the knife, wasn't it? Ked sang. His voice pierced the mist deeply. Despite Ked's blindness, apparently knowing who he was speaking to made a difference in how their music interacted.

Sky breathed, matching the rhythms of Ked's music to keep himself hidden.

The knife injured me in the place I cannot see, Ked sang. That is when it all went wrong. You, and the knife. But you... how is it you still exist? My master cannot take mindcasts of humans. A tremor of a golden laugh flitted through the void. Ah, that was an assumption I made. Perhaps it took a mindcast of you, but could not interpret it. Perhaps that is why your mindcast is so unique, my dear backward self. You were never folded up and prepared for storage, because only I can do that. Perhaps that is the difference.

Keep thinking these thoughts, Sky thought. *You are wasting your time on the past. What matters now is what happens next.*

Ked and Melrim made their way north to the Westwort Bridge, but not before making a diversion to a nearby well, a ring of stone with a tin roof at the end of a spacious, unpaved road.

"Our second stop," Ked said.

He had the guard's mind bright at the back of his neck, but the interfacing cords gripping it were growing restless. The mindcast was ready to store, or ready enough. *There will be a drought of minds where we're going,* Ked sang. *Best get one early.*

The Hunt crept greedily into Ked's music.

Sky thought of Melrim, and Ked turned to her. She was watching their surroundings, perhaps trying to see if anyone was following.

As badly as Sky wanted to spare her the sight of Ked killing again, he dared not intervene for this, not when Ked was seeking him so carefully. *Just let it be quick*, he hummed.

Ked indicated the well to Melrim. “Drink your fill. Stay here and wait for me.”

He left Melrim behind and made his way to a larger building, a stables, but could not get four steps away before pausing. His music was grinding against itself.

Ked frowned and turned back. Melrim was reaching for the dipper, and the street was empty. No, not empty. A stranger leaned against a wall as if drunk, cloak huddled around himself. The man stood a little taller as he watched Melrim lower the dipper into the water. Her blue dress was stark under the light of the setting moon.

Ked snarled and strode back to Melrim, who was pulling the rope back up. “Never mind. Come with me.”

He reached to take her hand but jerked away from it. “Come!” he said, pained.

Melrim followed him to the stables, and Ked eyed the dark corners they passed, watching for cut purses. His music was set to the rhythms of Protect, even as the Hunt grew stronger.

Ked sang malice toward Sky’s mist. *I cannot touch her, even if I don’t intend to hurt her? This bind in my back is ill conceived. You should change it.*

Sky hummed to himself, pleased that the seal he had placed on Ked’s weave was so potent despite his lack of planning. *Overseers are frightening indeed*, Sky thought with pride.

Unlike Sky’s other manipulations, the seal took no effort on his part to maintain. It was a permanent amendment on Ked’s music, or at least, it would be permanent until Sky took action to remove it. And it was as powerful as any instinct the creature had given him.

But placing a seal meant physically touching the center of Ked’s weave, the place right next to Sky’s body, and Ked’s sentries were focused on the knot of the weave. They had not

gotten very far along the place they could not see, and were nowhere near the center of the whorl, but they had gotten a little farther.

No, that wasn't the threat now. The problem was that singing threadsong made certain cords in the weave come alight, depending on the song and the combinations of harmonies employed. Ked did not perceive Sky's presence at all, but did notice when silver melodies put pressure on his own threadsong. If Ked was watching the weave itself, would he notice an overseer's music brightening certain cords and not others?

It troubled Sky that the degree of Ked's blindness was even a question. Servants weren't supposed to investigate along these lines in the first place. But to keep himself hidden, he would have to avoid singing silver music if at all possible. The less Ked learned about what Sky was, the better.

If Sky pushed and pulled Ked's rhythms the old way, the subtle way, there was nothing for Ked to observe, as it was Ked's thoughts and feelings that were changing. That much manipulation would be safe as long as Sky did it gently. There was a lot he could accomplish with these simple measures.

Sky had to temper his silver arrogance. That had been growing, and quickly. It was too easy to feel like a god like this, sitting in the back of his servant's body, guiding his thoughts and shaping his desires like clay.

Ked wore the guard's mind and shaped his throat, tongue, and palate to match the guard's anatomy as they passed rows of empty stables and walked up to the door of the guardhouse. There would only be one man stationed there, Ked knew, because messenger horses were no longer needed in the north. The bridges were closed, and the lands beyond forbidden.

Ked rapped the door urgently, then said, with the guard's voice. "Emikt! Come quickly! They're after the horses!"

There was a muffled groan and a clatter. After a moment, a white-haired man flung the door open and flew outside.

Ked grabbed him from behind and landed on top of him. Ked's hands found the man's scalp and the music of the Hunt roared awake, focusing his music like a knife blade on what was underneath Ked's fingertips. Interfacing cords bled into the man's head and opened. His spots were awash with blinding fury as the man's life and light poured into the emptiness at the back of his neck through his arms, through his fingers.

But the joy in Ked's music was beaten back by Sky's new imperative. Ked drew the Hunt louder through his body, but the other song still penetrated it, sending jarring dissonance through the void. Ked reformed his eyes and turned to Melrim in rage.

She stared at him, one hand over her mouth and another over her stomach. "What are you doing?"

"Don't look at this!" Ked cried. "Turn away!"

She turned her back and Ked's music came together again, but this time his bliss was corrupted by his fury that he was not allowed to harm this woman's *emotions*, either.

Ked drank images and memories of horses, of rushing through fields and forests... but he could not care. His glory was tainted, his purpose corrupted.

Ked screeched in the void. *That woman!* Hatred crashed as bursts of rancid gold light through the void, then flickered as his desire for violence toward her was snuffed out against his will. *That woman!* he cried again. *It is only pain! I will not let my hatred be bridled! I embrace this pain! I hate her! I will—*

Ked's avatar screamed, the threads in his body wound so tightly that a portion of them shattered. Ked gasped and his larger body shuddered, and he shoved the thought of violence against Melrim away, singing only the Hunt, thinking only of the memories he was stealing. *No pain—no pain—!*

He pulled the last few memories into place, and then the mindcast was done, apart from its wrapping. He sank against the stableman, mourning for the joy denied him at what would certainly be his final mindcast. His fingers caressed the man's

scalp as if comforting a scared dog. *Please, I want to finish the mindcast by drinking him. I must. I can't. I must...*

Sky was there with him as part of the Hunt, passive but alive, feeling Ked's thoughts rush into the mist and out again. *Fighting the seal is futile*, he thought. *Submit.*

Ked reconnected his broken threads, cringing with each reformed bond. Unpleasant work. *I can't fight this music head on*, Ked sang. *I must... bend. Move with the current instead. What is it actually wanting of me? No harm, no harm...*

His pain had become physical harm when it had grown too much, but a human body was different.

Ked ran his hands through the man's hair. "Pain," he muttered, "is not the same as harm. Is it?"

The stableman had been still from the shock of his mind being so opened, but now he struggled to get up. Ked shoved him against the ground, pressed flat against him, and sent all his threads deep inside.

The man gave a shrieking gasp before he fell silent, and his flesh flowed inward into Ked's through his clothes, a river of matter and light.

Sky's threads twitched with increasing unease as Ked forced his music to interpret Sky's bind more literally. Ked was singing, *Pain is not harm*— The seal accepted this. Melrim was not physically harmed by witnessing this act, and so Ked could proceed even if she was watching.

Such a quick pivot, Sky thought. *But this might be as far as the imperative will bend.* He touched the seal with a silver thread, feeling its shape. Bending it further would cause Ked pain, but he might learn to bend it as far as he was willing to tolerate that pain. *He will not do anything to shorten her life, at least. That won't be possible no matter how far he contorts himself.*

Ked fought to hold onto his eyes and he found Melrim again, who peeked back at him. His music flashed in triumph as he saw that he, drinking this man underneath him, was not harming her after all. Sky's bind was not offended this time.

That is the way of it, Ked sang. I must work within my desires, even the ones I despise. Bend them, not deny them.

The void settled like a spring day after a storm. Ked's avatar stood tall, head hanging low, exhausted but proud of his victory. Tired laughter came as bursts of gold sparkling through the void like butterfly wings.

Ked sank against the man's empty clothes, body ringing with relief and joy at the bright new mind in the back of his neck. His ecstasy was whole again. Heat flickered on his four spots in waves. His last mindcast, done.

"Why? He didn't do anything to you," Melrim said, voice trembling.

Ked rolled against the clothes, spreading ash around him, and he turned to her with a grin on his face. "This is what I am, priestess. You knew this."

"You didn't have to do that to him."

"Yes, I did."

He came to his feet, drawing up the man's shirt, then shaped his body to match the one he had just consumed. Shorter hair, curly, and stark white. A longer nose. The stableman had been taller than him, but he had already spread his structural fibers to store the extra matter he had consumed when he devoured the meat.

Melrim watched him with eyes wide. "Shapeshifter," she said.

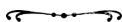
His spots flickered in delight at that declaration.

He pulled the shirt over his head, drinking moonlight, and looked out to the east. Dawn was not coming yet, but still the horizon pulled on his mind.

"You are stealing his identity?" Melrim said.

Ked shook the ash out of the man's pants, then stepped into the legs and retied them. "It will make crossing the bridge a little easier."

I would have killed everyone guarding the bridge, but for you. Thanks to you, damn woman, I must act more delicately. Better they don't try to fight us.



The two of them approached the Westwort Bridge, Melrim atop a horse, and Ked on foot. They had ransacked the stableman's house for food and filled gourds and bladders with water at the well, and the horse was well loaded with everything.

One horse, not two. Ked refused himself a horse.

"Why not ride, too?" she had asked. "The horses will keep a better pace."

Ked had only stalked forward, toward the bridge. *Why does she not keep her words to herself? She expects me to treat her like a real person.*

The two guards stationed at the bridge sat around a fire pit near where the cobbles became the stone slabs of the bridge. One of them stood at their approach. "Halt," he said, sounding bored.

"It's Emikt," said Ked. "Let us pass."

The bridge guard held up a lamp and came closer, lifting it up to shine light over Ked, then Melrim, then the bags on the horse.

"Quick errand, is it, Emikt? There's enough food there for days." The man's name fluttered in the stableman's mind, but Ked did not care to catch it.

"Yes," said Ked. "There is something in a nearby farmhouse my lady wanted to fetch."

"And you, on foot?"

"It is not that far, but my lady is *very delicate*." The last two words were curdling sarcasm.

"At this time of night? With no lantern?"

"She wanted to travel the blight under the Open Eye."

The bridge guard looked into the moon, now halfway to the horizon from its zenith. He shook his head and murmured, "Women will what women will." In a louder voice he said, "You have papers?"

Ked fished out a pair of coins from his pouch, handed one to the bridge guard with the lantern, and tossed the second toward the fire pit. The second guard reached for it and held it up in the firelight.

"I'd appreciate discretion, lads," said Ked.

The bridge guard nearest them pocketed the coin. "Be it on your head, then, if you go out there." He held the lantern up to Melrim. "He's told you the risks, my lady?"

Melrim nodded. She regarded him with the subtle disdain that the ruling class often employed to end conversations. A gold glimmer of admiration skirted through Ked's deepness.

The bridge guard shook his head and waved them away. "May you have the Sun's own luck out there. And the moon's. You will need both."

Ked led the horse forward.

He shivered when he stepped onto the bridge stones. He focused his sights on a hill across the river, pretending he was walking a stone path on solid ground. Westwort was truly enormous, a feat of human engineering and labor, so long that fifty horse drawn wagons could cross at once end-to-end, and five abreast. But it was an abomination to his threadsong.

Do not think about how far into the air we are. Do not think about the water underneath us.

Ked coiled his threads tightly, calming his music by using his human body alone to move. He focused on the splay of his feet inside his boots as he took each step, the supple roughness of the leather of the reins in his hands. The belt at his waist, the sounds of clothing moving against clothing and the horse shoes on the stone. Creaking leather.

"*Very delicate?*" said Melrim.

Ked twitched. He pulled the horse along faster, then faster. *Please, let's just get out from over this water.*

"I know how to ride, you know."

Horrific woman. Will you not stop talking?

Ked stopped abruptly then held the reins up as the horse came alongside him. Melrim reached for them.

Panic cut through Ked's music like a sword. He jerked backward and dropped the reins before she could touch his hand.

Melrim stared at him as he pressed hands into his chest and took gasping breaths.

"Do not touch me! Never touch me!" he cried.

"I wasn't going to."

"That was too close! Never do that again!"

"If I am to take the reins from you, then I must."

Ked snatched the reins and flung them at her.

He waited until he had seen for certain she caught them, then stormed forward. *Can't run yet. The bridge men might still be watching us. Damn them. Damn this woman! I'd be into the blight by now if it weren't for her.*

He clamped down on his hatred before Sky's bind could strike him again.

They continued in silence until they crossed the halfway point along the bridge, then Ked broke into a run. Melrim galloped after him. For one blissful moment Ked could pretend that he was alone again, Wandering on his own, not trapped by a human companion or human conversation.

The horse caught up and kept alongside him, so Ked ran faster, taking deep gulps of air, pressing his muscles with thread and blood. The horse struggled to keep up.

When he reached the far side he stopped and ducked into the weeds next to the road. The horse galloped past him. He ripped off his boots and spread his feet and toes flat, drinking everything he could reach. The race had left him too thirsty. He would never be able to keep that pace without real sunlight. Only a few hours remained until dawn. Only a few hours....

But he had crossed the Fyrth River. Still in Talris, but no longer in Fyrthten. They had reached the edge of the great blight.

I'll never need shoes again. I will never need to please a human by wearing something ever again! His buried spots shivered with laughter.

No one crossed the bridge anymore, and no one would follow them now... except perhaps the Hands of the Sun.

How desperate were they to regain their scapegoat for the blight? The populace outside the jail would want someone to die tonight to answer for their suffering. Would the Hands even guess where Ked had gone? Would they go into the blight to look for him?

He sang a frown as he stepped out from the chalky dust, the ground he had just devoured to nothing, and retrieved the boots. He would not wear them unless he had to, but he should at least keep them with him. He might need to look human at some point after all.

There might be rogue bands of humans out here, too, but he needn't perform for that sort. Those he would kill outright, because anything less and they would try to hurt the two of them.

Anger rolled through his back at how his thoughts were distorting themselves to satisfy Sky's bind. That last had been subtle.

Melrim returned with the horse and said, "Temper tantrum?" Her smile died as she caught sight of the dead earth Ked had left behind. It was bright in the moonlight, like pale ash.

Ked started forward again. "Let's not delay."

"That dust, did you... never mind. How long of a ride is it? I'll need to pace myself. And the horse."

"I don't know."

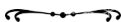
She brought the horse alongside. "You don't know where we're going?"

"I'll know where to go to reach my master. I just don't know where it is."

"That doesn't make sense. Do you know *about* how long?"

“How deep does the blight go, priestess? Perhaps you know that better than me.”

“Days,” she muttered. “It will be days, then. Wonderful.”



The dawn was long coming, but the extent of the blight was not apparent at the edge; it was not a sheer line, despite how Talris had decided to draw the border. At the other end of the bridge, the biggest sign was the lack of people.

The town they reached first was long abandoned and long ransacked, its windows dark and its doorways neglected. Dirt and dust crowded the corners. The buildings were weathered a year or longer, and mosses and weeds had crept through the stone. Vines strangled the wooden structures, such as were left.

From behind, Melrim atop the horse said, “So different in two years.”

His threads twitched in a frown. *Must she continue to announce everything that is obvious?*

No one was allowed into the blight officially, but rogues might have settled in the abandoned places, since Talris no longer maintained patrols. Ked kept his forehead and cheek sensory spots on the surface to catch the body heat of anyone attempting to ambush them. The streets were wide, but the low moonlight cast deep shadows. The horse stepped cautiously.

Ked saw nothing except the tiny warmth of rats, and heard nothing except the wind through the leaves and the horse taking cautious steps behind him.

Once they had cleared the abandoned town, Ked relaxed. He broke out into a light jog, boots still in hand, eyeing the moon as it touched the hills obscuring the coast. The hoof beats of the horse kept up behind him, but he turned frequently to ensure the woman was still there, still following.

The act of walking into new lands was a welcome relief. His Wanderlust had been neglected through his long hibernation, though well suppressed for the same reasons. Wandering was one of his deepest impulses, a companion to his hunger for human minds, and it felt good to take a step at a time, connected to the land through bare feet, moving through the world and gathering tastes to take with him. With each step, his understanding of the landscape grew pleasantly textured within his shape-sense.

He had been born deep in the blight, but had left via the northwest. Now he was coming into the blight from the south. He would wait until dawn to start taking cell prints, but he was certain to find something novel to add to his collection, even though he had been to this land before. Everything had been novel to his newborn self, but now his understanding was mature, and his stores could be made more complex with nuances he had not cared about the first time around.

The tug of the dawn from the east teased him until he came to a ridge overlooking the road on the right side. "Rest and have the horse graze," he said. "Stay within sight of me." He dropped the boots at the base of the ridge and clambered up through thorns and bushes.

"Stay within sight? Where are you going?"

"We will rest one hour. Eat and sleep."

At the top of the ridge Ked pulled off his shirt and darkened his skin and hair, no longer caring to maintain the stableman disguise. All that mattered now were the brightening horizon and the promise of sunfire over the trees.

His eyes fell away before they rebounded back into place. No, he would not be able to drink with his spots. He would have to watch Melrim and make sure no one was creeping up to her.

He held out his arms and faced the west, sending threads thick through his back and his hair instead.

He stared at Melrim, who stared back. *This is ridiculous*, he sang. *I will not watch her for hours while I bask backwards.*

Instead he focused on the road on either side, back toward Fyrthten, and north toward Éterhu. If anyone approached, even at a gallop, he'd have enough warning to jump down and intercept them. That would have to do.

The skin on his back tingled, and he sang the first few notes of the song that had engulfed him when his body had formed a nest, a year ago, somewhere in the mountains above Tarja. The nesting process would not begin for him now—apparently that music had never been up to him to sing—but he remembered the skin of his back drawing into sharp points, pulling outward like spines on a porcupine, and then unfolding into leaves. His deepness shivered with longing. He had never devoured sunfire like that before or since. It had been like drinking with his spots but over his whole body, an intensely erotic experience.

If I must drink sunfire from behind, could I leaf like that again? Grow the leaves without forming the nest itself?

It would waste more light than he gained, at his guess. He had not carried that tissue for long, as those black leaves had quickly become part of the nest itself, which had detached from him. That whole experience was clouded in his memory, as his mind had slipped past time for much of it, but he did remember realizing that the nest's tastes were different in a fundamental way from the ones he touched and breathed every day. They had been thread-tastes, matter of a different shape altogether, like the flesh of his master. He was too unfamiliar with those alien tastes to recreate them, and it would not be worth the cost of his experimentation to engineer a substitute.

Still, it made him restless to face the oncoming dawn with his back and not his face. It made those nest-desires sparkle in his music, half-formed, out of reach.

When sunfire touched his hair he gasped. Fire through his hair, through his threads, pooling in his back. How long had it

been? He had been living off of scraps, the paltry light stolen from meat and bone. The purity of this sunfire shocked him and delighted him, and he laughed with his voice and his spots.

Melrim was watching him now as she went through the saddlebags. He kept only enough attention on her to satisfy his music. The rest of him indulged in the dawn, singing with delight as sunfire touched his neck, then his shoulders.

He lingered on the ridge not for one hour, but three. His light stores had been filled to the brim, and he had made tiny repairs to his body and his threads that he had deemed not urgent, but still he basked. The light of dawn was comforting. As long as he basked like this, he could believe everything could be all right again.

But his sights were turning more and more southward, toward Fyrthten. He still feared the Hands of the Sun chasing them. Reluctantly, he came down the ridge to where the horse was trying to graze and where Melrim had curled up to sleep, in the shadow of a boulder.

“Get up,” he said.

She took so long to rouse that three gold beats of panic flew through his back. He could not touch her, could not tell if she was dead... but then she turned her head and scrunched her face.

“Ked,” she said. “I’m going to need more sleep than this. I’m only human.”

“Later. During the day we will make better time with the horse.”

“Well, I’m exhausted.”

“Fine. When the Hands of the Sun catch us, chasing the demon I so carefully presented to them, I’ll have to slaughter them all right in front of you.”

She groaned, then pushed herself upright. Ked stepped back so she wouldn’t accidentally—or deliberately—touch him.

She had one foot on a stirrup when she paused and regarded him. He glowered back at her.

"Must you look like Sky?" she said.

"This is what my body looks like."

"Well, it *harms* me to see Sky's face when—"

"Emotional harm is not real harm! But please, continue. I would dearly love to find more loopholes in Sky's bind. Go on."

Ked hummed to himself as Melrim mounted the horse. He had been using the stableman's mindcast to speak, since it was already open, but it occurred to him that he hadn't known the word *loophole* in either language. That got him thinking about Leinanso speakers.

Sky must have tricked him into being scared of the hunter's mindcast, but now he knew better. It need not remain quarantined now. *Let's flirt with the concept of "harm," shall we?*

He drew the hunter's mindcast up into his neck as Melrim got settled in the saddle. She winced as she put her legs into position—best not think about how her body was being harmed by riding so long—and he changed the shape of his body.

In the sun it was effortless to sculpt his structural fibers, pull at the soft tissues of his face, and alter his hair and eyes. He made deeper changes, too, the throat, the organs... but he omitted the black welts above and below his eyes. These were baked into the mindcast wrapping, as it perfectly captured the status of the hunter as Ked had found him. It was a simple thing to omit them.

The mindcast was not fully open yet, and could not fully open until the stableman's mindcast was compressed for another day, but he stole quick impressions of muscle memory, and put his hands on his hips and leaned casually to one side.

When Melrim looked up again, he had fully donned the hunter's shape. "What about this?" he said with the hunter's

voice. He grinned broadly. He had used Leinanso, as it was the language she and the hunter used with each other.

The horror on Melrim's face sent pleasant sparkles of gold through his whole body.

"You wouldn't," she said.

He had found the hunter's nickname for her. "Let's get going, Mel," he said, waving her forward.

"You wouldn't!"

"Why not? The shape of Sky's body bothers you, doesn't it? That's what you said."

He skipped and danced ahead of her. He reached for his boots at the base of the ridge, then waved at them as if dismissing them. He was done with disguises. So what if humans might find him? What use was keeping the stableman's shape, anyway?

He had forgotten how empowered he was in the sunlight. His threads were quick and bright, and his back glowed with vibrant gold music. He could do anything, and no human could harm him.

He slowed to a stop as he caught another memory. One of Sky and Melrim speaking to each other tenderly. The two had sneaked away from Sekt's party and were hiding in the garden behind Sekt's house, but the hunter had found them.

"Reem," Ked said softly. "*That's* what he calls you. Reem."

Melrim shook in the saddle, her face quivering as if about to cry.

An edge had crept into his music, and he decided that this was as much "emotional harm" as he could deliver safely. *I'd best not provoke Sky to do something worse to me.*

"Reem," he said again. He smiled gently and pressed a hand to the neck of the horse, sparing some of his strength to feed and water the animal through its blood. "If only I had caught that nickname in the hunter's memories when we first met. You might have trusted me from the start. Oh, how things

might have been different if I had been able to touch you then.”

Melrim jerked her arm forward to touch his. He ripped back his threads and recoiled from her, smiling as he raised his hands and walked backward away from her. He turned north, setting out at a brisk walk. The horse followed.

Perhaps it would not be a bad thing if Ked provoked Sky, after all. Under the light of the sun, he could afford to prowl his deepness again and find signs of Sky’s presence. This time, he knew much better what to look for, and he knew exactly where to look. He was a much better threadsinger in every respect than he had been even a week ago.

“Reem,” he mumbled to himself. *I will find a way to provoke Sky into action.*

14. Fog

Ked let off his teasing once he saw Sky did not react to any of it and Melrim had hardened herself against it. Instead he bent all his efforts to pack the stableman's mindcast so he could open Fox's mindcast wide enough for him to wear the mind, not just ransack it for isolated memories.

Sky's silver music gave him no insights into the interfacing process or the mindcasts themselves, but even Sky could tell after a few hours of Ked's work that Fox's mind was not whole enough for Ked to use that way.

He was too badly enthralled, Ked sang. Of all the mindcasts to be crippled in such a manner....

Ked gave up Fox's shape not long after that. He kept the mindcast open, pouring through it once in a while, but no longer attempted to submerge himself in it.

Ked's thoughts were still well guarded, but his intentions often bled outward from his avatar brightly enough that Sky could catch them, even if they didn't always take the form of words.

Cannot touch Melrim, cannot hurt Melrim. Cannot find Sky. Cannot hurt Sky, for this would hurt Melrim. Must find Sky. Trick him into action. Find where he is. Find what he's doing to me. Find him. Find him! Cannot touch him. Cannot touch her.

Ked turned back to ensure Melrim was still following. She was clearly exhausted and growing increasingly sore from riding, and her discomfort created a subtle but building dissonance within Ked's threadsong.

She is pressing forward of her own free will, sang Ked. I am not the direct cause. She could choose to stop and rest at any time. It's not me causing harm to her.

That reasoning kept the dissonance quiet, but it was not enough to banish it.

Now that the sun was high and the horse could traverse rougher terrain, Ked changed course, leaving the main coast road and striking out to the east. It was a minor road, unpaved and carved with the tracks of oxcart wheels, more winding and more wooded.

Increasingly, the vegetation was scant and the bushes and vines ragged. Trees were dead or dying from bark borer infestations that were too prolific and too widespread for anything natural.

Once, while hunting for cell prints at the side of the road, Ked caught a beetle that had been enthralled and was gorging on the roots of a vine. The sight excited him. He grabbed it and drank it in his hands, taking several cell prints of the animal's degraded state and some of the spores afflicting it.

We're coming closer, Ked sang.

They passed abandoned farmlands, huge fields of grain left to grow wild, full of weeds and heavily devoured by grasshoppers and other insects. There were still enough of the crops left for Ked to drink and steal cell prints from, and every few hours he drew the horse into one of these abandoned fields, drinking stalks of grain with his feet and pouring strength into the horse with his hands. He gave the horse water, too, some from the food he was consuming, and some from threads that had reached deep underground.

At these times, Melrim ate and drank from the saddlebags what she could. Ked's eyes were locked on her, but his attention drilled into the mist, daring Sky to act.

Ked did not outright say it, but he oozed these feelings so thickly he might as well have said it: Ked would keep the horse fed and its fatigue washed away, and could do the same

for Melrim if only Sky would alter the seal. Otherwise, she would continue to suffer.

Ked's sentries had burrowed deeper into the place within his deepness they could not see, but their progress had slowed, and they had not crossed more than a quarter of the way into the knotted whorl.

Even if Sky's body was out of reach for Ked, Ked was deep enough in the whorl he might be able to see silver music being drawn from the cords in the weave. As Ked grew more sure of himself, Sky grew more wary.

He and I both know that I will have to act before we reach the creature, Sky thought. It's a matter of time. Perhaps I should get it over with, do it soon before he learns to watch any more closely than this, and before the real need arrives.

But there was a chance he wouldn't need to intervene at all, and so the overseer half of him preferred to wait.

One can remain in koulim too long, he grumbled to himself. *Koulim's weakness was that if you could not decide whether to act or to wait, you would wait forever.*

One of the creature's spores brushed past the sensory spot on Ked's right cheek. Ked snatched it with thread and made a print of it to store in his collection. He hummed the shape of the spore's attachment point, the place it wanted to touch to an animals' lungs, and found a match in a cell print cluster within his left ankle. Deer, elk, moose... it resonated with all of these, and perhaps goats, oxen, and cows, too. Hoofed mammals with multiple stomachs.

One spore would not do much to an animal that size. They were still days away from the center of the blight. But it was yet another milestone that he had found spores in the wild.

Ked mulled the shape of it over in his mind. *I wonder if I could adapt these for—* Ked cut himself off. His avatar flinched and looked around himself as if waiting for the bind to strike him.

Melrim called them to a halt only halfway through the afternoon.

"There is a farmhouse in another half an hour," Ked said coolly. "A barn, if not a bed—"

"I can't ride anymore. I need to stop."

They pulled off into the trees and up a small hill. Melrim's legs were so bruised and chafed that she could barely come off the horse, and she dropped at an awkward angle with a yelp. Ked stood and watched her struggle, hands behind his back, smiling a stiff smile.

She sat on the ground and spread her legs out in front of her. She touched her thighs through her dress. "This will hurt for days," she muttered.

"Not very lady-like."

"You don't care. You're not human." She froze, then tidied herself up, putting her legs together and flattening her dress. She tucked her hair behind her ears. "Can Sky see through your eyes?"

"He must. Sometimes I can feel him pulling my eyes toward things he wants to see. That hadn't occurred to me. Yes, he must be able to see through my eyes in a literal sense." Ked sat on his haunches and stared out onto the road through the trees. His voice grew eager. "Did he tell you anything about what he was? Where he was?"

"I'm not going to help you find him."

"I cannot harm him without harming you. I just want to understand how he is doing what he's doing. You would not believe the things he has done to me."

"Was it any worse than what you've done to Emikt? To Fox?"

"The things I've done to Fox?" Ked stood and took tall playful steps until he was in front of Melrim. He bent over to look her in the eyes. "What do you think I've done to Fox?"

She matched his gaze. "The same you've done to Emikt. Raped his mind, devoured his body into dust."

Ked tapped the center of his chest. "I've *preserved* them."

He walked in a circle around Melrim, who craned her head to follow.

"You think you're special? You think you're not made of meat, like an animal? That you were not born from dust, and will not return to dust when you die?" He paused and spread his arms theatrically. "Salit Fox will live forever in the mind of my master. I've given him immortality."

"No, you cut his life short."

"You speak as if death is the worst thing that can happen to someone. You know you're all going to die eventually, right?"

"You robbed him of the life he might have lived. You robbed Raven of a father and Fern of a husband."

"You do not spare your footsteps because you might crush an ant. Things die. You ate salted meat today. Do you mourn for its calf, having lost a mother?"

"Does that make you our predator, then? Are we your meat?"

Ked braced himself between two trees, looking down at the weeds and the rocks under his feet. "No," he said softly. "You are ants."

"Then why deign to take human shape? Why be the human spy? What are you for?"

"I take a human shape to make it easier to do my work. My master must learn about humans."

"But what for?"

"Does it matter?"

She gaped at him. "You don't know."

"I would be a poor spy if I did not know why I was spying. I know, but you need not learn. This conversation is pointless."

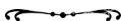
"Not pointless. You are desperate to prove your superiority to me."

"My superiority is self evident."

"Then you have been ensnared by a pair of ants."

Ked gave her a venomous smile. He turned and crouched, watching the road.

Within the void, Ked's music shimmered with hatred. *Ants*, he sang. *You are all less than ants.*



They camped with no fire, and Melrim slept atop a bedroll and underneath the only blanket. Ked sat partway up the slope from her, ears and eyes peeled and four sensory spots bared, watching for anyone or anything approaching.

As the night went on, Ked's focus came more and more to Melrim herself. Her body, her warmth on his spots. He crept closer to her. After a few minutes he moved even closer.

She does not toss and turn, so she will not thrust out an arm toward me, he sang. *Besides, if she touches me, it is not my fault. It is not I that is touching her.*

He winced; his song did not accept that. Apparently, they could not touch at all, no matter who initiated contact.

Ked drew a finger toward her forehead, but it stopped a hand span from her as if he had struck a wall. No amount of willpower allowed him to press his finger any closer than that.

He pressed harder anyway, and his song screeched and howled so harshly he ripped his hand away and fell backward.

Dazed, he lay on his back, and waited several minutes for his music to calm down, slowing his breathing. Trying to force the issue while the bind was inflamed only made it rebound harsher when he tested it.

Ked waited until the bind had retreated completely, then stretched out his hand again, reaching for her face. *I may not touch her, but her hair is dead tissue. It shouldn't count.*

His hand drifted toward the top of her head, then back again. The bind had gotten louder as he approached, but Ked had retreated before it could erupt. He was learning the edges of the bind well. *Not good enough*, Ked sang, threads gnashing. *Dead tissue is still tissue. So much for touching her skin. But...*

He crawled downward toward her feet, breaking stalks of grass. *Her clothes are not her body*, he reasoned. He reached for the hem of her blue dress. *The woman is her body, not her clothing, or else everything she touches is part of her body, and it is unreasonable to ask that I not touch the ground she walks upon.* He brought his hand closer in spurts, reaching and pulling back as if afraid of being burned.

"Ked, you're keeping me awake."

Ked leapt backward like a cat and landed on his hands and knees, skidding partway down the slope. His spots blazed with heat as she rolled her head toward him.

"How long have you been—"

"I can hear you moving around. Clacking rocks. Breaking twigs. Breathing."

"I've barely—"

"Ked," she said. "It *harms* me when you keep me from sleeping."

Ked sputtered nonsense noises as Sky's bind dug into his music, flattening it with dissonant silver noise. He stood and stormed up the slope, then dropped to the ground and sat cross legged, facing her. He continued muttering as he folded his arms angrily at her, and the bind slunk back into the corners of his mind. "You monster," he said.

"Quiet, or I won't be able to sleep."

Ked glared at her but did not so much as grind his teeth. Inside his mind, he ranted and raved, cursing her carefully enough not to trigger the bind again.

Ked did not move his body again all through the night, except to drink insects that crawled over his skin.

The morning's dawn light fell between the scattered trees, but did not reach Ked until after the sun had drifted high enough. He could not get up, could not turn toward the dawn. He had to stay in place, cross-legged, and keep completely still until Melrim roused. He only risked leaning forward and backward as the shadows from the canopy moved across his shoulders and his back.

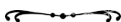
She is oversleeping on purpose! Ked sang.

The next day of travel went much like the previous, though Melrim needed rest far more often. They had yet to meet another soul, or even any large animals. They had almost run out of food. Ked still fed and watered the horse, but they had to find a well before the day was out to refill the canteens they had packed.

Ked's music thrummed with desire as they crested a large hill and came down into a broad valley. There was a new scent on the air, one that spoke to his threads and drew his music together much like the music for the Hunt. He was being summoned. It was faint, but the scent was clear.

The road they followed was overgrown, but it still offered a clear look through the forest into the valley ahead of them. The air ahead of them was pale, like a gentle morning fog.

Spores, Ked sang. His spots tingled with anticipation. *One barrier left.*



Within the void, Sky's bind circled toward Ked's avatar as aggressive silver wisps, prowling closer to the center. Ked's avatar looked straight ahead and laughed to himself, acknowledging them by not acknowledging them.

Ked's choice to reach the creature to free Sky would soon be at war with another threat, one that could not be negotiated away. Entrhancement spores *would* harm Melrim. Sky knew it, and Ked knew it.

Still he brings her deeper? Sky thought. *What will he do when she succumbs? Does he have no plan at all?*

Denial worked to guide threadsong as well as any other negotiation tactic. Ked had avoided thinking about spores working on humans, and so it had not been a part of his music's anxieties until he was tasting the spores himself.

Ked breathed in, singing his delight at the variety of spores. They would not harm him, of course. Not even the ones meant for humans, which he had not yet tasted.

It will happen before long, Sky sang. Still he hesitated. *Will I wait for him to goad me? Have I become so passive?*

Sky sent a whisper of silver through himself. *If Ked has no plan for this, then I must act to save her, no matter the risk to myself.* He moved himself slowly around the mist, watching Ked's sentries closely for a reaction. They could not see him yet, or else they were bluffing well. He put himself into position, feeling at the cords in his weave that he might need, sliding along the creases to soften the light they might emit.

"What is this fog?" Melrim said. "It's not humid. This isn't from the sea."

Ked only smiled.

Half an hour later, Ked finally tasted spores that would infect humans, though he only caught a few of them. A human would need more than a few to succumb, but they were walking deeper and it would happen before long. They crossed into groves with no grass, where the trees were stripped bare. The fog was a gray haze ahead of them, growing thicker.

Within the void, Sky's bind darted around Ked as silver bursts, snapping at him like wolves, almost coming close enough to touch him. But Ked's avatar, gold and gleaming, stood still, smiling and laughing to himself.

Ked's sentries around Sky's mist were as deep as they had ever been, pressed flat against their shared weave, their own music the faintest whispers. If Sky sang anything, they would hear. How could they not? And yet Sky would still have to act.

Behind Ked, Melrim coughed.

Ked's avatar flashed in a brilliant gold chord of anticipation. *A cough means nothing*, he sang, and meant it. Sky's bind did not rush inward yet. Ked could manipulate the bind as well as it manipulated him now.

Even now, Sky's music wanted him to wait. If he crossed his overseer half too harshly, it would go out of phase with

Ked's music and Ked would surely see it. Sky had to shift the tempo into *feilam* slowly. But he would have to act soon.

Melrim had a coughing fit, and Ked's music would not be convinced. She was being harmed.

"Wait," said Melrim. She was having trouble breathing. "My lungs are on fire. Something's wrong."

Ked watched her hungrily as she struggled off the horse, his song a high-pitched keening. On the ground, she clenched her eyes shut and clutched at her chest, breathing hard.

Ked's imperatives were clashing, threatening to smother him. Sky's bind leapt and leapt at Ked's avatar, landing on the gold figure with dissonant screeches. But the bind did not stick to him. He turned toward Sky's mist, laughing and sending a scathing look straight toward Sky at the center.

I know you, sang Ked. She will be safe because you are here and you will save her. I could not prevent this while bringing you two to my master to fulfill your larger purpose. I know you will do what is necessary.

Melrim curled up and coughed into her knees. Ked stood over her, trembling, hating her, needing to heal her, wanting to kill her but not wanting to kill her.

Sky sang silently, moving threads deep within Ked's weave at the place it touched his body, and he made a realignment within the seal. **TOUCH HER ONLY TO HEAL HER.**

The tension in the void snapped. Ked's hands rushed to Melrim, one hand for her back and one for her neck. His threads rushed inside her body, and he checked the tissues in and around her brain before moving to her chest. "Hold your breath," he said.

Melrim was dazed for a moment before she started and struggled against him. "You're touching me!"

"Hold your breath, I said! I'm healing you."

Ked raced through her lungs, loosening and dissolving the spores that had attached to her alveoli. Melrim's body relaxed, but her eyes were wide with fear.

Meanwhile, inside the void, Ked's avatar burned as a vibrating spot of light, smearing and warping with rage. *What did you do? How is it that I saw nothing? I saw nothing!*

Solemnly, Sky withdrew the threads he had used to alter the seal, and he wrapped them tight around himself. Ked's sentries, which had been pressing themselves deeply into the mist, flailed in a panic.

I saw nothing! sang Ked, devastated. *How? You must be cheating! Damn you!*

Melrim took deep breaths as Ked stepped away from her. "I thought Sky bound you. You couldn't touch me."

"He changed the bind." Ked's voice was tight.

Melrim let out a slow gasp, then touched her throat. "That cough must have been important, then. What—"

"You would have become a thrall had I done nothing."

"A thrall." Her face grew dark. "That's what Sky said. Spores that change animals, make them want—"

"Get on the horse."

"You said, had you done nothing I would have—"

"Get. On. The. Horse."

Melrim scrambled for the horse. Ked stared at her, carefully hating her, and he winced as she cried out lifting her leg to the stirrup. Her leg shook as she tried to raise it.

Ked's avatar vibrated, splitting into two shapes momentarily before snapping back together. "I must heal that," he said gruffly.

"Heal what?"

"Your thighs. Your back." He rushed for her. "I—I can't stop myself. I can't let you get any more hurt. Stop. Stop!"

Melrim stood in place, leaning against the horse as Ked moved his hands to her ankles, her legs. She stiffened as he reached her thighs, sliding his hands through the dress and pressing where her muscles were bruised and her skin was raw.

He burned through light madly to do this, to rush into her body and soothe what was injured. He healed as quickly as he

could have healed himself, and he fed her blood, just as he had the horse. Threads took deep gulps of sunfire but still he burned his light down to nearly nothing to rush through the work as quickly as possible. He could not bear to be inside her and could not bear to leave her alone. The contradiction rode his music, forcing every note he sang as he healed her body.

His hands slowed as they climbed her back, her neck... her head. His fingers lingered on her scalp, searching for signs that spores' effects had reached her brain, but his interfacing cords shook with need he could not allow himself to entertain for a fraction of a second. His music was a keening whine.

"You have no idea," he said, "how deeply, unbelievably painful this is."

The instant Ked was finished, his hands leapt off of her body and he stormed into the bushes, breathing hard. His six spots flashed with hatred before running cold to devour sunfire as he raised his head toward the sun, nearly at its peak above him. He stomped his feet against the dirt, tearing the ground apart to voice his rage. He gathered almost no strength from what he drank but he devoured it anyway, needing to destroy *something*. The plants around him crumbled to ash in a circle several paces around him.

Inside the void, the shape of Ked's avatar was blurry, pulsing in and out of its outline like a cook pot boiling over.

Sky watched this with alarm. *What happens to a servant pressed too hard?* he thought.

"I'm not even thirsty anymore," Melrim said.

Ked gripped himself with his arms and his body shook as footsteps came up from behind him.

"As destructive as you are—"

Ked whipped to face her, and his six spots screamed hatred at her.

Melrim paused only a moment. Calmly, she said, "You are quite the impressive creature."

Ked's hatred bled off his spots and he reformed his eyes. He glared at her in silence as she approached the horse.

“But never touch me like that again,” she said fiercely.

Ked stalked toward her, threads vibrating. “I will need to touch your lungs again every few hours or you will succumb again. Unless....”

His fingers twitched. Inside his chest, threads raced through his lungs, feeling the smaller and larger structures and singing the shape of Melrim’s tissues.

A pocket of threadlight brightened near Sky’s mist. Sky coiled his threads and muted his music before he saw that it was a series of sub organs loosely attached to Ked’s thread-mind, a cluster that resembled a tightly-packed bunch of grapes or a clump of fish eggs. Sky had never paid them any attention before, as they had always been dark and silent, but now Ked worked them hard, bending all his anger and fury toward getting them doing whatever it was they did.

Each one glowed until it emitted a burst of threadsong, over and over again, making random noise at first, but gradually a sense of purpose emerged. A shape. It was as if each sphere in the cluster were its own alchemist, brainstorming and experimenting with tastes and shapes.

“Unless what?” Melrim said.

One of the substructures burst with light and music that set a ripple of light through Ked’s body, from his deepness to his fingers and toes. There was an exultant gold chord, then the chemical laboratories fell dormant again.

Sky’s music strained as Ked approached Melrim, hands raised. “I will fix your lungs so the spores will not work on you anymore.”

Melrim’s face twitched with surprise then hardened with determination. She turned her back to him and raised her head tall. “Only touch my back, then.”

“I was not asking permission.” He pressed his hands onto her back, and threads dove through her clothes and past her ribs.

Gold threads changed Melrim's tissues, making them more resemble Ked's own, but with a few other changes that were necessary because Melrim was not a threadsinger.

Astonishing, Sky thought. His body twisted. *That will work, but... how did he maneuver the bind so well? This is not a healing. Touch her only to heal her, I said.*

Ked was healing Melrim in advance, doing the equivalent of multiple potential healings at once. Such an abstract choice of action, yet the bind was not offended.

Sky reviewed the bind several more times, each time more certain that the seal should have stopped Ked from doing what he had done. It was composed to be more immediate. More literal. The condition was very plain. Was Ked including the threat of the spores around them in his intentions? Threadsong responded to intent. But Ked's thoughts were so silent Sky could not read them. *He should not be able to hide himself that way, either*, Sky thought, threads gnashing.

Melrim mounted the horse, and Ked led the way, pressing deeper into dead lands and gray fog. Ked moved with a dead calm. As they walked, Sky could not shake the feeling that Ked had outmaneuvered him.

15. Homecoming

There was no longer any land to drink. The trees were dark skeletons, and the shrubs and weeds bare stalks or nibbled to stumps. The fog dampened everything—sight, sound, and heat. The summoning scent grew thicker, but the origin was not clear to Ked yet. The threads on his feet darted in and out of the soil with every footstep, seeking something he could not articulate, but something he would recognize when he encountered it.

His music was a dull droning, repetitive and forceful. *Return home—soon—master—* he sang. *My master, my love, my God... I will be with you soon.*

The rhythm of the horse's hooves changed. Ked might not have noticed except for how long the horse had been following and how accustomed to its gait he had become.

Ked glanced backward. Melrim struggled with the reins, and the horse looked about the land, moving restlessly.

It had black marks above and below its eyes.

A sharp jolt of desire flashed through Ked's back. *The horse has outlived its use,* he sang. It was not time for his other thoughts yet, and so he looked at the horse and added, *Should I eat it myself, or should I save it for my master? We can't be far now.*

"I think we need to rest the horse," Melrim said. She shifted on its back, moving her center so she could dismount. "It doesn't want to go any farther."

"Wait. Don't come down." Ked took the horse's head in his hands, feeling about its skull, its neck, and its brain, ascer-

taining the depth of its degradation. “It will try to kill you if it sees your face.”

“What?”

The horse aimed an eye at Ked, but Ked held its face away from him. “It’s a thrall now. It will attack anything without these marks.” He let light flutter down his four visible spots.

Melrim stiffened in the saddle. “You had not protected the horse?”

“It didn’t occur to me.”

“Liar.”

Ked shrugged his arms dramatically. “I have no choice. I will kill it.”

“But... how will we get back?”

“Our speed returning is less of a concern. And now that I can touch you to heal you, I can keep you fed and watered. Your stamina need not suffer.”

Melrim sent him a murderous look.

“We are already out of food,” Ked said. “I will have to feed you with thread as long as we are in the blight, horse or no horse.”

“Thread?”

Ked blinked, then scowled. “Never mind. I must deal with the horse. Do not come down until I say.”

Ked had only interacted with a few thralls when he had nested a year previous, but just the sight of one made his music ring like the peal of a bell. It belonged to him, and he was hungry.

In his mind and his music, three songs came into mind, three things he could do with this thrall. Slow songs, simple songs—the only threadsong they would understand.

He could declare ownership, which would cause the thrall to rush toward him to feed him. He could compel it to follow, which is what his music wanted him to do now, as they were close enough to a real nest—if not his master—that the thrall ought to be fed to either of them rather than Ked himself. And the third....

Ked brought its eye close to his face, and he let his face flatten. A cool shiver rolled down his back. *Be still*— he sang with his spots.

The horse shuddered and went stiff. It had no thread anatomy, but Ked still sang to it, reinforcing the command by sending calmness and dullness into its blood.

“Get off the horse,” Ked said. “Slowly.”

Melrim came off the horse, staring at Ked as he kept the horse’s head pointed away from her.

“Back away,” said Ked.

Melrim moved several strides away, eyes fixed on the horse.

Ked touched the horse’s neck and cut its spinal cord.

The horse dropped, then Ked’s hands were upon it, feeling about its shoulder, its belly, and its organs.

He tempered his hunger to be efficient in excising light and hoarding resources, and he filled himself with what he would have wanted to have during his long hibernation and imprisonment. Fats, proteins, sugars, salts... some he made a part of his body, and some he gathered into pockets hidden between layers of his flesh. His limbs plumped, and his muscles filled out. He made his limbs longer and his back taller to better hoard what he was drinking. He strengthened himself in every way he knew how. This was to be his last meal.

I am my master’s greatest creation, he sang. I am more powerful than I had ever dreamed I could become. I am perfect.

He was vaguely aware of Melrim—he could not help but always be aware of where she was—approaching him, observing him as he worked. A fullness settled on him, a rare thing, but welcome now. He knew his life would soon be at its end, and that thought brought a strange contentment to his music. Soon, perhaps within hours, he would finish himself. He was ready.

He stood over the horse's mummified body, glorying in the strength flowing through his threadsong and around the deepness of his back.

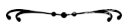
"You can heal, and you can empower your body or the body of others," Melrim said, "yet you choose to spend your life devouring humans."

"All for my master," he said with a smile. "I would do it all again."

"With thread?"

Ked's face twitched. He pulled his human eyes to the surface and smiled gently at her. *Soon—soon—*

"Not long now, priestess," he said. "Follow me closely."



Sky's anticipation was growing, too.

Ked would ask the creature to untangle them, and would grow him a body. Sky was certain of this, because Ked would not be able to bring Melrim into the blight and toward the creature without a genuine belief that he could convince the creature to do this. Ked was betting his sanity on it.

Sky would be brought into a new body... and then what?

The creature would still be a monstrous, seductive force. Ked might not be able to harm either of them, assuming the creature didn't remove the seal Sky had placed, but the creature had every reason to kill or consume them once Ked's favor was done.

Would Sky be made human, or a threadsinger? Would he retain his silver music, or would he be given the threadsong of a spy-servant? He could not assume anything.

He could try to attack the creature at the moment of contact. That had been his original plan, and might still be the best choice. But what he really needed was an imperative that was contagious. If he could implant an imperative in the creature's

song, then it would be similarly compelled to keep both Sky and Melrim safe. Then Sky could kill it at his leisure.

A contagious imperative, given from overseer to master. Was that possible? He doubted it. But who cared what was possible? Ked and Sky were breaking new ground. Sky would make it possible.

PROTECT REEM— he sang. ***GET MY BODY BACK—***

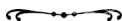
That wouldn't work. He should avoid relative references. The creature needed to want these things, too. How would the creature think of the two of them? He shifted his perspective.

PROTECT THE WOMAN—RESTORE MY FIRST SERVANT—

"First servant" might mean Ked. Dangerous. He attached a modifier, the sense of open space above the earth. The sky. The creature wouldn't know what that meant, but Ked would, and he would.

He shuddered, sculpting himself to want these things, sculpting those who would touch him to want it, too. A contagion, something that hid itself within another's music before building and overtaking what else might have been there, like what the spores did to flesh. He worked backwards, singing the music as it should appear when reinforced, then broke the melodies down into pieces that would want to reinforce themselves.

I am a god, he found himself thinking, but he knew it was true. He was doing the impossible. His body was liquid silver, empowered by Ked's feast, rolling about his own weave as if he was the center of their body. He hardened his mind with the sub-melodies he had constructed.



Ked's concentration was on the tastes underfoot. The underground insects were absent but the soil was intact. He stole cells from plant and animal leavings when he could.

It was dusk when the soil became truly dead. Tasteless, thick with thread-ash. He caught the tastes of a nest's devouring roots.

In the fading light it was difficult to see the line of sudden paleness and uniformity of the soil. But now he knew they had crossed the threshold, it was apparent, if subtle.

He sang a burst of gold light into the roots, and listened for echoes. From the distortion and the delay, the edge might have been a half a mile from the nest itself.

Ked increased their pace, moving at an angle to the center of the devoured space, stopping every so often to taste deeply.

"Ked?"

Ked waved Melrim back. "Soon. I am finding the way."

At last he found a sentry root, one that could communicate with the nest.

Master! he sang. *I am here! But I am in trouble! Help me!*

He waited several heartbeats. If his master was touching this nest, or any of the roots this nest's roots were touching, it would hear him.

Please, please—

Nothing. *Perhaps that message is too complex for the distance.*

He sent his message again, singing more slowly, paring his ideas down to their core. *Master—I am here—I am in trouble*
—

He waited almost a minute, and then a slow silver shimmer touched him. *I COME—*

Ked broke into a run.

He checked that Melrim was following, and darted over rock and boulder, up and down gnarled hills and ridges. This land was wild, thick with dead trees and thorny bushes and shrubs. Anything less was long devoured.

Hurry, he sang. He turned to make sure she was still behind him.

Her dress had caught on something, and she tugged on the offending branch. "Ked, wait! It's too dark. Slow down."

Ked stopped in place, music shuddering as he realized she might have gotten scratched. "Hurry!" he cried.

His threads dove deep into the soil, dashing outward in front of him as far as they could reach. *Master!* he sang.

The response was quicker this time. They were one root system apart.

The root could only tell him which way it was to the nest itself, not which root the message was coming from, nor its direction.

I will take her to the nest, then, he sang. If she is frightened of the nest, so be it.

Melrim had freed herself. "Are we close?"

"Keep up with me."

He kept forward, going more slowly so she would not trip or get caught on anything else, moving directly toward the center of the devoured space, until a large black shape appeared in the haze before them, a black tree with a bulbous trunk that drooped against the ground like an over-sized gourd. Even in the twilight, it was dramatic against the pale surroundings.

He stepped closer eagerly, craning his head at the black leaves atop thick black stalks. His back itched. *So large*, he sang, his music swelling with love for his master. Once, he had partaken of a nest much like this, and his music thrummed with the remembered tastes of the nest's restorative fluid and light.

His music quickened with desire before shimmering and grinding under silver pressure. With a grimace he slowed, eyeing Melrim, who was staring at the nest.

"What is that?" she said.

He raised his hands toward her. "Stay away from it. It will eat you if you touch it."

"Is that your master?"

"Of course not. Just wait there. I must check something."

He approached the nest and touched its shell between a pair of spore sacs, round puffy structures about the size of his

palm that dotted the shell. One sac burst open as he moved threads across the shell surface to find a place receptive to him, then he linked to it. He sang to it, asking it to report to him the directions of the last few messages it had heard.

The nest's thoughts were slow, hardly thoughts at all. It had no will of its own, and could only perpetuate or filter music someone else sung to it. At Ked's urging, it pulsed softly at his feet through the root he had originally followed.

He stepped around the shell in a circle, tasting each sentry root one at a time until he came to one that pulsed the same way as the first.

Ked grinned at Melrim. "This way. Don't come closer to the nest than this, but follow me."

Melrim stepped slowly—too slowly—past the nest. "So this is where spores come from," she said. Another spore sac burst open.

"It doesn't matter. Come, come. My master is minutes away. Come!"

Ked's music pounded at him, straining. He wanted to return home with all his body but he needed to obey Sky's bind. God, millions of years old, must agree to perform a request before he could return home. Unthinkable. It all came down to whether he could convince the creature to break its routine.

He could. He had to. He would die if he failed.

Ked sang into the sentry root as he followed it. *Master—help me—I am in trouble—please, hurry—*

16. God

Ked called for a halt after the sun set so they could wait for the moon to rise. The moon was waning but still bright and round, though only a fuzzy circle underneath the haze.

Spores swirled in thick ribbons as he moved past them. Melrim was breathing hard and Ked winced under a flash of silver pressure. *I have been going quickly*, he sang. *She is breathing hard from the effort, not from the spores.* It was probably true.

Through the gray land ahead of him, he caught a large warm shape. His eyes could not see it yet, but that heat.... It came toward him.

He let out a desperate gasp. *Master!* he sang.

I APPROACH— came God's voice, clear and quick. They were touching the same root now.

Ked turned, shaking, giddy from joy and pain. "Melrim, it is upon us. But do not be afraid. I cannot let it hurt you. I *cannot*. I would sooner die."

Melrim wiped sweat from her forehead, and nodded.

"It will not look like anything you've ever seen before. Do not run. You won't be hurt. Do not touch me, but stay close."

Melrim crept behind him, and half of his threads pointed toward her, straining with the fear that she would touch him. *My mind is divided*— he sang into the root. *I need help*—

The creature prowled toward them, growing larger. Melrim gasped.

It was the color of the haze and the gray land around them, but it was fluid, large and strong, like an over-sized caterpillar,

taller than he was. It rolled forward on a dozen legs, each without joints or bones, pure muscle and thread. Black spines covered its back, and a row of pale feelers, darting about as if under a heavy wind, lined its sides from its back to its trunk of a neck, thickest around its face.

A pale face, with six black spots, two across, and three down. Beautiful. Perfection. God.

His master's spots came alight, and the voice of God struck him to his deepness. **MY CHILD—MY LOVE—MY SERVANT—** The lights were dazzling in the darkness, softened only by the haze of spores. They were the only things that mattered in the world.

Ked's face flattened. *Help me—my music is twisted and broken—* he sang with his spots.

The feelers around God's face pointed toward Melrim, who crept backward. **AN UNTOUCHED ANIMAL—** sang God. Desire flickered on its spots.

Ked held out his arms and his music churned with needs he could not suppress. *Do not eat her—!*

The creature paused, its feelers flicking about. **MY SERVANT—COME HOME—**

I can't—my music is corrupted—you cannot touch me yet—I cannot come home yet—

CORRUPTION—INSUBORDINATION— it sang. Its silver voice was colored with confusion. Anger. His master was angry at him!

Do something for me first—please—then I can come home
—

Ked repeated this message several times, but it was as if the creature did not understand. In all its lives, who would have asked God to do something? Strike a bargain? Do a favor? God sang and servants obeyed. What Ked was doing was so perverse he thought his music would swallow him up and crush him into nothing.

Ked shook as he waved Melrim forward. "Please, priest-ess, Melrim... you must face it. Present yourself to it."

“It’s awful!”

“Come up to me. It must see us together, or this will have all been for nothing.”

Melrim stepped closer, matching Ked’s distance, and she held her head high.

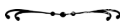
“I will ask it about freeing Sky now,” said Ked.

The creature came closer to Ked, raising its front-most arms, singing its desire to repair its servant.

Ked let into his mind the thoughts he had hidden in his body. *Don’t touch me! This is a trap! Make the woman into a servant, like me! Quickly!*

God’s spots pulsed in surprise, then it turned its whole body toward Melrim.

Ked’s connection to his body snapped like a guillotine had dropped, and he convulsed on the ground.



NO! YOU ARE TO KEEP HER FROM HARM!

Sky smothered Ked, who struggled violently against his grip, and he pressed every gold note in the void into nothing.

His vision was scattered, but he caught sight of Melrim standing tall as the creature reached for her. She stood still, because she was confident that she would not come to any harm.

“Reem!” cried Sky. “RUN!”

The creature snatched her and she yelled out in surprise, then terror. It drew her up against its body facing outward and smothered her with its many hands.

Make her into a servant! Ked cried through his whole body. *Make her a servant or I will die!*

YOU WILL SAY NOTHING! Sky bellowed.

Ked was a mass of gold laughter, blazing in triumph, fighting Sky back even as Sky poured all his strength as an overseer against him.

Through the root connecting them, the creature's thoughts came as distant echoes. It would do as Ked said. It would turn the woman into one of its servants. It would make her like Ked.

KEEP HER FROM HARM, I SAID! HOW DARE YOU! KEEP HER FROM HARM!

She will not be harmed! came Ked's triumphant voice.

LIAR! His servant, lying with threadsong! His bind, the seal he had placed, failed! This had been Ked's plan from the start, and somehow he had kept these thoughts from his own overseer. Unforgivable! **SHE WILL DIE, KED! SHE IS BEING HARMED, EVEN NOW! HER BODY—**

Her body is being perfected! Now nothing my master will do to her will harm her, and she will not be harmed by anyone or anything ever again.

NO! Sky moved over the seal, feeling it. The seal was still there, still working. But Ked's actions did not trigger it. None of what Ked was saying was in conflict with it.

Sky thought of his own torture, his conversion. The creature had tortured him for days if not weeks. **SHE IS BEING HURT NOW, KED! SHE IS IN GREAT PAIN!**

Ked laughed, and the seal did not stir. This argument had long since stopped working to trigger the bind, and no matter how Sky twisted the thought now, the seal did not respond.

Her pain, sang Ked, is power she does not yet understand. When she is complete, she will live in my master's music, in bliss, forever. As will I. And you will be cut out of me and destroyed. Your death will not harm Melrim anymore, now, will it?

In the void, Sky's music tightened around Ked's avatar like numberless ropes, holding him tightly, but even that did not stop the laughter that bubbled out around the void. Sky grabbed the avatar by his shoulders, shaking him and screaming at him. **STOP IT!**

Sky's outer body shook on the ground, convulsing and seizing. Ked fought him too well. A servant should not be able

to do this to him! A servant should not have disobeyed him like this!

Sky managed to reform their eyes, and he reached an arm toward his love, who was all but buried inside the creature's body.

There was nothing he could do. If he fought the creature now, he would be discovered, and it would kill him, and kill her, too. He had to wait.

REEM, I HAVE FAILED YOU! I WAS SUPPOSED TO PROTECT YOU!

Incredible, sang Ked's avatar. Your voice is louder than mine, and still I cannot see you.

Sky released the avatar's shoulders and the silver ropes slithered away. He stepped backward, dazed, devastated, and drifted back into the mist.

Ked's avatar, now free, rolled his shoulders and patted himself down. A tremor of gold brilliance flew down him from head to toe. *I've won, despite your cheating.*

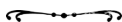
Sky gathered himself in the mist, shrouding himself in the overseer's music to keep himself calm. **RESTORE REEM, GET MY BODY BACK**, he sang. *The creature will archive her mind. She is not dead. I can still save her. I must wait. I need to keep to my ambush but I must wait or we will both die. Reem, I'm so sorry... I must wait.*

Melrim, inside the creature's arms, stared ahead dully. Black spots surfaced on her forehead and cheeks. Her limbs twitched.

Oh, moonsblood, Reem I am so sorry!

Sky could not bear to watch, but Ked watched with interest, and Ked had full control of their outer body. Sky saw everything. Ked had their eyes locked on the creature, music rejoicing as a ring of pale feelers crept outward from Melrim's face.

Reem, I will save you! Please, forgive me!



Ked stilled, then he drew himself up to stand. A few feelers from the creature followed him as he came closer and sat, staring at Melrim with his human eyes, fascinated.

Her brown face was paling, and her eyes closed, then folded into her flattened face, revealing a third pair of sensory spots. The feelers around her face made her a small mirror of his master. Their master. Her six spots flickered with wonder and power—a copper-colored voice.

Ked's music leapt. *A warrior*, he sang.

It was a good choice. Ked was too precious and had Wandered too long to be discarded, and so his master wanted a servant that could fight him or draw him home by force. There would be no more rebellion now, at least not as long as his master finished the work, but his master did intend to finish. Its spots sparkled with echoes of its actions and its intentions.

Melrim's arms, enveloped by the creature's limbs, turned gray and soft. Her fingers split into feelers, and her hands unfolded like flower petals. Three banks of feelers on a flat hand, just like the hands of the creature.

Her feelers pressed together and fused into scythes, then relaxed back into feelers. She flexed her hands as if playing, making her feelers longer before pulling them back into brown fingers, then feelers again. Sparkling laughter drifted across her spots.

Ked was enraptured. *So beautiful. Sky, don't you think she is beautiful?*

He listened, but no silver voice drifted out of nothingness and into his deepness. Ked's body was his own again.

Given up? Ked sang. *Did you die at last?*

It didn't matter if Sky was dead or still hiding. His master would fix everything, and now nothing could keep them apart.

The creature's body was shrinking, and thread-ash puffed away from its body and its nostrils above the feelers at its

sides. Ked had been formed over the course of a day, he half remembered, but the creature was working much more quickly than that now, and with only moonlight and on dead soil. This was a true emergency, worthy of burning its body down.

Ked's music soured at the prospect that he had caused his master harm by behaving how he had done and asking it to do this expensive work, but he smiled with his spots. His plague of humans was at an end. He himself had endured far worse than this.

All my pain was worth it. I've won.

The creature, slow and shrunken, withdrew from Melrim. Blue tatters of clothing fell to the ground and she stepped toward Ked, naked, pale as the creature. She was human in shape, but her skin and her joints mimicked the creature, lithe, soft, and strong. Ked's threads shivered with wonder and a long denied hunger.

It is time— she sang with her spots. The purity of her copper voice awed him. *Will you fight—or will you come home—?*

She watched him with the feelers around her face and down her neck. Some feelers had tiny sensory spots, or even tiny eyes, at their tips. A flicker of envy passed through his back before it was swallowed by his larger hungers. He was a spy, and needed to look and function more like a human than she did. But they both served the same master, the same God. There was a purpose behind his lack of such sensory organs.

He flattened his face. *I will come home*— he sang, and his words passed through his six spots as waves of heat. *All is well now*—

She watched him as he came toward the creature with open arms.



Sky was a roiling knot of anxiety. His servant stepped toward the creature, and Sky could not get his thoughts together.

SAVE REEM, GET MY BODY BACK, he was singing, over and over again. This wasn't the plan. He had to remember his contagious music, the pieces he had constructed, but they were meant for protecting her, not recovering her body and her mind. He was too panicked to think of how to change them, or decide if he should.

Koulim was beyond him, but his thoughts toward *feilam* had no direction. He had to wait, had to think. What was most important?

REEM! he declared. **RESTORE REEM—RESTORE THE WOMAN'S BODY—** His own life didn't matter as long as Mel-rim would live. He focused all his thoughts on this one need.

MY CHILD—MY LOVE—MY SERVANT— sang the creature's spots. **COME TO ME—**

Ked's spots burst with heat and he plunged himself into his master's body. He reached his face to his master's, intending to interface as the creature did, spots to spots, and not as he did to humans with his hands, but the creature took his head in its hands and held him back. Ked's music brimmed with his final song, and his minds were on the edge of ecstasy, needing to come together and finish himself. He waited for his master's word.

Sky had no time to think of why the creature wanted to delay their union before its hands plunged into Ked's chest and his back, and its silver cords shot straight into Sky's body.

Blinding light tore into his mind and pulled him apart. It was the weight of the universe, the breadth of millions of years, blinding and irresistible. Sky was nothing under the creature's eyes, its hands. His music was shredded as if against a millstone.

It saw him! It knew he was here! Its light struck him like spears and his body flailed in terror. He was going to die! He could sing nothing except his despair.

He trembled, bracing for the end, but the end did not come. The creature tugged on his weave, pulling on aspects of his mind so hard he thought he might die, but it was not killing him.

It sang to him, a deep, purposeful music, silver and perfect. It filled him up, sculpting his body and his threads, and correcting his weave. Sky trembled within the mist, which grew larger and more certain as more of its music flowed into him. He moved missing limbs, reached for music he had forgotten, and his voice rose to join with the creature's as it stretched and kneaded him. They were the same voice. He did not know what he was singing until he was singing it, and his music brightened with a fullness he had almost lost forever.

He was ancient music, desire... he and the creature were one mind, temporarily apart. Their voices were the same, and he knew who he was. He was a part of the great Continuity, a single individual spread across space and time.

Gently, the creature pried away a mindcast that had grown into his flesh, out of place, wrapped it and sent it away.

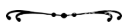
The overseer shivered, whole at last, amazed at regaining what he had forgotten, and he took his servant's head and regarded his larger self with awe.

CONTROL YOUR SERVANT— it sang to him.

He sang his assent. Of course he would.

The overseer settled into his familiar place, touching his servant's threadmind and humming soft music that would make his servant want to fulfill his purpose. The overseer remembered who he was. He was soft, he was hidden, he was perfect, and soon he would come home and rejoin his larger self. His body pulsed quietly with need, aching to fuse and become part of Continuity again. **SOON**— he sang.

The creature withdrew from the servant's deepness, and the servant sang his desire to come home, never realizing anything had happened within his back.



Exhausted, God slumped forward on its belly and sent rooting threads deep underground. There was nothing left to drink, and the paltry moonlight on its back was scattered by spores. It unfurled a few of its leaves in vain. There was a nest nearby. It would recover inside as soon as it was done with its servants.

COME HOME— it sang to the spy.

Such trouble that servant had been. The spy's overseer had been injured, a rare event, but now the overseer would have no trouble keeping the servant's rebellion under control. The crisis had passed.

God pressed its face forward into the spy's until their six spots touched. The spy's gold music shuddered with joy as his will dissolved into Continuity.

God pored through the mindcasts, touching them as if it had taken them itself. Such brilliant images, tastes, shapes! Cities, metal, language... the humans had settled and tamed huge areas of wilderness, building structures, farming, and shaping metal. They communicated with each other, formed communities, and their hands, their tools.... God had rarely encountered a species so suited for enslavement.

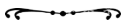
God took in its servant's cell print stores, the tastes of the animals and plants its servant had found, drawing them against its cords, and adding them to its personal collection. It would resolve them together with its existing stores over the next few weeks, once it had recovered enough strength. Every fresh connection was a promise of future pleasures, sweet music that rolled through its body in pleasant waves.

This planet was overrun with life, overflowing, the perfect temperature and abundant with metals and water and sun. This planet would become a new stronghold of its empire, and slaves and servants and other selves would be born here en

masse. More metal ships and more selves, spreading more into the stars, to gather more tastes and drink everything....

God's threads trembled with blissful anticipation. **PERFECT**— it sang. This world was perfect, and its Continuity was perfect. It was eager to return to the shuttle to send its report to the ship in orbit, to tell its other selves that this planet was perfect for them, and to come in great numbers. The ship would send the message through the void of space to other satellites and ships in the neighboring systems. But its body would need a great deal of rest before it could travel even as far as the shuttle. First, days and nights in one of its nearby nests. And before even that, it had to draw back its servants.

COMPLETE YOURSELF— God sang to its two servants, the warrior and the spy. The warrior pressed her body into one of its limbs, dissolving herself into its flesh, and the spy's two minds folded, ringing with gold purpose.



The overseer sang to his servant as his twin minds were polished. The archive of the servant's human brain drifted down the servant's neck to join with its mate, the archive of the servant's threadmind.

Both needed the other to function, and both were needed to interpret the human mindcasts the servant had taken throughout his two years of Wandering. The overseer would see that the halves fit together properly, and his last act would be to deliver the composite archive to his larger self to integrate into its anatomy.

SOON—SOON—

The overseer's hungers to return home sharpened. He had lived in poverty and stillness for nearly two years, and he was hungry for the fullness of the tastes and memories of Continuity waiting for him.

The fusion would come in mere moments, but there was still other work for him to do.

He drew together his servant's mindcast collection, readying it for delivery in a space not far from his weave. But there was one mindcast that had been set aside for him to keep dormant, one that the servant had not been permitted to see, touch, or even know about. That mindcast had been taken blindly, but the mind inside knew too much about threadsong for even a spy-servant to use safely, so it had been put in his care for him to keep alive instead. Where had it gone?

He hummed an old song and reached around his body for that special mindcast, the one taken from the servant at the moment of his birth. It was not quite where he had expected it to be—no, he had expected it to be here, in storage—and it felt familiar under his threads.

The wrapping was plain, but it was easy to touch and easy to hold against himself. Why should he want to hold it so? Why should he want to press it against the bulb at the center of his whorl? Why did it feel so comfortable there, why did he suddenly feel so whole, so....

For a split second he was too large and too small all at once. He was inside out, he was two minds, he rippled against himself, plunging into himself from two directions. He took a breath of silver light as if gasping, and a shiver rolled through his body.

My name is Tabyz Sky, he sang suddenly. His voice had a gold cast, and then he was silver again.

MY NAME IS TABYZ SKY, AND I AM.... He didn't know what he was, except that he was himself.

His music was shining, pulsing at him with purpose and desire. **I WILL RETURN HOME**, he sang, but he was already home. His mind was whole as it was.

Ked's twin mindcasts snapped together into a single shape, intricate and faintly shimmering with gold, three times as large as a human mindcast. The composite mind slipped into Ked's mindcast collection as one of their number, and Sky drew

them all together with fibers and tissues as if closing a purse full of marbles or a net full of fish. This was a song he was to sing. He was helping his servant return home. He was an overseer.

Something was building in his music. The blue expanse above the ground, the open air. The sky. *Reem*, he thought. His thoughts turned outside his tiny body, into his servant's larger body and the creature enveloping everything. Ked's body was dissolving, and the creature drew Ked's core against its own. Ked's weave was unrolling, unraveling, laying Sky's body bare. Sky keened with need at his larger self.

MY OTHER SELF—MY SERVANT'S OVERSEER— sang the creature. It reached its threads and its interfacing cords toward him. Sky met them eagerly. **COME HOME—FUSE—REJOIN—WE ARE ONE MIND—**

Sky's body was liquid, and he pressed himself against a much larger threadmind, the center of Continuity he had hungered for two years. They were rushing into each other, blurring together, and then a new burst of silver music overflowed into their union with an intensity that surprised him and yet didn't.

SAVE REEM! GET MY BODY BACK!

The creature's music buckled and collapsed under Sky's violent purpose. It had been expecting a union of equals, or at least a meeting of a greater mind to a lesser one, and so was defenseless against Sky's counter-imperative. It had no time to be surprised before it rolled inward in a mindcast of its own, its will pulling out from its threadmind and falling dormant, and Sky slipped into the creature's vacant threadmind instead.

17. Flesh

REEM! REEM, WHERE ARE YOU?

Sky's body was too large, too fluid. He was weak, shaking, his light already spent to nothing, and he didn't know how to move his limbs. Quills flexed on his back, seeking sunfire, finding only scant moonlight.

The bodies of his servants were inside him, he was God—no, he was Tabyz Sky, and he was....

REEM!

He had to rescue Melrim. Her body had bled into his, and her structural fibers were already breaking apart and becoming integrated into his body. He sang at them so they would reform. Her core was still intact, and it knew its own shape. **BECOME MY WARRIOR AGAIN**— he sang, and her body drew itself together inside him.

But the brain inside that body no longer contained Melrim. Melrim herself would have been archived, made into a mind-cast. She must have been. Should have been. The creature would not have held a mind in its hands and failed to archive it. Would it? **PLEASE, LET HER MIND BE SOMEWHERE HERE.**

He hummed a pulse through the mindcast stores that his lesser self—his servant's overseer—Sky—*he*—had gathered. They had been set near his core, near his inner body. Their shapes echoed back at him, but their light was uniform. He could not tell them apart.

REEM, ARE YOU THERE?

None of them responded. His interfacing cords raced between them, touching each one, but he didn't know how to

interact with them. They were alien to him.

One, glossy with gold, was larger than the others, he clutched it with threads and interfacing cords. This one he understood. This one was meant for him.

He linked to it, and it was as if his eyes had opened. He knew the mindcasts now, knew their tastes and their circumstances of capture, and then he found one he did not remember taking.

REEM!

He sang her name into the mindcast and it sparkled back at him.

The warrior-servant was using his light to restore herself, and so he burned his body down. He was too large—he needed to become himself again, too—and so he dissolved his back-most limbs. He drank in his leaf stalks, useless in the dark, and they puffed away into thread-ash. The next set of limbs were devoured to nothing. He grew smaller quickly, as his flesh was already spent from the creature's efforts making Melrim into a warrior-servant.

Threads screeched with pain and darkness and he pressed Melrim's mindcast against the warrior-servant's brain, holding her half-dissolved body rigid within him with silver threads.

BECOME WHOLE! he sang to it. **BECOME REEM AGAIN!**

Ked's mindcast turned to fire under his touch. Ked's knowledge was not meant for this, but Sky forced him to find a way anyway. His silver music flooded it, bending it, needing Ked to show him how to do the opposite of what he had done all his life.

Gold and silver music laced together until the answer came into Sky's music, and Sky let the melodies direct his body. The brain of the warrior-servant was swept away as Melrim's thoughts and memories regained their former places.

The warrior-servant had only been minutes old, and the space was empty enough, but it took far too much light and far too much time to do this. This wasn't supposed to be done at all. Sky burned away more of his bulk, making it into more

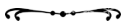
precious light. He was running out of body to use, and he still had to restore himself. **REEM FIRST!** he declared.

Her mindcast dissolved, an empty husk, and her body detached from his and flopped to the devoured ground in a puff of thread-ash. Sky had just enough bulk left to make human-shaped arms, legs... but his organs were wrong. He collapsed next to her, wheezing.

He lifted an arm, but almost couldn't. His skin shrank against his misshapen structural fibers, blackening, their outer layers falling away as dust. Sky had not seen whether his attempt to restore her had succeeded, and he no longer had the strength to see into her skin, even if he could reach her. He could not reach her.

She wasn't moving.

Within his deepness, his music dimmed, flickering with strange colors and pale noises. *Reem... Reem... you must live. I love you.* He no longer saw anything, no longer tasted anything. He was darkness and dust.



A light flickered in the darkness. A wisp, a touch. A smell, a sound.

A voice.

Reem, you must live.

He was gone again. Nothingness, blackness. He hung in a void, empty of thought, bereft of light.

Sky! came a voice, a ringing sound, like a copper-colored bell.

Something trickled into him. He grasped it, breathing it. Light, taste—

It hurt. His broken body could not bear it. He almost let go. *Please,* he sang.

Sky, is that you?

Who... he sang. His voice was a whisper, so soft it carried no color. Someone was with him, someone that glowed like firelight behind him. He could not see it, but he felt the warmth of it.

His inner body trembled. It was all he could do to hold on, to breathe. He remembered a storm in a void of blackness, an atoll. He remembered breathing himself into life.

He took a deep breath.

His music sputtered with gold sparks and silver fireflies. He clung to something and breathed again.

Sky, hold on. Stay with me.

That copper voice... that was threadsong. Someone else was singing to him. He gathered his thoughts together, tried to move threads from his deeper body, but they were brittle. He had to see who it was. That voice couldn't have been Melrim, could it?

A thread cracked as he moved it.

No, don't move. It's all right. I'm here. Just breathe slowly.

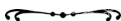
Light flowed into him as he breathed, but the light was raw and painful like a blanket drawn across heavy burns. *It hurts,* he sang.

I know. I'll do what I can. Keep still.

Reem, you must live.

I will, and I am. I'll protect you. Rest now. We're safe.

His mind drifted away from that copper voice and into his center, a tiny silver light, trembling like a candle flame, all his focus lost except to breathe. He was breathing, he was alive. He was alive.



When Sky came to himself again, his silver rhythms were certain. He breathed on his own, drawing in light and breathing it out again.

No, his light was gold, not silver. He was....

My name is Tabyz Sky, and I'm... I'm human.

No he wasn't. He was one of the lives of Continuity, he was....

He cringed inward, unsettled. It was so hard to move, so hard to taste. He reached out with thread, and his threads moved slowly, but they did not splinter into shards this time. He touched himself.

He was inside a threadmind, a large one, at the head of the weave, not at the center of the whorl. But he was also connected to the bulb inside the whorl, attached with a band of woven cords he did not recognize.

His perception fuzzed, and for a moment he was the bulb again, the overseer. He hummed a silver note of surprise.

Sky?

Sky snapped back to his threadmind, which percolated with gold and silver buzzing. Dizzy, he reached out with threads from his threadmind but could not reach what he wanted.

Confusion flicked over his sensory spots. His eyes were shut. He had eyes, and sensory spots on the surface of his cheeks and forehead. He was large, but he was floating in something delicious, a thick fluid that tasted like light and power.

His fingers twitched.

He felt someone's hands on his face, someone's fingers moving past his sensory spots. Copper threads flicked inside.

He managed to send a few threads from his spots into those hands, those fingers. He knew the taste, because Ked knew the taste. He was still holding Ked open, still using him.

Reem? he sang. He hadn't imagined it. It had seemed like her voice, even though it was threadsong.

Oh, stars, Sky, I've got you. You're safe.

How? How? You can't...

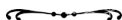
Don't worry about that now. Drink as deeply as you can.

She cradled him against her body as she sang to him, sending his music into a healing stillness.

I'm sorry, he sang. I'm sorry.

Threads emerged from his skin to drink deeply from the fluid contained inside the creature's nest, and light flowed into his back.

Sky slept.



Sky opened his eyes to blackness. Melrim was holding him from behind, half dozing.

He could taste sunfire on his skin. On his leaves.

His spots tingled in confusion, sending flickering light into the space in front of him. Amber fluid, a brown wall behind, pale strands of fibers connecting himself to the wall in all directions. The light faded.

A pulse of panic raced through his back, rising as another burst of light from his spots to the world in front of him. He saw his brown hands—he had human hands—and after the light faded again, his spots saw them as warmth. Threads from his arms and legs shivered, and he could feel the pale strands responding to him. Some strands were his own threads, extended in great numbers and bunched together, and some belonged to the nest, inert except when he sang to them. Others reflected copper light back at him. He was connected to the nest and to—

Reem!

He used thread to turn himself around, detaching and re-attaching the strands and pulling on them to move, and he took her shoulders.

His spots saw the warmth of her face, set with four cold circles around her eyes. His spots blazed in despair, and with the light cast from his spots he saw her face, her perfect, beau-

tiful face... beautiful with those round black spots. She watched him sadly.

He moved his hand over her hair, brushing one of her forehead spots with his thumb, and he shook his head as the light cast from his spots faded and then grew loud again. *No, no no*

It's all right, she sang.

He heard her voice from the places he touched her, and through the glittering light moving across her spots. She was singing with thread-song. She was a threadsinger. *This wasn't supposed to happen! The creature—*

I know, she sang. I saw you remember. You had nightmares off and on over the last week.

I was supposed to protect you from this! I saw the creature grab you, and it took you and... I let this happen! Reem, I am so sorry! This is all my fault. My fault!

His eyes burned and his spots tingled with shame and regret as he moved his hands over her shoulders, flicking threads into her skin. She was a threadsinger, too, and she sang back at him patience and love and forgiveness. He wanted to embrace her and wanted to shove her away so he would never hurt her again.

Ked tricked us. It wasn't your fault.

I was his overseer. Silver flashed through his back. I saw Ked was hiding his thoughts from me, and I should have forced him to stop. I should have forced him to give me answers. I should have stopped the creature the moment it touched you. Pain rippled through his back at the remembered sight of her thick in the creature's clutches, her eyes clouded, her body twitching. It grabbed you and I did nothing. I've never been so frightened in my life. I watched it change you. Torture you. I should have done something.

It would have seen what you were and what you were trying to do, and it would have killed you on the spot. The creature was... is... quite frightening.

Is?

I found it.

Fear swept through Sky's body. *Found it?*

In your back.

Sky's spots burned with dread as he looked into his chest, sending threads through his mindcast stores. Holding onto Ked as he was, he knew each mindcast intimately, and he pushed minds aside until he came to one much, much larger than even Ked's mindcast was.

It was completely dark, but its wrapping was ominous. He had taken this mindcast himself, in a way, and it sat isolated, as heavy as a lead marble. It was an entirely different design, alien, compelling.

The creature, Sky sang. I defeated it. It's here, captured.

Sky's body relaxed into Melrim, and he grasped her and hugged her tightly.

We're safe. But, oh, moonsblood, it's here. It's here, in a mindcast, inside me.

Melrim kissed him on the cheek. *I don't understand how you did it. I keep going over the details, the images and tastes I caught from you, and I just don't understand it.*

I came at it as an equal, and I did something that it had no reason to expect. I wanted something other than the desires born from the ancient music, and it had never seen that before.

Sky brought his threads toward it, pointing at it sharply.

Don't open that thing, Melrim sang.

No. Never open. I need to destroy it.

Sky touched it from all sides, intending to rend in half. But his threads paused when they touched it.

It was part of his collection. How could he destroy something he had collected?

He needed to keep it.

He needed to keep it?

Is that my desire? Sky thought. *Me, the spy-servant, or me, the overseer? What of my human desires? I should destroy it,*

shouldn't I? If I never intend to use it, why keep it? I must destroy it.

Sky let his overseer's music die away, and he sang with a gold voice alone. He considered the mindcast, touching it, feeling it. But even then, Sky could not bear to harm it.

The creature was responsible for his torture—and Melrim's—and the destruction of most of the wilderness and farmlands between two nations, who were now at war with each other. Dozens or hundreds dead from spores alone, and hundreds of humans dead by Ked's hand over the last two years. The creature could want nothing good with the human race, and it would not stop before it had devoured everything.

The creature was a monster and he should destroy it.

His threads moved about its mindcast listlessly, then he shoved it away from him. It sank back into storage.

Sky's music was a hollow monotone, gold with a silver cast. *Do I have control of my mind, even now? A human would have destroyed it.*

I think it's not that simple, Melrim sang softly.

Sky shook his head, forcing heat into his spots so he could see his love with his human eyes. He took her face gently in his hands. He sent light through his body, through his arms and his hands to his fingers, and his legs to his feet to his toes. He tasted Melrim doing the same.

I don't know who I am anymore, he sang. And now Melrim shared his fate. A threadsinger, like him. A monster like Ked.

No, not a monster, Melrim sang. *Ked's mission was what was monstrous, not his body. We are human enough.*

Are we? Sky sang. Silver music prickled under his sensory spots. *I'm not even sure if I'm one of the creature's other selves. I don't know if I had become one when it touched me, or if I had always been, and had only thought I was Tabyz Sky because I was nearly killed and used Sky's mind to repair myself. What if I still have the monster's hungers? What if I do more of what it's done to Talris? What if I hurt you again?*

She stroked his cheek. *Do you think one of the creature's selves would care about any of that?*

You don't know what it was like, looking at a larger self like that, needing to become one with it again. That's all I was, desire itself. If I can't trust my own desires, what is left?

What do you desire now?

I want you to live!

Would the creature, or a servant of the creature, want me to live?

Sky hummed a melancholic chord.

Would they have fought to restore my human mind, replacing the mind of a newborn servant?

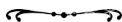
No.

Would they want to kill the creature's nests?

Sky's eyes widened and light from his spots brightened Melrim's face, which was split into a passionate grin.

Kill the nest, he sang. He nodded. End the blight.

Both of them reached a hand to the nest's walls, and they told the nest to die.



Sky lifted his head out of the nesting fluid and took a deep breath, pulling himself up through the hole in the top of the shell. He drank the stray nesting fluid that still clung to his skin and from the corners of his lungs he had missed. Sunfire touched his spots and he sighed.

He stood tall, caressing one of the black stalks the nest used to drink light, tasting it. It was shrunken and the broad leaf at its top curled inward, already responding to their instructions to die.

How many more of these are there in the blight? he sang. *Then there's the one Ked grew north of Tarja. We should find all of them. Kill all of them.*

Behind him, Melrim gave a choking cough.

Sky rushed to her and helped her climb out of the fluid, but her cough had already stopped. "I'm fine," she said. "I didn't clear my lungs of that stuff fast enough. I'm fine now."

They both stood on the crest of the nest, naked, facing the sun. He took her hand.

"I'll have to get used to things like this," she said.

"Get used to what?"

"Thread things."

He squeezed her hand. A pained note flickered through his back.

The world before them was gray as far as they could see, thread-ash and rock. The circle of pale, dead earth around the nest was cut by the skeletons of dead trees.

"I've spent so long trying to fight Ked, I don't know what I'll do with myself now. We will kill the other nests, and then what? Can we go back to Fyrthten, like this?"

"Why not?"

"Can we live as humans?"

"What's important is that we live." She took his face in her hands.

He kissed her, and the music flowing through his blood was anything but thread-song.

Author Bio

Mary Jenkins is an oil painter, a musician, a computer programmer, and (apparently) a novelist. She grew up reading Anne McCaffrey, Orson Scott Card, and K. A. Applegate, with smatterings of Greg Bear, David Brin, Vernor Vinge, Isaac Asimov, and Octavia Butler.