

It was spring again.

Mil Ton Intassi caught the first hint of it as he strolled through his early-morning garden--a bare flutter of warmth along the chill edge of mountain air, no more than that. Nonetheless, he sighed as he walked, and tucked his hands into the sleeves of his jacket.

At the end of the garden, he paused, looking out across the toothy horizon, dyed orange by the rising sun. Mist boiled up from the valley below him, making the trees into wraiths, obscuring the road and the airport entirely.

Spring, he thought again.

He had come here in the spring, retreating to the house he had built, to the constancy of the mountains.

Turning his back on the roiling fog, he strolled down the pale stone path, passing between banked rows of flowers.

At the center of the garden, the path forked--the left fork became a pleasant meander through the lower gardens, into the perimeter wood. It was cunning, with many delightful vistas, grassy knolls, and shady groves perfect for tête-à-têtes.

The right-hand path led straight to the house, and it was to the house that Mil Ton returned, slipping in through the terrace window, sliding it closed behind him.

He left his jacket on its peg and crossed to the stove, where he poured tea into a lopsided pottery mug before he moved on, his footsteps firm on the scrubbed wooden floor.

At the doorway to the great room, he paused. To his right, the fireplace, the full wall of native stone, which they had gathered and placed themselves. The grate wanted sweeping and new logs needed to be laid. He would see to it later.

Opposite the doorway was a wall of windows through which he could see the orange light unfurling like ribbons through the busy mist, and, nearer, a pleasant lawn, guarded on the far side by a band of cedar trees, their rough bark showing pink against the glossy green needles. Cedar was plentiful on this side of the mountain. So plentiful that he had used native cedar wood for beam, post, and floor.

Mil Ton turned his head, looking down the room to the letterbox. The panel light glowed cheerfully green, which meant there were messages in the bin. It was rare, now, that he received any messages beyond the commonplace--notices of quartershare payments, the occasional query from the clan's man of business. His sister--his delm--had at last given over scolding him, and would not command him; her letters were laconic, non-committal, and increasingly rare. The others--he moved his shoulders and walked forward to stand at the window, sipping tea from the lopsided mug and staring down into the thinning orange mist.

The green light tickled the edge of his vision. What could it be? he wondered--and sighed sharply, irritated with himself. The letterbox existed because his sister--or perhaps it had been his delm--asked that he not make himself entirely unavailable to the clan. Had she not, he would have had neither letterbox, nor telephone, nor newsnet access. Two of those he had managed, and missed neither. Nor would he mourn the letterbox, did it suddenly malfunction and die.

Oh, blast it all--*what* could it be?

He put the cup on the sill and went down the room, jerking open the drawer and snatching out two flimsies.

The first was, after all, an inquiry from his man of business on the subject of reinvesting an unexpected pay-out of dividend. He set it aside.

The second message was from Master Tereza of Solcintra Healer Hall, and it was rather lengthy, outlining an exceptionally interesting and difficult case currently in the care of the Hall, and wondering if he might bring himself down to the city for a few days to lend his expertise.

Mil Ton made a sound halfway between a growl and a laugh; his fingers tightened, crumpling the sheet into an unreadable mess.

Go to Solcintra Hall, take up his role as a Healer once more. Yes, certainly. Tereza, of all of them, should know that he had no intention of ever--he had told her, quite plainly--and his had never been a true Healing talent, in any case. It was a farce. A bitter joke made at his expense.

He closed his eyes, deliberately initiating a basic relaxation exercise. Slowly, he brought his anger--his panic--under control. Slowly, cool sense returned.

Tereza had been his friend. Caustic, she could certainly be, but to taunt a wounded man for his pain? No. That was not Tereza.

The flimsy was a ruin of mangled fiber and smeared ink. No matter. He crossed the room and dropped it into the fire grate, and stood staring down into the cold ashes.

Return to Solcintra? Not likely.

He moved his shoulders, turned back to the window and picked up the lopsided cup; sipped tepid tea.

He should answer his man of business. He should, for the friendship that had been between them, answer Tereza. He should.

And he would--later. After he had finished his tea and sat for his dry, dutiful hours, trying to recapture that talent which *had* been his, and which seemed to have deserted him now. One of many desertions, and not the least hurtful.

Spring crept onward, kissing the flowers in the door garden into dewy wakefulness. Oppressed by cedar walls, Mil Ton escaped down the left-hand path, pacing restlessly past knolls and groves, until at last he came to a certain tree, and beneath the tree, a bench, where he sat down, and sighed, and raised his face to receive the benediction of the breeze.

In the warm sunlight, eventually he dozed. Certainly; the day bid well for dozing, sweet dreams and all manner of pleasant things. That he dozed, that was pleasant. That he did not dream, that was well. That he was awakened by a voice murmuring his name, that was--unexpected.

He straightened from his comfortable slouch against the tree, eyes snapping wide.

Before him, settled casually cross-legged on the new grass, heedless of stains on his town-tailored clothes, was a man somewhat younger than himself, dark of hair, gray of eye. Mil Ton stared, voice gone to dust in his throat.

"The house remembered me," the man in the grass said apologetically. "I hope you don't mind."

Mil Ton turned his face away "When did it matter, what I minded?"

"Always," the other replied, softly. "Mil Ton. I told you how it was."

He took a deep breath, imposing calm with an exercise he had learned in Healer Hall, and faced about.

"Fen Ris," he said, low, but not soft. Then, "Yes. You told me how it was."

The gray eyes shadowed. "And in telling you, killed you twice." He raised a ringless and elegant hand, palm turned up. "Would that it were otherwise." The hand reversed, palm toward the grass. "Would that it were not."

Would that he had died of the pain of betrayal, Mil Ton thought, rather than live to endure this. He straightened further on the bench, frowning down at the other.

"Why do you break my peace?"

Fen Ris tipped his head slightly to one side in the old, familiar gesture. "Break?" he murmured, consideringly. "Yes, I suppose I deserve that. Indeed, I know that I deserve it. Did I not first appeal to Master Tereza and the Healers in the Hall at Solcintra, hoping that they might cure what our house Healer could not?" He paused, head bent, then looked up sharply, gray gaze like a blow.

"Master Tereza said she had sent for you," he stated, absolutely neutral. "She said, you would not come."

Mil Ton felt a chill, his fingers twitched, as if crumpling a flimsy into ruin.

"She did not say it was you."

"Ah. Would you have come, if she had said it was me?"

Yes, Mil Ton thought, looking aside so the other would not read it in his eyes.

"No," he said.

There was a small silence, followed by a sigh.

"Just as well, then," Fen Ris murmured. "For it was not I." He paused, and Mil Ton looked back

to him, drawn despite his will.

"Who, then?" he asked, shortly.

The gray eyes were infinitely sorrowful, eternally determined.

"My lifemate."

Fury, pure as flame, seared him. "You dare!"

Fen Ris lifted his chin, defiant. "You, who taught me what it is to truly love--you ask if I *dare*?"

To truly love. Yes, he had taught that lesson--learned that lesson. And then he had learned the next lesson--that even love can betray.

He closed his eyes, groping for the rags of his dignity...

"Her name is Endele," Fen Ris said softly. "By profession, she is a gardener." A pause, a light laugh. "A rare blossom in our house of risk-takers and daredevils."

Eyes closed, Mil Ton said nothing.

"Well." Fen Ris said after a moment. "You live so secluded here that you may not have heard of the accident at the skimmer fields last relumma. Three drivers were killed upon the instant. One walked away unscathed. Two were sealed into crisis units. Of those, one died."

Mil Ton had once followed the skimmer races--how not?--he had seen how easily a miscalculated corner approach could become tragedy.

"You were ever Luck's darling," he whispered, his inner ear filled with the shrieks of torn metal and dying drivers; his inner eye watching carefully as Fen Ris climbed from his battered machine and--

"Aye," Fen Ris said. "That I was allowed to emerge whole and hale from the catastrophe unit--that was luck, indeed."

Abruptly it was cold, his mind's eye providing a different scene, as the emergency crew worked feverishly to cut through the twisted remains of a racing skimmer and extricate the shattered driver, the still face sheathed in blood--two alive, of six. Gods, he had almost lost Fen Ris--

No.

He had already lost Fen Ris.

"I might say," Fen Ris murmured, "that I was the most blessed of men, save for this one thing--that when I emerged from the unit, Endele--my lady, my heart..." His voice faded.

"She does not remember you."

Silence. Mil Ton opened his eyes and met the bleak gray stare.

"So," said Fen Ris, "you did read the file."

"I read the summary Tereza sent, to entice me back to the Hall," he corrected. "The case intrigued her--no physical impediment to the patient's memory, nor even a complete loss of memory. Only one person has been excised entirely from her past."

"Excised," Fen Ris repeated. "We have not so long a shared past, after all. A year--only that."

Mil Ton moved his shoulders. "Court her anew, then," he said, bitterly.

"When I did not court her before?" the other retorted. He sighed. "I have tried. She withdraws. She does not know me; she does not trust me." He paused, then said, so low Mil Ton could scarcely hear--

"She does not want me."

It should have given him pleasure, Mil Ton thought distantly, to see the one who had dealt him such anguish, in agony. And, yet, it was not pleasure he felt, beholding Fen Ris thus, but rather a sort of bleak inevitability.

"Why me?" he asked, which is not what he had meant to say.

Fen Ris lifted his face, allowing Mil Ton to plumb the depths of his eyes, sample the veracity of his face.

"Because you will know how to value my greatest treasure," he murmured. "Who would know better?"

Mil Ton closed his eyes, listening to his own heartbeat, to the breeze playing in the leaves over his head, and, eventually, to his own voice, low and uninflected.

"Bring her here, if she will come. If she will not, there's an end to it, for I will not go into the city."

"Mil Ton--"

"Hear me. If she refuses Healing, she is free to go when and where she will. If she accepts Healing, the same terms apply." He opened his eyes, and looked hard into the other's face.

"Bring your treasure here and you may lose it of its own will and desire."

This was warning, proper duty of a Healer, after all, and perhaps it was foretelling as well.

Seated, Fen Ris bowed, acknowledging that he'd heard, then came effortlessly to his feet. "The terms are acceptable. I will bring her tomorrow, if she will come."

Mil Ton stood. "Our business is concluded," he said flatly. "Pray, leave me."

Fen Ris stood, frozen--a heartbeat, no more than that; surely, not long enough to be certain--and thawed abruptly, sweeping a low bow, accepting a debt too deep to repay.

"I have not--" Mil Ton began, but the other turned as if he had not spoken, and went lightly across the grass, up the path, and away.

Mil Ton had stayed up late into the night, pacing and calling himself every sort of fool, retiring at last to toss and turn until he fell into uneasy sleep at dawn. Some hours later, a blade of sunlight sliced through the guardian cedars, through the casement and into his face.

The intrusion of light was enough to wake him. A glance at the clock brought a curse to his lips. Fen Ris would be arriving soon. If, indeed, he arrived at all.

Quickly, Mil Ton showered, dressed, and went on slippers down the hall toward the kitchen. As he passed the great room, he glanced within--and froze in his steps.

A woman sat on the edge of the hearth, a blue duffel bag at her feet, her hands neatly folded on her lap. She sat without any of the cushions or pillows she might have used to ease her rest, and her purpose seemed not repose, but alert waiting.

Her attention at this moment was directed outward, toward the window, beyond which the busy birds flickered among the cedar branches.

He took one step into the room.

The woman on the hearth turned her head, showing him a round, high-browed face, and a pair of wary brown eyes.

Mil Ton bowed in welcome of the guest. "Good day to you. I am Mil Ton Intassi, builder of this house."

"And Healer," she said, her voice deeper than he had expected.

"And Healer," he allowed, though with less confidence that he once might have. He glanced around the room. "You came alone?"

She glanced down at the blue duffel. "He drove me here, and opened the door to the house. There was no need for him to wait. He knew I did not want him. You did not want him either, he said."

Not *entirely* true, Mil Ton thought, face heating as he recalled the hours spent pacing. He inclined his head. "May I know your name?"

"Bah! I have no manners," she cried and sprang to her feet. She bowed--a completely unadorned bow of introduction--and straightened.

"I am Endele per"Timbral, Clan--" her voice faded, a cloud of confusion passed briefly across her smooth face.

"I am Endele per"Timbral," she repeated, round chin thrust out defiantly.

Mil Ton inclined his head. "Be welcome in my house, Endele per"Timbral," he said, seriously. "I am in need of a cup of tea. May I offer you the same?"

"Thank you," she said promptly. "A cup of tea would be welcome."

She followed him down the hall to the kitchen and waited with quiet patience while he rummaged in the closet for a cup worthy of a guest. In the back, he located a confection of pearly porcelain. He poured tea and handed it off, recalling as she received it that the cup had belonged to Fen Ris, the sole survivor of a long-broken set.

Healers were taught to flow with their instincts. Mil Ton turned away to pour for himself,

choosing the lopsided cup, as always, and damned both Healer training and himself, for agreeing to...

"He said that you can Heal me." Endele spoke from behind him, her speech as unadorned as her bow had been. "He means, you will make me remember him."

Mil Ton turned to look at her. She held the pearly cup daintily on the tips of her fingers, sipping tea as neatly as a cat. Certainly, she was not a beauty--her smooth forehead was too high, her face too round, her hair merely brown, caught back with a plain silver hair ring. Her person was compact and sturdy, and she had the gift of stillness.

"Do you, yourself, desire this Healing?" he asked, the words coming effortlessly to his lips, as if the year away were the merest blink of an eye. "I will not attempt a Healing, against your will."

She frowned slightly. "Did you tell him that?"

"Of course," said Mil Ton. "I also told him that, if you wish to leave here for your own destination, now or later, I will not impede you. He accepted the terms."

"Did he?" The frown did not disappear. "Why?"

Mil Ton sipped tea, deliberately savoring the citrus bite while he considered. It was taught that a Healer owed truth to those he would heal. How much truth was left to the Healer's discretion.

"I believe," he said slowly, to Endele per Timbral's wary brown eyes, "it is because he values you above all other things and wishes for you only that which will increase your joy."

Tears filled her eyes, glittering. She turned aside, embarrassed to weep before a stranger, as anyone would be, and walked over to the terrace door, her footsteps soft on the wooden floor.

Mil Ton sipped tea and watched her. She stood quite still, her shoulders stiff with tension, tea cup forgotten in one hand, staring out into the garden as if it were the most fascinating thoroughfare in Solcintra City.

Sipping tea, Mil Ton let his mind drift. He was not skilled at hearing another's emotions. But the Masters of the Hall in Solcintra had taught him somewhat of their craft, and sometimes, if he disengaged his mind, allowing himself to fall, as it were into a waking doze — well, sometimes, then, he could see...

Images.

Now he saw images and more than images. He saw intentions made visible.

Walls of stone, a window set flush and firm, tightly latched against the storm raging without. Hanging to the right of the window was a wreath woven of some blue-leaved plant, which gave off a sweet, springlike scent. Mil Ton breathed in. Breathed out.

He felt, without seeing, that the stone barrier was all around the woman, as if she walked in some great walled city, able to stay safe from some lurking, perhaps inimical presence...

A rustle of something and the stones and their meaning faded.

"Please," a breathless voice said nearby. He opened his eyes to his own wood-floored kitchen, and looked down into the round face of Endele per Timbral.

"Please," she said again. "May I walk in your garden?"

"Certainly," he said, suddenly remembering her profession. "I am afraid you will find it inadequate in the extreme, however."

"I was charmed to see your house sitting so comfortably in the woods. I am certain I will be charmed by your garden," she said in turn, and turned to place her cup on the counter.

He unlocked the door and she slipped through, walking down the path without a look behind her. Mil Ton watched her out of sight, then left the door on the latch and poured himself a second cup of tea.

By trade, he was a storyteller. A storyteller whose stories sometimes went ... odd. Odd enough to pique the interest of the Masters, who had insisted that he was Healer, and taught him what they could of the craft.

He was, at best, a mediocre Healer, for he never had gained the necessary control over his rather peculiar talent to make it more than an uncertain tool. Sometimes, without warning, he would tell what Tereza was pleased to call a True Story, and that story would have--an effect. Neither story nor effect were predictable, and so he was most likely to be called upon as a last resort, after every other

Healing art had failed.

As now.

Mil Ton thought about the woman--the woman Fen Ris had taken as lifemate. He remembered the impassioned speech on the subject of this same woman, on the night Fen Ris had come to tell him how it was.

He sighed then, filled for a moment with all the grief of that night, and recalled Fen Ris demanding, *demanding* that Mil Ton take no Balance against this woman, for she had not stolen Fen Ris but discovered him. Among tears and joy, Fen Ris insisted that they both had been snatched, unanticipated and unplanned, out of their ordinary lives.

And now, of course, there was no ordinary life for any of them.

He wondered--he very much wondered--if Endele perTimbral would choose Healing.

Her blue bag still lay by the hearth, but it had been many hours since she had gone out into the garden. More than enough time for a sturdy woman in good health to have hiked down to the airport, engaged a pilot and a plane and been on her way to--anywhere at all.

Mil Ton sighed and looked back to his screen. When he found that he could no longer practice his profession, he had taught himself a new skill. Written stories never turned odd, and before his betrayal, he had achieved a modest success in his work.

The work was more difficult now; the stories that came so grudgingly off the tips of his fingers bleak and gray and hopeless. He had hoped for something better from this one, before Fen Ris had intruded into his life again. Now, he was distracted, his emotions in turmoil. He wondered again if Endele perTimbral had departed for a destination of her own choosing. Fen Ris would suffer, if she had done so. He told himself he didn't care.

Unquiet, he put the keyboard aside and pulled a book from the table next to his chair. If he could not write, perhaps he could lose himself inside the story of another.

She returned to the house with sunset, her hair wind-combed, her shirt and leggings rumpled, dirt under her fingernails.

"Your garden is charming," she told him. "I took the liberty of weeding a few beds so that the younger flowers will have room to grow."

"Ah," said Mil Ton, turning from the freezer with a readymeal in one hand. "My thanks."

"No thanks needed," she assured him, eyeing the box. "I would welcome a similar meal, if the house is able," she said, voice almost shy.

"Certainly, the house is able," he said, snappish from a day of grudging, grayish work.

She inclined her head seriously. "I am in the house's debt." She held up her hands. "Is there a place where I may wash off your garden's good dirt?"

He told her where to find the 'fresher and she left him.

Dinner was enlivened by a discussion of the garden. She was knowledgeable--more so than Mil Ton, who had planted piecemeal, with those things that appealed to him. He kept up his side only indifferently, his vision from time to time overlain with stone, and a storm raging, raging, raging, outside windows tight and sealed.

When the meal was done, she helped him clear the table, and, when the last dish was stacked in the cleaner, stood awkwardly, her strong, capable hands twisted into a knot before her.

Mil Ton considered her through a shimmer of stone walls.

"Have you decided," he said, careful to keep his voice neutral--for this was *her* choice, and hers alone, so the Master Healers taught--"whether you are in need of Healing?"

She looked aside, and it seemed that, for a moment, the phantom stones took on weight and substance. Then, the vision faded and it was only clean air between him and a woman undecided.

"They say--they say he is my lifemate," she said, low and stammering. "they say the life-price was negotiated with my clan, that he paid it out of his winnings on the field. They say, we were inseparable,

greater together than apart. His kin--they say all this. And I say--if these things are so, why do I not remember him?"

Mil Ton drew a deep, careful breath. "Why should they tell you these things, if they were not so?"

She moved her shoulders, face averted. "Clearly, it is so," she whispered. "They--he--the facts are as they state them. I saw the announcement in the back issue of the *Gazette*. *I spoke to my sister. I remember the rooms which are mine in his clan house. I remember the gardens, and the shopkeeper at the end of the street. I remember his sister, his brothers--all his kin! Saving him. Only him. My ... lifemate.*"

Her pain was evident. One needn't be an empath to feel it. Mil Ton drew a calming breath...

"I am not a monster," she continued. "He--of course, he is bewildered. He seems--kind, and, and concerned for my happiness. He looks at me... I do *not* know him!" she burst out passionately "I owe him nothing!" She caught herself, teeth indenting lower lip. Mil Ton saw the slow slide of a tear down one round cheek.

She was sincere; he remembered Tereza's report all too well:

*This is not merely some childish game of nesc, but a true forgetting. And, yet, how has she forgotten? Her intellect is intact; she has suffered no trauma, taken no drugs, appealed to no Healers to rid her of the burden of her memories...*

"And do you," Mil Ton asked once more, "wish to embrace Healing?"

She turned her head and looked at him, her cheeks wet and her eyes tragic.

"What will happen, if I am Healed?"

Ah, the question. The very question. And he owed her only truth.

"It is the wish of your lifemate that you would then recall him and the life you have embarked upon together. If you do not also wish for that outcome, deny me."

Her lips tightened, and again she turned away, walked a few steps down the room and turned back to face him.

"You built this house, he said--you alone." She looked around her, at the bare wooden floor, the cedar beam, the cabinets and counter in-between. "It must have taken a very long time."

So, there would be no Healing. Mil Ton sighed--Fen Ris. It was possible to feel pity for Fen Ris. He bought a moment to compose himself by repeating her inventory of the kitchen, then brought his eyes to her face and inclined his head.

"Indeed, it took much longer than needful, to build this house. I worked on it infrequently, with long stretches between."

"But, why build it at all?"

"Well." He hesitated, then moved his hand, indicating that she should walk with him.

"I began when I was still an apprentice. My mother had died and left the mountain to myself alone, as her father had once left it to her. There had been a house here, in the past; I discovered the foundation when I began to clear the land." He paused and gave her a sideline look.

"I had planned to have a garden here, you see--and what I did first was to clear the land and cut the path-ways..."

"But you had uncovered the foundation," she said, preceding him into the great room. She sat on the edge of the hearth, where she had been before. Fen Ris had himself perched precisely there on any number of evenings or mornings. And here was this woman--

Mil Ton walked over to his chair and sat on the arm.

"I had uncovered the foundation," he repeated, "before I went away--back to the city and my craft. I was away--for many years, traveling in stories. I made a success of myself; my tales were sought after; halls were filled with those who hungered for my words.

"When I returned, I was ill with self-loathing. My stories had become ...weapons--horribly potent, uncontrollable. I drove a man mad in Chonselta City. In Teramis, a woman ran from the hall, screaming..."

On the hearth, Endeles per"Timbral sat still as a stone, only her eyes alive.

"That I came here--I scarcely knew why. Except that I had discovered a foundation and it came to me that I could build a house, and keep the world safely away."

*Oh, gods*, he thought, feeling the shape of the words in his mouth, listening to his voice, spinning the tale he meant, and yet did not mean, to tell...

"I built the house of cedar, and laid the beams by hand; the windows I set tight against the walls. At the core, a fireplace--" He used his chin to point over her shoulder. "Before I finished that, the Healers came to me. News of my stories and the effects of my stories had reached the Masters of the Guild and they begged that I come to be trained, before I harmed anyone else." He looked down at his hand, fisted against his knee, and heard his voice continue the tale.

"So, I went and I trained, and then I worked as a Healer in the hall. I learned to write stories down and they did not cause madness, and so took up another craft for myself. I was content and solitary until I met a young man at the skimmer track." He paused; she sat like a woman hewn of ice.

"He was bold, and he was beautiful; intelligent and full of joy. We were friends, first, then lovers. I brought him here and he transformed my house with his presence; with his help, the fireplace went from pit to hearth,"

He closed his eyes, heard the words fall from his lips. "One evening, he came to me--we had been days apart, but that was no unknown thing--he followed the races, of course. He came to me and he was weeping, he held me and he told me of the woman he had met, how their hearts beat together, how they must be united, or die."

Behind his closed eyes he saw image over image--Fen Ris before him, beseeching and explaining, and this woman's wall of stone, matching texture for texture the very hearth she sat on.

"Perhaps a true Healer might have understood. I did not. I cast him out, told him to go to his woman and leave me--leave me in peace. I fled--here, to the place which was built for safety..."

"How did you abide it?" Her voice was shrill, he opened his eyes to find her on her feet, her body bowed with tension, her eyes frantic. "How did you abide loving him? Knowing what he does? Knowing that they might one day bring his body to you? Couldn't you see that you needed to lock yourself away?"

His vision wavered, he saw stones, falling, felt wind tear his hair, lash rain into his face. In the midst of chaos, he reached out, and put his arms around her, and held her while she sobbed against his shoulder.

Eventually, the wind died, the woman in his arms quieted.

"I loved him for himself," he said softly, into her hair. "And he loved the races. He would not choose to stop racing, though he might have done, had I asked him. But he would have been unhappy, desperately so--and I loved him too well to ask it." He sighed.

"In the end, it came to my choice: Did I bide and share in our love, for as long as we both remained? Or turn my face aside, from the fear that, someday, he might be gone?"

In his arms Endeleva shuddered--and relaxed.

"As simple as that?" she whispered.

"As simple, and as complex." Words failed him for a moment--in his head now were images of Fen Ris laughing, and of the ocean waves crashing on stone beneath the pair of them, of arms reaching eagerly--

He sighed again. "I have perhaps done you no favor, child, in unmaking the choice you had made, if safety is what you need above all."

"Perhaps," she said, and straightened out of his embrace, showing him a wet face, and eyes as calm as dawn. "Perhaps not." She inclined her head. "All honor, Healer. With your permission, I will retire, and tend my garden of choices while I dream."

He showed her to the tiny guest room, with its thin bed and single window, giving out to the moonlit garden, then returned to the great room.

For a few heartbeats, he stood, staring down into the cold hearth. It came to him, as from a distance, that it wanted sweeping, and he knelt down on the stones and reached for the brush.



"Mil Ton." A woman's voice, near at hand. He stirred, irritable, muscles aching, as if he had slept on cold stone.

"Mil Ton," she said again, and he opened his eyes to Endele per Timbral's pale and composed face. She extended a hand, and helped him to rise, and they walked in companionable silence to the kitchen for tea.

"Have you decided," he asked her, as they stood by the open door, inhaling the promise of the garden, "what you shall do?"

"Yes," she said softly. "Have you?"

"Yes," he answered--and it was so, though he had not until that moment understood that a decision had been necessary. He smiled, feeling his heart absurdly light in his breast.

"I will return to Solcintra. Tereza writes that there is work for me, at the Hall."

"I am glad," she said. "Perhaps you will come to us, when you are settled. He would like it, I think--and I would."

He looked over to her and met her smile.

"Thank you," he said softly "I would like it, too."