

It was snowing, of course.

The gentleman looked out the window as the groundcar moved quietly through the dark streets. His streets.

*And really*, he said to himself irritably, *you ought to be able to hit upon some affordable way of lighting them.*

"What are you thinking, Pat Pin?" His lady's voice was soft as the snow, her hand light on his knee. And he was a boor, to ignore her most welcome presence in wor-ries over street lamps.

He leaned back in the seat, placed his hand over hers, and looked into her dark eyes.

"I was thinking how pretty the snow is," he murmured.

She laughed and he smiled as the car turned the cor-ner — and abruptly there was light, spilling rich and yellow from all of the doors and windows of Audrey's whorehouse, warming the dark sidewalks and spinning the snowflakes into gold.

"Boss. Ms. Natesa." Villy bowed with grace, if without nuance, and pulled the door wide. "You honor our house."

Great gods. Pat Rin carefully did not look at his lady as he inclined his head.

"We are of course pleased to accept Ms. Audrey's in-vitation," he murmured. "It has been an age since I have danced."

The boy smiled brilliantly. "We hoped you'd be pleased, sir." He pointed to the left, blessedly returning to a more Terran mode. "You can leave your coats in the room, there, then join everybody in the big parlor."

"Thank you," Pat Rin said, and moved off as the bell chimed again, Natesa on his arm.

"Who," he murmured, for her ear alone, "do you suppose has been tutoring Villy in the Liaden mode?"

"Why shouldn't he be teaching himself?" she coun-tered, slanting a quick, subtle look into his face. "He admires you greatly, master."

"Most assuredly he does," Pat Rin replied, with irony, and paused before the small room which served as a public closet for the clients of Ms. Audrey's house. Natesa removed her hand from his arm and turned, allowing him to slip the long fleece coat from her shoulders. The remains of snowflakes glittered on the dark green fabric like a span-gle of tiny jewels. He shook it out and stepped into the closet.

The hooks and hangers were crowded with a variety of garments: oiled sweaters, thick woolen shirts, scarred spaceleather jackets, and two or three evening cloaks in the Liaden style.

Pat Rin removed his own cloak and hung it carefully over Natesa's coat. Shaking out his lace, he stepped back into the hallway, where his lady waited in her sun-yellow gown.

He paused, his heart suddenly constricted in his chest. Natesa's black eyebrows rose, just slightly, and he moved a hand in response to the question she did not voice.

"You overwhelm me with your beauty," he said. She laughed softly and stepped forward to take his arm again.

"And you overwhelm me with yours," she answered in her lightly accented High Liaden. "Come, let us see if to-gether we may not overwhelm the world."

The doors between the public parlor and the visitors' lounge had been opened and tied back; the furniture moved out of the public parlor and the serviceable beige rug rolled up, revealing a surprisingly wide expanse of plas-tic tile in a deep, mostly unscarred brown. A refreshment table was placed along the back wall, directly beneath--

Pat Rin blinked.

When not pressed into duty as a dance hall, the public parlor of Ms. Audrey's bordello displayed certain ...works of art... as might perhaps serve to beguile the mind away from the cares of the day and toward the mutual enjoyment of pleasure.

This evening, the walls had been--transformed.

The artwork was gone, or mayhap only hidden behind objects, which, had anyone dared challenge Pat Rin to describe twelve items belonging to Korval that he least expected to find on public display, he would certainly have placed within the top six.

Nursery rugs, they were--the design based upon a star map. Three rugs together formed the whole of the map, the original of which he had himself seen, preserved in Korval's log books.

One rug had lain on the floor of the nursery at Jelaza Kazone. The second, in the schoolroom at Trealla Fantrol. The third--the third had covered the floor in the small private parlor the boy Pat Rin had shared with his foster-father, Luken bel'Tarda.

And yet on the wall directly across from him--the rug, the very rug, from Trealla Fantrol. And on the wall to his right, the rug from Jelaza Kazone.

Carefully, Pat Rin turned his head, and--yes, there on the wall behind them was the rug from his childhood, looking just as it always had, close-looped and unworn, its colors as bright as--

"Pat Rin?" Natesa murmured. "Is something amiss?" I

He shook himself, and turned his head to smile at her.

"Merely--unexpected, let us say." He waved a languorous hand. "What a crush, to be sure!"

This was not strictly the case. Still, the big parlor was comfortably crowded, the conversation level somewhat louder than one might perhaps have expected at a similar gathering in Solcintra. Bosses of several of the nearer territories were present, including Penn Calhoon, as well as the Portmaster, and a good mix of local merchants.

Across the room, white hair gleaming in the abundant light, his cousin Shan stood in deep conversation with Narly Jempkins, chairman of the nascent Surebleak Mercan-tile Union.

"We arrive among the last, as suits our station," Natesa said softly, which bait he ignored in favor of inclining his head to their hostess, who was approaching in a rus-tle of synth silk, her pale hair intricately dressed, and an easy smile on her face.

"Boss. Natesa. I'm real glad you could come."

"Audrey." Natesa smiled and extended a hand, which the older woman clasped between both of hers.

"Winter has been too long," Natesa said. "How clever of you to think of a dance!"

Audrey laughed. "Wish I could say it was all my idea! Miri was the one put the seed in my head, if you want the truth. Said she had too much energy and no place to spend it, which I'll say between the three of us ain't the usual complaint of new-birthered mothers."

"Miri is an example to us all," Pat Rin murmured, which pleasantries Audrey greeted with another laugh.

"Ain't she just--and your brother's another one! When I invite a man to a dance and I don't expect him to bring his keyboard and set up with the band. That's just what he's done, though--take a look!" She pointed down the room, where was collected a fiddle, a guitar, a drum set, a portable omnichora — and several musicians wearing what passed for stage finery on Surebleak, clustered about a slender man in a ruffled white shirt and formal slacks that would have been unexceptional at any evening gather in Solcintra.

It had been ...disconcerting... to find that Audrey, with the rest of Pat Rin's acquaintance on Surebleak, assumed that Val Con, his cousin and his Delm, was in fact his younger brother, brought in

to care for the transplanted family business while the Boss undertook the important task of putting the streets in order.

As the misapprehension only amused Miri, and Val Con's sole comment on the matter was a slightly elevated eyebrow, Pat Rin gave over attempting to explain their actual relationship and resigned himself to having at his advanced age acquired a sibling.

"For a time, he and Miri sang for their suppers," he said now to Audrey. "Perhaps he misses the work."

"Could be," she answered, as the sound of footsteps and voices grew louder in the hall behind them. She sent a look over his shoulder, extended a hand and patted his sleeve lightly.

"The two of you go on in and circulate. Dancing ought to be starting up soon."

Thus dismissed, Pat Rin followed Natesa deeper into the parlor.

Ms. Audrey's big parlor, already crowded, grew more so. Deep in a discussion with Etienne Borden and Andy Mack, which involved free-standing solar batteries, and the benefits of light level meters over mechanical timers, Pat Rin still registered an abrupt lowering of the ambient noise and looked around, thinking that the promised music was at last about to begin. But no.

It was his mother entering the room, on the arm of no one less than Scout Commander ter'Meulen, dressed for the occasion in High House best, his face oh-so-politely bland, and his mustache positively noncommittal.

Pat Rin, who had all his life known Scout ter'Meulen, could only wonder at the reasons behind such a display--not to mention the why and wherefore of Lady Kareen accepting his arm for anything at all. They were neither one a friend of the other, though it had always seemed to Pat Rin that the greater amusement was on Clonak's side and the greater dislike on his mother's. Surely--

Audrey bustled forward to welcome these newest arrivals, her high, sweet voice easily rising above the other conversations in the room.

"I *knew* you'd turn the trick, Mister Clonak!" she said gaily, patting him kindly on the shoulder. This was apparently a dismissal, as Clonak adroitly disengaged himself from the lady's arm, took two steps into the parlor and was lost in the general crush.

Audrey turned to face Kareen squarely, and Pat Rin's stomach tightened, as he contemplated disaster. Even had he not counted Audrey a friend, he thought, it was surely no more than his duty to stand between her and Lady Kareen yos'Phelium, in the same way that it was his duty as Boss to stand between the residents of his streets and mayhem.

He murmured something quick and doubtless unintelligible to the Colonel and the assistant portmaster, and slipped through the press of bodies, moving as quickly as he was able.

"Lady Kareen," Audrey said clearly. "Be welcome in my house."

It was the proper sentiment, properly expressed, thought Pat Rin, working his way forward. Though what--and from whom--his mother might exact as Balance for being made welcome at a whorehouse--

"Well met, cousin!" Val Con murmured, astonishingly slipping his arm through Pat Rin's. "Where to in such a rush?"

"If you would not see a murder done--or worse--" Pat Rin hissed into the frigid silence that followed Audrey's greeting--"let me tend to this!"

"Nay I think you wrong both our host and your lady mother," Val Con said tranquilly, his grip on Pat Rin's arm tightening. "Besides, the hand is dealt."

"You know what my mother is capable--"

"Peace," his cousin interrupted. "My aunt is about to play her first card."

"Who speaks?" Lady Kareen's Terran was heavily accented, but perfectly intelligible; her tone as frigid as the wind in high winter.

It was of course quite mad to even consider that he might extricate himself from the brotherly embrace of one who was both a pilot and a Scout. Nonetheless, Pat Rin took a careful breath to camouflage his shift of weight--and felt warm fingers around his unencumbered hand. He looked down,

equally dismayed and unsurprised to see Miri grinning up at him, grey eyes glinting.

"Take it easy, Boss," she whispered. "Audrey's good for this."

He began to answer, then closed his mouth tightly. The fact that this had been planned--that Audrey had been coached on form and manner...

"That's right," their host was saying equitably to his mother. "You won't know that. I'm Audrey Breckstone, boss of this house. I'm happy to see you."

Not for nothing did Lady Kareen stand foremost among the scholars of the Liaden Code of Proper Conduct. She not only knew her Code, but she practiced it, meticulously Rather too meticulously, as some might think. But there was perhaps, Pat Rin thought now, an advantage--to Audrey, to the house, and to Kareen herself--in an extremely nice reading of Code in regard to this particular circumstance.

It was not for a mere son to say what weights and measures were called into consideration as his mother stood there, head tipped politely to one side, face smooth and emotionless, but surely the unworthy scholar who had studied Code at her feet might make certain shrewd and informed guesses.

Whether Audrey possessed the native genius to have added that guileless, "I'm happy to see you," to her introduction, or whether she had been coached in what she was to say mattered not at all. That she had uttered the phrase in apparent sincerity placed her *melant'i* somewhat in regard to the *melant'i* of Kareen yos'Phelium. Here was, in fact, a delm--at most--or a head of Line--at least--so secure in her own worth and the worth of her house that she not only welcomed, but was *happy to receive*, the burden of a visit from a high stickler who might ruin her and hers with a word.

Or, to phrase the matter in the parlance of Sunbleak, Audrey had in essence said to Kareen: *I see that you're armed, and I'm your equal.*

"I am pleased to accept the greeting of the house," Lady Kareen stated, and bowed--Expert to Expert--which allowed a certain limited equality between herself and her host, and placed a finer measuring into the future, after more data had been gathered and weighed.

To her credit--or that of her tutor--Audrey did not attempt to answer the bow. Instead, she smiled, and offered her arm.

"There's going to be music and dancing for the youngsters in just a bit, now," she said. "But I'm betting that a woman of good sense would like to have a glass of wine in her hand."

There was a slight hesitation as Kareen performed the mental gymnastics necessary to untangle this, then she stepped forward and placed her hand lightly on Audrey's sleeve.

"Thank you," she said austerely. "A glass of wine would be most welcome."

The two ladies moved off toward the refreshment table as the rest of the guests shook themselves and returned to interrupted conversations.

Pat Rin remembered to breathe.

"See?" Miri gave his hand a companionable squeeze before releasing him, and sending another grin up into his face. "Piece o'cake."

"As an author of the joke you might well say so," he replied, with feeling. "But consider how it might seem to those who had no--"

"Indeed, it was ill-done of us," Val Con murmured, slipping his arm away. "We had not taken into account that your duty would place you between the two ladies."

Pat Rin turned to stare, and Val Con inclined his head, for all the worlds like a proper Liaden, and murmured the phrase in high Liaden--"Forgive us, cousin. We do not intend to distress you, but to attain clarity."

Sighing, Pat Rin also inclined his head, "It is forgotten," rising reflexively to his lips.

"Next time, we'll send you a clue ahead of time," Miri said.

He eyed her. "Must there be a next time?"

"Bound to be," she answered, not without a certain amount of sympathy. Her eyes moved, tracking something beyond his shoulder.

"Band's settin' up," she said to Val Con.

"Ah," he returned, and lifted an eyebrow "Cousin, I am wanted at my 'chora."

"By all means, go," Pat Rin told him. "Perhaps Ms. Audrey will induce my mother to stand up with Andy Mack."

The band played surprisingly well, and in a rather wider range than Pat Rin had expected, fiddle and guitar at the fore, Val Con's omnichora weaving a light, almost insubstantial, background.

At Ms. Audrey's insistence, he and Natesa had stood up for the first dance--a lively circle dance not dissimilar to the *nescolantz*, which had been a staple at young people's balls when he had been considerably younger. He spied Ms. Audrey, with Lady Kareen and Luken bel'Tarda at her side, observing the pattern of the dance from the edge of the rug. Further on, Clonak ter'Meulen was in animated conversation with Uncle Daav and Cheever McFarland.

At the end of the first dance, he relinquished Natesa to Priscilla with a bow, and started for the refreshment table. He'd scarcely gone three steps before his hand was caught.

"Come," said his cousin Nova. "I claim you for the next dance!"

"Ah, do you?" He laughed, and allowed himself to be led back onto the floor. "Then let us hope the band pities me and produces a less spirited number!"

Alas, his wish had not reached the ears of the band leader, for the next dance was something akin to a jig, re-quiring intricate footwork which he learned from step to step by the simple expedient of observing Nova and repro-ucing her movement.

He'd done the same thing many times in the past, of course--a person of *melant'i* would naturally take care to acquire the movements of a variety of dances, so that he might do his proper duty as a guest; however, no one but a scholar of the form could hope to know the intricacies of all possible dances. A quick eye and a flair for mimicry were therefore skills that a young person who wished to move without offense through Solcintra's party season would do well to acquire.

Having survived the jig unbloodied, Pat Rin bowed to his fair partner, handed her off to his Uncle Daav, and turned, setting his sights on a glass of wine and perhaps more discussion of solar arrays with Andy Mack, who he could see speaking with Clonak to the left of the refreshment table.

This time, he was claimed by a smiling Villy who led him back out onto the floor with something very like a skip in his step. At least, Pat Rin thought, the gods were at last kind: It was a square dance, with he and Villy facing off as sides one and two, with Shan and Priscilla taking up the third side and the fourth.

The slower pace was more than balanced by a complex, cumulative pattern of exchanges with one's partner, thus: step forward, touch right hands, step back/step forward, touch right hands, then left, step back--and so on, until the tune turned on itself and one began to subtract a gesture at the exchange, and each dancer was at last back in their place, having regained all that had been given.

The music stopped the instant the second partner pair fell back into place. There was a moment of tension, as if the dancers awaited another phrase from the musicians--then laughter, and light applause. Their little square evapo-rated, Pat Rin moving with determination toward the re-freshment table, Shan and Priscilla amiably keeping pace. He was sincerely thirsty now, and thinking in terms of a cool glass of juice.

"Do you find the party agreeable?" he asked Priscilla.

"Perfectly agreeable," she said, with a seriousness that was belied by the glimmer of a smile in her eyes. "Ms. Aud-rey said that she meant to host the dance of the winter."

"Which we thought would be no great challenge." Shan continued. "There being so few dances held in the winter. Or the summer. Or the spring, come to belabor it."

Pat Rin considered him. "If you find a lack, cousin, you might host a ball or two yourself."

"Well, I might," Shan allowed. "If it weren't for the fact that the Delm has some foolish notion in his head about bringing Surebleak up to a mid-tier spaceport, with a timetable of roughly *right now*. Perhaps he's spoken to you on the subject?"

"He has," Pat Rin said, "and I must say that the Delm and I are as one on the matter."

"Well, then, what choice have I--a mere master trader!--commanded as I am by both the Delm of Korval and the Boss of Surebleak? Duty, as always, must bow before pleasure, and so it is that tomorrow I regretfully shake the snow of Surebleak from my boots and betake myself to Terran Trade

Commission headquarters, there to enlist their aid in the Delm's necessity. There will be no dances held at yos' Galan's house--had we a house, which of course, we don't--until my task is done. Unless, Priscilla, you would care to host a ball or six while I'm gone?"

"I thought I'd go with you, instead," his lifemate replied in her calm deep voice. "To keep you and Padi out of trouble."

This was news. Pat Rin looked up. "Your heir accompa-nies you on this mission?"

Shan grinned, silver eyes glinting. "Now, pity me, truly. Bearding the Terran Guild is as nothing when measured against the prospect of introducing one's daughter to the intri-cacies--not to say the politics--of trade."

They had reached the refreshment table. Pat Rin poured wine for the two of them, and a glass of cider for himself, then inclined his head as Shan moved off to answer a hail from Portmaster Liu--and again a moment later as Priscilla was called over to join Thera Calhoon, Penn's lady wife.

Momentarily alone, Pat Rin sighed, had another sip of cider, and closed his eyes. Now that he had extricated himself from dancing, the band was--of course!--playing smooth and undemanding strolling music, the voice of the omnichora somewhat stronger than it had been previously.

Opening his eyes, Pat Rin looked out over the crowded dance floor. Uncle Daav was dancing with Natesa, Nova with Clonak ter'Meulen, and Villy with Etienne Borden. He sipped more cider and reminded himself that it was a boon to be warm in the depths of Surebleak's winter.

"Hey, there, Boss." Miri's cheerful voice interrupted his reverie. "Feeling OK?"

He considered her gravely, one eyebrow up, which only widened her grin.

"You look like Daav when you do that," she said, reach-ing around him for the cider bottle.

"There's punch, if you'd rather," Pat Rin murmured, and Miri laughed as she poured cider into a cup.

"Think I don't know better'n Audrey's punch?" she asked.

"The wine, then," Pat Rin countered. "It's quite pleasant."

She sent a sparkling glance up into his face. "Oughta be, considering it came out of our cellar." She sipped. "That's good," she sighed, and gestured vaguely with the cup. "Only way we could get Shan to come was to promise there'd be something drinkable on the table."

"Doubtless," Pat Rin said dryly, and she laughed again.

"Cut a fine figure out on the floor," she commented, her eyes on the languid dancers. "Bet you could dance all night, if there was need."

It was his turn to laugh, softly. "I hope that I do not shame my host or my lady," he murmured. "But I have long since given over dancing until dawn."

"Not quite 'til dawn, I'm guessing," Miri said, as the music swept into a crescendo, the 'chora's voice suddenly and achingly clear. She knocked back the last of her cider and put the cup on the table.

Pat Rin glanced at his cup, finished the last swallow and thought about pouring another before he went in search of Andy Mack, and--

"Over here!" Miri called, and put her hand on his arm.

Pat Rin went still. "What?" he snapped.

"Easy. It ain't nothin' more than this special dance Audrey has it in her head we all gotta do together. Family thing."

"I have already danced--"

"One more!" Villy cried, arriving in a swirl of exuber-ance. "You have to, sir! You're the Boss!"

"Ah." He considered the boy's flushed face. "How if I appoint Boss Calhoon to stand up in my place?"

"Won't work," Mid said. "Penn gets the least bit warm and his glasses fog up on him."

"Besides not being family?" he asked, but she only grinned, and nodded toward the floor, where stood surely all the members of Clan Koval present at the party, saving herself, Val Con, and Lady Kareen, who was at the edge of the rug, between Clonak ter'Meulen and Andy Mack, her face so perfectly bland that Pat Rin shivered.

"Miri..." he began, but she was gone, walking toward the group assembled in a loose circle at the

center of the floor.

"Come on, sir!" Villy tugged his hand. "They're wait-ing for you!"

It was on the edge of his tongue to snap that they might wait for him until the snow melted. However, good manners overcame bad grace, and he allowed himself to be led out onto the floor. Hoots and whistles came from some of the spectators on the rug, and Lady Kareen's face grew blander still.

At the edge of the circle, Villy relinquished his hand, bowed his liquid, meaningless bow, and skipped back toward the refreshment table.

Pat Rin gave a sigh--and another as Natesa came forward to put her hand on his arm.

"A round dance, my love," she murmured, as she eased him into the circle. "Audrey has asked us most espe-cially to honor her."

If one's host desired it, there was nothing more to be said. And certainly he was able for one more dance. Still... He looked into Natesa's eyes.

"Do I know this dance, I wonder?" he murmured.

She smiled. "I believe you will find that you do," she answered, and guided him to a gap in the circle between Nova and Priscilla. Having seen him situated, she moved away, slipping into place between Luken and Daav, and smiling at him across the circle.

The drummer beat out a rapid tattoo, sticks flashing, and struck the cymbal a ringing blow, the sound quickly muffled by a cunning hand on the rim.

The room stilled admirably as Ms. Audrey walked out onto the floor, head high, back straight, as proud and as easy as any delm might be within the jewel of her own entertainment.

She raised her hands and spun slowly, showing herself to all gathered.

"You might be wondering," she said conversationally to the room at large, "why it is that I decided to throw a party in the middle of the winter. One reason is that Miri Robertson over here was getting the silly-stirs, her being a woman who had to go off-world to find enough going on to keep her busy--" She paused to let the general laughter die back, then tipped her head and smiled.

"There's two other reasons for this gathering, though. And I'm thinking they're both important enough to want some explaining.

"So, the next reason for the party is that we're in the middle of a special kinda winter. The first winter in my memory and in all of yours where there ain't a turf war going on, when the road to the spaceport stands open for its whole length, and where there are not less than five Bosses in this room right now."

Much shouting, stamping, and whistling erupted. At the edge of the rug, Andy Mack reached out, grabbed Penn Calhoon's arm and yanked it high into the air. Here and there around the room, the other Bosses were being given similar treatment. The applause ebbed, then swelled again, going on until the drummer rapped out a short, sharp re-buke.

Ms. Audrey waited while the room quieted, then held up her hands.

Silence fell, more or less immediately, and she grinned broadly.

"That's right. Now, you'll remember I said *three* rea-sons and here's the third--" She turned, bringing the room's attention to the circle of Korval, standing ready at the center of the dance floor.

"Boss Conrad and his organization are the reason we can have this party, now, in the middle of winter, without worrying we'll attract the attention of a rival fatcat." She looked around the room, spinning slowly on her heel.

"Remember this. Remember this night, this party. And remember who made it all happen."

The room was utterly quiet for the beat of three, then Andy Mack called out from Lady Kareen's side, "First of many nights just like it!"

"First of many!" The room took up the cry, hurled it against the ceiling, sustained it--

Once again, the drummer intervened. The shouting subsided slowly, and by the time quiet was more or less achieved, Ms. Audrey was making one of the little group about lady Kareen, her arm tucked companionably through Clonak's, and Cheever McFarland had waded out of the rug-bound observers and onto the dance floor.

It was rare, Pat Rin thought, that one saw Cheever McFarland dressed in other than utilitarian clothing--tough sensible trousers and shirt in neutral colors, sturdy boots, and the inevitable jump pilot's jacket. Tonight, however--tonight, the big Terran positively turned heads as he moved toward their small circle.

The theme was black--a silk shirt so deep that it shone like onyx, with no ruffles or ballooning sleeves which might entangle a pilot, while the trousers were not so tight as to bind, should a pilot need to move quickly, nor the shiny black boots too snug, should a pilot need to run.

Over the shirt was not the usual battered spaceleather jacket but a vest in opal-blue brocade, embroidered with silver rosebuds.

Someone from the group on the rug whistled; Pat Rin suspected Andy Mack. Cheever only grinned his easy grin and raised a big, unringed hand.

"Now, what we're going to be doing here is something like what's called a round dance in Boss Conrad's hometown, and what they called a cue dance back when I learned how, at pilot school. Either name makes sense--a round dance on account it moves 'round in a circle and a cue dance on account there's somebody stands outside the circle, who's got what you might call the big picture, and they're the one responsible for shouting out signals about what steps to dance." He put his hand on his chest, and the drummer executed a long, showy roll, which got a laugh from those watching, and a grin from Cheever himself.

"Boss Conrad and his kin, they learned round dan-cin' because where they come from it's what polite people learn to dance. Me, I learned in a piloting seminar because we was bored and needed some legal way to work it off. That being the case, the cues are a little different.

"So, what we're gonna do is show you a round dance like Boss Conrad learned it, and then a cue dance like I did."

"Where'd Miri learn how?" somebody--Pat Rin did-n't recognize the voice--called from the back.

"From the Boss' brother," Miri sang back. "You?"

The drummer hit the block twice and struck the cymbal hard, to general laughter.

"Any more questions?" Cheever called, and continued without taking a breath. "Fine. We're ready whenever the band gets around to it."

Immediately, the omnichora launched six bright notes, like skyrockets, toward the hidden winter sky, the fiddle player spun clear around and enthusiastically put her bow across the strings, the guitarist plucked out a quick pattern of sound and the drummer beat the rim, counting out three, six, twelve.

The music shifted, twisted, slowed...

"Bow to your partner," Cheever directed, against the mannerly rising of "Tiordia's Stroll."

Pat Rin received Nova's bow, bowing to her in turn. At Cheever's instruction, they joined hands, crossed, turned, and slid two steps forward, two steps right, three steps backward, three left, crossed, turned, and changed partners. Pat Rin's left hand slipped out of Nova's as his right hand met Priscilla's. He and his new partner stepped together, then apart, changed sides and danced four steps left and five steps back, six steps forward, four steps right...

Relaxed and smiling, Pat Rin performed his part in the dance with ease, warmed and oddly comforted by the familiar movements. He did, in that portion of his mind neither attentive to nor lulled by the dance, own himself astonished to find Cheever McFarland so able a dance master. *Truly*, he thought, as he and Priscilla crossed and turned; *there is no end to the good pilot's talents....*

The dance continued its pleasant course, until each dancer had partnered with every other dancer in the set. Perfectly on-cue, he left Luken's side, his hand finding Nova's precisely on the beat. They turned, crossed, and dropped hands to the caller's commands, and bowed, holding it for twelve beats, and straightening just as the last note from the 'chora trembled into silence.

The room was entirely quiet as they straightened, and in that moment, Pat Rin saw his mother, attended now by no one less than Portmaster Liu. Her face was calm, perhaps even relaxed, as if the dance had soothed her as well. She inclined her head slightly in his direction, then turned to address the Portmaster.



A wholly unexceptional procedure, Pat Rin thought, and not at all too much effort to expend for the pleasure of one's host. He was slightly warm, but nothing that another glass of cider couldn't put--

"All right," Cheever McFarland was saying, his big voice shattering the quiet. "That's what a round dance looks in Boss Conrad's old turf. Now we're gonna show you how I learned it. First thing you'll notice is different, is the cues. Pilots, they can't leave anything alone if there's a way to maybe tweak it. Next thing you'll notice is there's some extra bits added in, 'cause pilots tend toward boredom and makin' trouble if they don't have six things to do at the same time."

Pat Rin frowned and turned to cock an eyebrow at Nova, who replied with a bland glance that would have done justice to his mother.

"Last thing," Cheever was saying, "is that pilots? They're competitive. So this dance, it's a kind of a contest, too."

*Contest?* thought Pat Rin, feeling his stomach tighten. He looked across the circle for Natesa, but she was turned away, watching something in the room beyond.

"Just as soon as the band's ready," Cheever said.

The drummer snapped out a twelve-count, then the guitar came in, followed by the fiddle, the omnichora sing-ing softly in support. The tune was somewhat brisker than "Tiordia's Stroll"--and completely unfamiliar.

"Acknowledge your co-pilot," Cheever instructed, and Pat Rin turned to exchange bows with Nova, who smiled at him.

"Comp--" he began, but--

"Check your board," Cheever called, which Pat Rin's feet somehow knew to be a glide and change sides. "Bring up the screens!"

Warned by the set of Nova's hip, Pat Rin managed to spin as instructed, though raggedly.

"Strap in," Cheever instructed. Nova's hand moved, Pat Rin caught it in his; they turned, separated--

"Lift!"--each danced six steps to their right--"Establish orbit!"--a half turn, so Pat Rin was looking over Nova's shoulder at the starry rug that had covered the floor in Luken's small private parlor in their quarters above the warehouse--

"Outer ring adjust," Cheever said. Pat Rin kept his place while Nova slid three steps to left. His view of the rug was now unimpeded.

"Lay in coords!" Cheever called.

*Lay in--*

But Cheever was giving the coordinates. Rapidly. Pat Rin focused on the rug--on the *map*--found the first coord, slid forward two steps, located the second, slipped to the left three steps, the third--the third? There!--and forward again, four steps.

"Roll starboard!" came the instruction, and Pat Rin spun to the right with the rest, noting in a sort of mental gasp that the music was moving quicker now, that the 'chora's voice was louder, and the fiddle's entirely gone.

"Lay in coords!"

This time, it wasn't a complete shock; Pat Rin had time to face the map--the less familiar rug that had graced the schoolroom floor at Trealla Fantrol--and focus before Cheever intoned the first coord, then another, and another--a set of six full coordinates this time, and Pat Rin slipped, spun, circled, and lunged as directed, finishing the sequence damp and limp, but oddly triumphant. He hadn't missed a step!

Luken, however, had not had the same good fortune. Pat Rin spied him walking away from the circle, Andy Mack leaving the crowd at the edge of the rug to meet him--then Cheever called them to roll once more and he was facing the map from Jelaza Kazone.

The music was much too quick now, Pat Rin thought, tucking up his lace, and shaking his hair out of his eyes. More a jig than a round dance, which the 'chora gave shape in a continuing twisty flow of brilliantine notes.

*Val Con must be ready to drop*, he thought--and there was another thought, linked to that--but it was lost in the need to accept the coordinates, and he plotted his course with his feet and his hips,

barely registering when Miri dropped out at the eighth coord--and Priscilla, at the twelfth.

The next round came and as he glimpsed the near-est celestial rug, he all but felt the controls beneath his hands; in truth he missed the cabin of *Fortune's Reward*, as he missed the thrust against his back, and the comfort of sitting First Board. The rug was before him, and another as he danced, and the calculations went thus and so and turn and step, and by rights now there should be Jump glare and stars on the screens ahead, and stars behind, with stars underfoot, and a planet to find.

But the dance--

"Orient!" Cheever called, and the four remaining dancers came together in the center, joined hands, ran--*too fast!* Pat Rin thought, with a sudden spike of panic--'round, three times, six--

"Establish orbit!"

As one, they dropped hands, each spinning away from every, two-four-six revolutions, and came to rest, facing--the entranced spectators.

At the fore of them all stood his mother, considering him with a sort of distant interest, as one might inspect an insect.

"Check your board!" Cheever directed, and Pat Rin executed the required glide and change, aware of the weight of his limbs. It was hot, and his head ached, and, really he had every reason to be tire--

The omnichora shouted, notes streaming like lift beacons, and there was Miri next to his mother, and Priscilla approaching--

"Lay in coords!"

There was no map this time. Pat Rin closed his eyes. Cheever chanted the coordinates--a short set of three. Forward, back, turn left--

"Sign your co-pilot!"

Pat Rin extended a hand--and his eyes snapped open in astonishment as it was caught in a warm grip.

"Well done!" Uncle Daav whispered, under cover of the music, and--

"Clear your board!"

The two of them crossed, separated, and came back together.

"Lock it down!"

Natesa's fingers wove comfortably with his. Shan, on her other side, extended his hand and caught Daav's free hand.

"Dim the lights," Cheever said softly, and the four of them walked sedately widdershins, three times, the 'chora slowing, slowing, almost down to a proper round... "Open hatch."

Obediently, they dropped hands.

"Go to town," Cheever all-but-whispered, and the four of them turned to face the rug and those watching, as the 'chora finished with a flurry and a flare--and the shouts and whistles began.

Pat Rin shook his lace out and reached for his glass. With Natesa's connivance, he'd slipped through the crowd to the back room that had been set aside for the band's use. Finding a bottle of autumn wine before him, he poured and sipped, and sipped once again before making the attempt to make himself seemly.

The dance--the dance had been an odd thing, to be sure; in memory not nearly so harrowing as in actuality. Had it gone on much longer, he had no doubt but that he would have joined Luken, Miri, and Priscilla at his mother's side.

He paused, frowning, recalling the moment when he had met his mother's eyes...

"Ah, here he is, keeping the wine to himself!" Clonak ter'Meulen's voice overfilled the little room. Pat Rin sighed, and turned to face not only the portly Scout, but Luken and Daav, and Shan, Priscilla, Natesa, Andy Mack, Nova, Cheever, Miri--and Val Con, green eyes sparkling, the renegade lock of hair sticking damply to his forehead.

"Well met, cousin," he murmured, and Pat Rin held out his glass.

"I thought the 'chora was overextended," he said. "Drink."

"My thanks." Val Con took the glass and sipped; sighed. Pat Rin considered him, doing a different sort of calculation.

"More clarity?" he asked, but it was Miri who answered.

"No complaints, Boss. Sent you a clue, fair and square," she said.

He eyed her. "Hardly in advance."

"But in advance, nonetheless," Val Con said, with a note of finality in his quiet voice. "Come, let us not bicker. There is business to be done--and quickly, so that Clonak is not long kept from the wine."

"That's a touching regard for my well-being," Clonak said, and suddenly pulled himself up straight, looking not so pudgy, nor foolish at all.

"Pat Rin yos'Phelium Clan Korval," he intoned, the syllables of the High Tongue falling cool and sharp from his lips, "has stated in the hearing of pilots and of master pilots not once but several times that he holds a first class limited license under false pretenses. The pilot's solo rating flight was conducted in a Korval safe-ship, programmed to fly, should there be no pilot available. Pat Rin yos'Phelium has stated his belief that it was the ship which overcame the challenges of the pilot's solo, not the pilot." Clonak gave Pat Rin a level look.

"These are serious concerns and the pilot erred not in laying them before master pilots. Therefore, and after consultation, it was agreed that a retesting should be done. The testing is now completed, and I call upon the master pilots present to render their opinions: is Pat Rin yos'Phelium Clan Korval a pilot or does he hold a license wrongly? Speak, masters!"

Daav stepped forward, black eyes serious.

"Though he is perhaps not as conversant with the basic coord book as might be desirable, it is my estimation as a master pilot that Pat Rin yos'Phelium is worthy of the license he carries." He fell back a step, cocking an eyebrow at Andy Mack, lounging against the wall. The lanky pilot shook his head, white hair moving softly across his shoulders, and took a sip of his beer.

"Been sayin' it, ain't I? Boy's a pilot. Tell by lookin' at him."

Shan stepped forward. "It is my estimation as a mas-ter pilot," he said seriously, "that Pat Rin yos'Phelium is wor-thy of the license he carries." He fell back a step, and Priscilla came forward, then Nova, Cheever and at last Natesa, who made her declaration with the cool, emo-tionless intonation of a Judge, then smiled at him and stepped forward to take his hand.

"You did well, Pat Rin," she murmured.

"In fact," said Clonak, "he did. I say this as one who doubted the damn' dance would work out at all, but young Shadow carried the day. So." He looked sharply at Pat Rin. "In my estimation as a master pilot, having observed the whole of the testing, Pat Rin yos'Phelium is worthy of the license he carries and I'll thank you to stop doubting yourself, you young whippersnapper! Between you and your lady mother, you're a devil's brew, make no mistake!"

Pat Rin blinked. "My mother?"

"It happens," Priscilla said surprisingly, "that Lady Ka-reen is, after all, of the dramliza. She appears to have only one talent, which is rare, but not unknown."

Pat Rin looked at her, foreknowing... "And that talent is?"

Priscilla smiled at him. "She may impose her will--to a very limited extent--upon the unwary." Her smile deepened. "And now that you are warned, you are armed."

His mother a *dramliza*? It was only slightly mad, Pat Rin thought, considering the facts of Shan and Anthora in the present generation. But that one talent ...

"I think you are saying that it was my mother's influ-ence that kept me from qualifying as pilot?"

"At first, boy dear," Luken said, gently. "By the time you had failed two or three times, you were quite able to fail all on your own." He smiled, sadly. "It was my sorrow, my boy, that I could never allow you to see anything other than your own unworthiness."

Pat Rin blinked against tears; Natesa's finger's tight-ened around his. "You did so much else, Father..."

A small pause, and then was Val Con abruptly before him, raising his hand so that Korval's ring gleamed. Pat Rin lifted an eyebrow. "Korval?"

"You will," Korval stated, "arrange time to study with Clonak ter'Meulen. You will learn the core coordinates, and such protocols as Scout ter'Meulen finds worthy. You will come to your delm inside of one local year and submit to such verification as may be demanded."

"Ah. And my streets? My duties as boss?"

Val Con smiled, and put his hand on his lifemate's shoulder.

"You'll think of something," he said.

Pat Rin drew a breath--to say what he hardly knew, or perhaps he meant only to laugh. The opportunity for either, however, was snatched from him by Cheever McFarland.

"Right then," the big man said. "Time to finish it up."

The fiddler provided a sprightly, skipping little mel-ody as they filed into the parlor and took up position on a clear space on the rug, Val Con leaving them at the last to tend his 'chora once more.

Pat Rin stood in the first row of pilots, Natesa on his right, Luken on his left, Daav directly behind. The room was quiet, all eyes on them. Especially Pat Rin saw, were Lady Kareen's eyes on them, from her position between Audrey and Penn Calhoon. His mother's face betrayed the faintest hint of boredom, as would perhaps be worthy of an adult who had been teased into attending a gathering of halflings.

The fiddler finished her tune as Cheever McFarland and Miri Robertson stepped up before the rest of them, mercifully blocking Pat Rin's view of his mother's face. From behind, the 'chora began to whisper a faint line of a tantaliz-ingly familiar song. Pat Rin strained his ears, trying to iden-tify the music--then forgot about it as Cheever began to speak.

"I'm going to impose on your patience once more, here, if Ms. Audrey'll let me," he said.

In the first row, Audrey laughed, and called out, "It don't strain my eyes any looking at you, Mr. McFarland! Speak on!"

"Thank you, ma'am." The big man bent a little at the waist--*a bow*, Pat Rin thought, *Cheever McFarland style*--then raised his voice so that it carried to the far corners of the room--and likely the rooms abovestairs, as well.

"Now, I know you all heard me say that pilots is com-petitive, and you might've thought that just meant that them who missed their steps had to drop outta the dance. But there was a little more to it than that. We was also looking to judge who among the pilots dancing had danced best, according to their level, their flight time, and their training. Miri here--you all know Miri's partnered with the Boss' brother, right? And when there's a question comes before either of them, they got this arrangement where both are understood to answer? Makes the family business run smoother. Anyhow, Miri here's gonna announce the win-ner."

Whistles, hoots, and stamping filled the room. The drum tried to bring order, without success, until--

"PIPE. DOWN!" Miri ordered, loud enough to make Pat Rin's ears ring--and silence fell like a knife.

"That's better," she said, in a more conversational tone. "I won't take long. Just want to say that it's the judg-ment of the master pilots we assembled here to watch that the winner of tonight's competition is--Boss Conrad!"

More noise erupted, shaking the rugs hung against the walls, and he walked forward to stand between Miri and Cheever. Smiling hugely; Villy danced forward with a bou-quet of dried leaves tied with bright ribbons and presented it with a bow.

Pat Rin inclined his head, received the offering, and stood while the cheering went on, his eye inexorably drawn to the place where his mother stood, silent and bland-faced.

She met his eyes, her own as hard as stones—and turned her face away.

Pat Rin took a breath — sighed it out, and looked up with a smile as his lady came to his side.

"Shall we go home, love?" she asked, slipping her arm through his.

He looked into her face, and then around the room, heard the drummer begin his count--and looked back to her.

"I believe," he said, smiling. "That I would like to dance with my lifemate. There are still some hours until dawn."