

Un Bel Di

by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

As his terrifying smile widened, the Janif Undersecretary watched the procession of Papi wind its way up the far side of the valley. "They're like fine children, perfect children, every one of them." The Undersecretary licked his outer lips; it was a furtive darting movement. "So sad they aren't truly intelligent. If they were ..." He broke off. If they were ...

His companion almost put a hasty hand on the Undersecretary's auxiliary arm. "We are still in doubt about that here. We have not run many tests yet. They might have greater potential than we know." The Ambassador made a weak gesture of apology.

Undersecretary Navbe waved him away in an offended manner. "Certainly, certainly. Keep your ambassadorial pride. I myself look for signs of genius in my pets. You are free to do the same."

Instead of the accepted answer, the Ambassador raised a primary arm slowly and remained rigidly silent. He then bowed with maddening propriety to the lengthening shadows.

The Undersecretary closed the screen, stepping back with a gesture of regret. It was a great pity that he had to be so very isolated. And the Ambassador was just as bad as the others of his status. He would be tolerant to absurdity of the locals, then become unyielding and moralistic with the others of his kind. Navbe had seen it often in his post and bitterly rued having to deal with such perversity.

But the Ambassador was speaking. "... for the Papi, in this instance. You will want to observe them while you are here, Undersecretary."

Privately the Janif Undersecretary thought this a lamentable state of affairs. "Of course. I look forward to it," he said.

"This is quite a unique place," continued the Ambassador, warming to his subject.

They all are, thought Navbe.

"We've found not only that the Papi have a highly developed social order, but that they surgically alter their young to fulfill specific cultural functions." Here the Ambassador hesitated.

"Oh?" Navbe managed the illusion of polite interest.

"Yes. They can make truly amazing changes. Each of the modifications has a definite place in the culture, although a couple are odd, dependent creatures."

"They can actually do this?" Navbe asked lazily.

"It appears so," answered the Ambassador cautiously.

"Before or after birth. How?" Under his meticulous exterior, Navbe felt a deep elation. Perhaps his

temporary exile would not be as terrible as he had feared it might be. There could be great solace here after a few special arrangements.

"I am sorry to say that we have not yet discovered their reproductive mechanism. They are probably ovoviviparous." He moved uncomfortably, knowing how far he had stepped beyond the bounds of allowable ceremony. It was also a blot to his record that he knew so little about the people he lived with.

At this Klin Navbe all but laughed. So there was a mystery, was there? That made for a challenge. And this sniveling diplomat had not found it out. "Probably?" He was scornful, but not so much as to discourage the Ambassador from talking. As all others of his status, Navbe despised the Representative status. Yet there was a chance that his host knew the reason for his temporary exile, and he dared not put himself in a compromising position with such a person.

"As I have told you, we cannot do the tests. We lack the full authorization to do so. I do not know how we shall function if we are not properly authorized."

"Precisely." What was this fool's familial name? Lesh? Yes, Ambassador Lesh. He wanted the authority to proceed with tests, and Navbe could give him that authorization. Plans blossomed in his mind.

It was perhaps fortunate that the Meditation Bell rang the summons to the Third Cycle just then; it provided cover for the awkwardness between the two officials. Their Janif formality asserted itself, and they strode silently down the hall together.

When they had completed their ritual exercises, Navbe put Ambassador Lesh at his ease with that age-old question beloved of off-planet Janif officialdom: "How did you come to serve on Papill, Ambassador?" And he masked his boredom at the too-familiar tale of a diplomat's career.

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In the long twilight the two Janif sat together on the terrace listening to the distant Night Song of the Papi. In the valley below Ambassador Lesh's estates the waning light shifted, slid, and was gone, and the soft white fogs followed the shadows to wrap the valley in sleep. On the ridges the tasseled, angular trees sighed in the wind, their hard thin leaves clicking endlessly above the fog.

"A beautiful place, Lesh, even with just the two stars. It is like a children's story." Navbe watched the valley's soft change, dreaming absently of violated children and the strange Papi, intense pleasure hidden in the formal set of his face. He had picked a flower and was stroking it with the extending sensors of his thumbs. "You are to be envied, Ambassador—to be surrounded by all this loveliness."

"I have thought so myself," said the Ambassador in an unbecoming burst of familiarity.

Navbe ignored the solecism. "And the Papi are such pretty people. So delicate. Not like those creatures on Tlala or Isnine. You have beauty here, and tractable natives."

The Ambassador, lulled by the Undersecretary's flow of remarkable condescensions and innocuous questions, was betrayed into elaborating on the Papi. "They are a gentle people. It is of great importance to them that they bring delight to their neighbors. It is unfortunate that they do not recognize the laxness of their social order, but their errors are charming. They have made almost a religion of their kindness. Over the years I have observed their spirit of self-sacrifice." He became aware of his blunder. "But it is nearly impossible to take advantage of them. They know their own order." His confusion led him to a further

mistake, and he showed his primary hands as he shifted position.

Irritated, Navbe wondered how many more insults he would have to endure at the hands of Ambassador Lesh. He savagely desired to humiliate his host, but he wanted information more, so he forced himself to respond with calculated ease: "Certainly, to see the Papi is to want to protect them from abuse. They must be greatly in your debt."

"Not at all," Lesh said hastily, looking wretched.

Navbe flung back both pair of arms in his best offensive manner. "You must not fear me, Ambassador Lesh. Surely you know the Judiciate would not have allowed me to come here if they had found any real basis to the scandal. But such talk, especially about High officials, is dangerous. I have willingly elected to leave Jan to come here in order to allow the tale to be forgotten."

The Ambassador twitched uncertainly. He had heard tales of the Undersecretary's strange perversions but was loath to ask about them. Even to admit he had heard the rumors would be more shame than he would deliberately bring on himself.

"Come, come, you must not be afraid. You have heard something of me caught alone with the children of Sub-council Hariv. No, you needn't deny it. The grosser strata, disobeying every Janif law, have repeated the story, elaborating and embellishing it, if the versions I have heard are indicative. That I have been allowed to see the children is true, and I am fully aware of the honor done me in this, but how, in a High House, would I have obtained that access to the completely sequestered offspring of such an official? Only think of the obstacles and be reasonable." It had been difficult to get to them, but Navbe was well aware that the task was not as difficult as the public had been led to believe.

The Ambassador knew about the guarding of High children, and he wavered. "They did speak of bribes and extortion ..." It was a terrible breach of courtesy even to mention it, but he was too deeply involved to deny his knowledge.

The Undersecretary bit out a laugh. "What man of Sub-council Hariv's stature would have such servants around him? He would never tolerate so low a status to enter his House. How do high status servants behave? Bribes are out of the question." That much, at least, was correct.

"I hadn't considered ..."

Navbe remembered how very long it had taken for him to find his accomplice, one who shared his need to use the young bodies for cruel pleasure. How delicate the maneuvering had been, and how quickly the problem had been solved when he had discovered the night handservant to be addicted to Unjy. Then it had been easy. All the careful searching, the obtuse questioning, the days of painstaking effort had been worth it. He could recall the tearing of the flesh when his antlers touched it, the smell of the soft inner tissues when he fingered them ...

"Yes, I had not thought of that. With such talk rife in the lower strata, the honor of high status servants would be impugned. It is no wonder you chose to disassociate yourself from such improper conduct."

"So you see," Navbe said expansively if vaguely.

The Ambassador was painfully relieved. He settled back in the soft cushions and offered the Undersecretary another dish of Merui. Navbe accepted it with a skilled blend of humility and contempt.

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All the Papi that waited at the gates looked uniformly young to Navbe. They all had the serene, childlike faces and downy antlers that marked Janif children, made more attractive by huge violet eyes. Their clothes were a soft, clinging fabric that Navbe longed to fondle.

"We bring you the morning, you who are new among us," the Papi said in chorus. "We have come to welcome the new Janif visitor and to beg him to visit us in our houses."

The Ambassador stole a warning look at the Undersecretary, but Navbe was far too careful to be so carelessly trapped. "It will give me much honor to walk with you one sundown," he said with a slight bow in the proper ritual intonation.

The soft garments moved in the wind, and the Papi were outlined in their clothes, naked to Navbe. His thumb sensors stirred urgently. "It is close to the First Meal, and I wish you nourishment."

The Papi were obviously happy with him. They rustled among themselves, whispering in their chantlike speech.

Then a Papi, whom Ambassador Lesh had identified as the local leader, came forward with his offering of three finely wrought platters. Each was covered with squares of the fascinating cloth. "A gift for you," he said to the Janif with an acceptable show of respect. "It is our delight to bring these few things to you, in the hopes they might please you."

Navbe had studied this part of the ritual the night before and was able to respond without noticeable hesitation. "Here are three rare things; but the light in the valley and the mist ensnared in a tree are rarer." He touched each of the platters without removing the cloths. "I will value the gifts as they are valued by the givers."

The Papi and Ambassador Lesh regarded him with approval, although Lesh's look was tinged with relief. "You will be welcome among us at any sundown," said the Papi spokesman. "I am known as Nara-Lim. This one is Tsu-Lim and this one is Ser-Tas." He did not introduce the others, to Navbe's delight. Apparently only the platter-bearers had that distinction. Navbe approved of that, the recognition of status. Ambassador Lesh had told him that Lim and Tas were thought to be titles, which revealed the extent to which he had deluded himself about the Papi's intelligence potential. Titles among those who lived as the Papi did would be ludicrous.

The platter-bearers put their offerings on the steps, then went ceremoniously to the rear of the group. Nara-Lim touched each of the platters and then he, too, went to the rear of the group.

"I am honored by Nara-Lim and his generous companions." And Navbe turned, walking slowly up the steps at the gateway.

Behind him, the gentle, fragile Papi waited until the gates were closed before they left the Ambassador's estates.

"That was well done," Lesh said, forgetting himself.

"I wish to make my stay as pleasant as possible," Navbe informed his host with a sarcastic laugh. As he spoke he was thinking of ways to obtain a Papi for his own use. Seeing those lovely animals at the gates that day had awakened his need again and had strengthened his resolve to have one. He knew that his position was an advantage but could not find the best means of using it.

"Make no doubt, Undersecretary; they will want you to visit them." Ambassador Lesh stopped at the terrace. "Will you take your meal now?"

"It is customary," Navbe said witheringly.

"Must this be with the Janif meats, or will the local ones do? We have the Janif available, but during the day I have tried to run this establishment on native foodstuffs ..."

"Your economy is no doubt admired. Serve what you wish. If I am to go to their homes, I should learn what to expect." He saw Lesh's embarrassment and was pleased.

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Nara-Lim looked expectantly at his guest, hesitating as he held the door to his house open to the Janif. "Undersecretary? What am I to have the pleasure of doing for you?" He bowed low.

Klin Navbe opened both sets of hands in obsequious display, hoping to disarm the Papi with this extraordinary courtesy. "I have come as a student, Nara-Lim. I desire to learn more of the life of your people." He knew that these natives were stupid and trusting. This approach would be the most likely to succeed. Any species of low technology that flattered itself with the illusion of intelligence was easy to convince of your interest.

"We are delighted." Nara-Lim opened the door wider.

"I wish also to thank you for the cloth, the stone work, and the herbs you presented to me. I am impressed."

"It is enough that you value them. If you enjoy our poor offerings, they are made rich."

Navbe moved closer. "You must tell me how to proceed, since your ways are not the ways of the Janif." Cynically Navbe watched the approval in the old Papi's eyes. These little people were incapable of understanding insults.

"Certainly. It will be an honor to this house." He stepped aside to let the Janif Undersecretary enter.

After a long and boring afternoon, Navbe was allowed to leave, promising to return when he could, thanking his host in the most effusive terms.

Then, when he stood in the door, he turned back, as if suddenly aware of a new question. "I have just thought ... But it would be too great a favor. I must not ask it."

"What were you thinking of?" Nara-Lim asked eagerly, his wide Papi eyes alight and his soft clothes quivering. "The Janif have not shown so much curiosity about us until now. We are certainly ready to fulfill any reasonable request."

With this encouragement Navbe put on a display of reluctance, sneering privately at the naiveté of the creatures. As if any Janif could be so concerned with Papi. "You told me of the ... did you call them companions? ... Yes? Companions."

"Yes?"

"They are adapted for the pleasure of the owner, is that not correct? Do I choose the words badly?" Navbe paused as if uncertain as to how to continue. "I thought that I might arrange to buy one, if that is the usual transaction . . . You see, I would then have one of you with me, to instruct me and tell me what I need to know of your world and your ways. I am right that the companion is always with its . . . master?"

Nara-Lim looked chagrined. "I should have suggested it to you. You must forgive my manners. It would naturally have been offered to you if I had thought your interest was so great."

Realizing that his boredom had shown, Navbe made a show of confusions. "I will confess that when I first asked you, it was idle speculation, but your talk has shown me that Papill has much to offer those of us from Jan." It was the first honest statement he had made, and it pleased him to think that Nara-Lim would hear it as a compliment. Such foolish creatures deserved to be prostituted.

"Then I will arrange for a companion for you. Perhaps you will be kind enough to call here one day soon."

"In three days, then?" Here Navbe held his breath.

"Of course," was the answer as Nara-Lim bowed. "I will select a companion for you, one known for grace and docility and boasting much beauty." He paused, looking up to the sky. "There will be heavy mists tonight. You will want to return to the Ambassador's estates quickly. It is dangerous to be abroad in the mists. Even Papi have been lost quite hopelessly in them."

"Your concern flatters me," Navbe said, touching the homing device that would guide him unfailingly back to the estates. "I will leave you now."

"Your interest in Papill is a great honor to our people. Your companion will be here in three days." He kept his deep bow even as he closed the door against the approaching night.

As he strode back along the mountain path in the steadily thickening fog, Klin Navbe gloated to himself. Success was so easy with fools, and the Papi were certainly fools. They thought themselves possessed of tradition, when all they had was a stagnated culture of decaying bloodlines. What an opportunity this presented to him! It would be ridiculous to waste it.

Ambassador Lesh met him by the terrace. "You were out?" he asked shrilly. "Where were you?" In his fear he forgot to use Navbe's title.

"I went to see Nara-Lim. For what little concern it is of yours." He paused for this to sink in, then: "I will require room to accommodate a Papi servant. Nara-Lim is providing me with a companion."

"A companion," Lesh repeated blankly. He had a sudden picture of those most special Papi with Undersecretary Navbe and was afraid.

"It will arrive here in three days. I assume you can be ready."

Lesh's primary arms twitched. "I can." He thought for a moment. "We can move you and your companion into the Terrace House." Ordinarily such a thing would be unthinkable, but Lesh no longer wanted to be involved in the affairs of the Undersecretary any more than protocol made necessary.

"That should be satisfactory. I rely on you to arrange it for me in time for my companion's arrival." And with that he went past the Ambassador into the house, his robes hissing derisively.

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The companion looked up at Navbe with huge, adoring eyes. It was specially dressed for the occasion, wrapped in innumerable layers of tissue-fine cloth. It regarded Navbe with awe and a little ill-concealed fear.

"This is most kind of you, Nara-Lim," Navbe said without looking at him. "I will treasure this, you may be sure." He reached out to touch the slender sprouting antlers. "Remarkable."

Nara-Lim looked pleased and murmured some words that Navbe didn't hear.

"Yes, I will certainly treasure this." Inwardly he was still reeling from the first sight of the companion. Of all the Papi he had seen, this was the most childlike; a small figure without any of the grosser features of most of the natives. He had been told that they were made so, but did not realize until now that the change would be so impressive. Formed like a Janif child, with limpid eyes and soft antlers that were downy to the touch. He would have to be careful at first, make no moves to reveal his intent.

"You are pleased, then. This is satisfactory?" Nara-Lim asked quietly.

"Are you pleased?" The companion asked with a becoming urgency.

"Yes. Yes, I am pleased." He dragged his eyes from the companion and turned to Nara-Lim. "You have done me great honor, and I am beholden."

The old Papi turned almost double. "It is we who are honored. No Janif has ever before been so generous of his interest; no Janif has even bothered to learn from us. You have been most kind."

"Really," he said. "What more is there for me to do? Are there rituals, or documents ...?"

"A brief ritual," Nara-Lim said diffidently. "It is to assure your care of your companion, since it is wholly dependent on you. They are made for one individual and may not be changed. We feel it is essential to have a ceremony to establish this."

"Commendable," Navbe said, hoping that the ritual would be short. He was anxious to return to the Terrace House. The companion would be his then, for whatever purposes he chose. His auxiliary arms drew his robes more closely about him so that the Papi could not see the agitation he was feeling.

"Then, if you will come this way?" Nara-Lim held open the door to the garden. "I arranged for the proper setting earlier. I hope this does not distress you. Ordinarily it would be for you to do, but I thought that you would forgive me this liberty."

"Your behavior is excellent, Nara-Lim." How he hated exchanging these useless formalities with this race of precious animals. Only the promise that was held in the companion's body kept him reasonable and accepting of the ridiculous wishes of the Papi. "I am unfamiliar with your ways and find your tact most rewarding."

They went into the small garden where Nara-Lim had lit a number of ornamental fires in braziers. Then he threw scented water on the companion. He next gave each a plant to hold while he recited some unfamiliar words. When the plants had been burned in the braziers, it was over.

"Very pretty," Navbe remarked, thinking it all very stupid. The companion clung to his auxiliary arm.

"In five days there will be a ceremonial visit paid to you, as assurance that you are taking proper care of the companion. But you must not let this concern you. It is merely our way." He made an elaborate

gesture to signify the perfunctory nature of the visit.

"I thank you for telling me." This was genuine thanks, for Navbe realized that he must be careful to leave no mark that might arouse suspicion as to his use of the companion. There must be no sign of abuse; at least, not for the first five days.

The Papi elder bowed. "Go then. And learn of each other."

Navbe led the companion away from Nara-Lim's garden with unseemly haste, smiling ferociously.

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Although Ambassador Lesh suspected why Navbe had taken the companion, he was careful not to show this in his manner. He greeted Navbe as he returned and directed his servants to show them to the Terrace House.

"I know you will understand that this is the best of the separate houses I have," he said uneasily.

"Of course. This had to be expected." The patronizing sound of his voice grated, and Ambassador Lesh had to force himself to ignore it.

"You should find it adequate," he responded at last, when he was sure he would not overstep his status.

"Adequate," Navbe agreed. He turned to the companion, glowing fragile and childlike beside him. "It will do for you," he told the companion with a sound curiously like a snort.

"Wherever you are, that is truly the best place to be," murmured the companion in a sweet, trilling voice.

Navbe was surprised. He hadn't expected quite so much ability in the companion and was not sure he wanted it. But devotion would be something new, and he thought it would amuse him.

"Do you hear, Lesh? It's quite alarmingly faithful." The cruel eyes mocked the rigid control of the Ambassador. "Were you about to warn me of the natives? Your little Nara-Lim has done so already. Charming. We went through a ceremony designed to overwhelm me with the honor of the occasion." He turned again to the companion. "He wanted me to understand what I was being given. As if I needed him to tell me." He laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh.

"They are meant to be faithful, Undersecretary. I understand that they cannot be altered to suit another once they have been given to ... someone ..." he ended awkwardly.

"Are you suggesting that I take this with me when I leave? With all that's being said about me?" He had taken the precaution of speaking Janif rather than his approximation of Papi. "Really, Lesh. This is an animal, no more. I have it to amuse me and stave off the unutterable boredom of this place. When I leave, it will return to its people. You're wrong, you know, to think that creatures like this one really care about their masters. It's sham, Lesh. Just cunning and sham."

"You're not to harm it," Ambassador Lesh cried recklessly.

"Would it make your position here embarrassing?" Navbe looked at Lesh until the Ambassador was forced to look away. "I can't adapt my wants merely to suit you, Lesh. You know that, don't you?" He put his primary arm under the status badge on the front of his robe. "You do know that."

"If Nara-Lim were to discover—"

"Discover what?"

"Certain things," Lesh said petulantly.

"Lesh, you forget who you are." This was harshly said, and to emphasize the harshness Navbe put both auxiliary arms outside of his robe, thumbs twitching.

"You will do as you wish," Ambassador Lesh allowed, in a defeated tone. "You will be shown to your Terrace House."

"Oh, you may lead the way," Navbe said maliciously. It pleased him to take vengeance on Lesh by making him do servant's work, lower status servant's work.

"As you say," Lesh said tightly.

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"I have not pleased you?" the companion asked anxiously.

"Does it matter?"

"I have tried to do as you wish. What more do you want of me?" The great sad eyes hovered over him.

"What are you doing off your mat?" Navbe asked, entirely out of patience.

"You are not pleased with me. What must I do?" Even the downy antlers quivered with emotion.

"Do not fret. You were all compliance. Return to your mat." But even as he said it he was annoyed afresh. The children had not wanted him; they had fought him with their hands and new antlers as well as struggling and crying out when he assaulted them. This creature had accepted him, making no more than a whimper at the worst of it and looking with dumb reproachful eyes as it was ravished.

"I must please you."

"Then go to your mat!" With this he turned away and had the satisfaction of hearing the soft sounds as the companion curled on the mat at the foot of his bed. There was vulnerability after all.

"Companion," he said without turning or rising.

"Yes," answered the eager voice in the gloom.

"You will learn to please me. It is that we are different in our ways. In time we will grow accustomed to one another."

There was relief in the little voice as it answered. "Oh, yes. There is plenty of time. I will learn. It is a promise. I will be as you want me."

As Navbe fell into sleep, he knew that the companion would learn. He would see to it.

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Nara-Lim and the visitors were disturbed when they made the perfunctory five-day visit. There was a lingering pain in the eyes of the companion, an elusive sorrow that they could not understand. Questioned in private, the companion said: "We are different. That is the trouble. It will take time."

"You are well, then?" Nara-Lim asked, uneasy without knowing why. He felt something he had not felt before, an oppressive air, a touch of hidden fury. He did not have a name for it, but he was afraid that the companion did.

"I am well." The companion turned its eyes away, looking toward Navbe across the terrace.

"Is there some trouble?" pursued Nara-Lim.

"Just that we are strange to one another. I am learning to ... please him." The trouble in the deep eyes faded. "He has promised to teach me and keep me by him forever. He promised."

Nara-Lim nodded, and felt that he ought to be satisfied: "It is probably as you say. They are not as we are."

The companion came near to Nara-Lim. It gestured formally, a pale imitation of Navbe. "He is my master, Nara-Lim, and I am his companion. I must be his way now."

"Yes," said Nara-Lim with equal formality. "That is the way of companions." But he was still unsure.

"Come, you will talk with him. You will see how much he cares for me and how great is his esteem for me. I am fortunate indeed in this master." So saying, the companion led Nara-Lim across the terrace to where Navbe stood, surrounded by Papi, a gargoyle surrounded by fauns.

When the visit was concluded, Nara-Lim went away with the rest, fearing that his gift had been a betrayal to his people. He had seen the look in the Janif's eyes, the contempt of his manner, and had heard him say fleetingly to Lesh that it would be welcome to him to be among civilized beings again. He had issued the binding orders himself, and felt no doubt at the time, but seeing the companion with the Janif now, he feared.

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"Another postponement!" Navbe snarled, hurling the directive to the floor. His sensors writhed on his hands and his tongue flicked uneasily over his outer lips.

"What delay?" asked the companion meekly. It had seen fury in Navbe's stride when he had left Ambassador Lesh, and could feel the rage that consumed its master.

"I am not summoned back ..." He broke off, realizing who he was answering. "It is not important to you."

The companion came to Navbe's side, its soft clothes whispering as it moved. "This thing has disturbed you. Let me bind your brow, or bathe you."

Navbe tore the delicate primary hands from his forehead. "No!" He stormed across the room. "I do not want you sniveling around me!"

The companion was shocked. "But I am here ..."

"I don't want you here!" Navbe punctuated this with a blow, and was rewarded with a moan. "Go away. Go bother someone else."

"But I can't," the companion said softly. "I was made to be your companion, and I serve no other. I cannot leave you."

Navbe turned murderously on it. "Then keep out of my way."

"As you wish," the companion whispered unhappily.

"And be silent!"

Then he sat on the reclining cushions and thought. The delaying order was not entirely unexpected, but it angered him. There was not reason enough to refuse him the right to return to Jan. To be left on this outpost world with talkative pets was driving him distracted. He pulled at the directive with all four hands. The children could not have betrayed him. They were too frightened and too badly hurt. And for that they would have ordered him exterminated, not exiled. He feared that they might delay him forever, shifting him from remote world to remote world until his name had no power and his status was reduced to nothing. He scuffed at the tattered directive. That some low status clerk had sent it only made matters worse.

"Would you want food, my master?" came the question from the far corner of the room.

"No." There had to be something he could do to force the issue. He would protest to Secretary Vlelt. It was a risky business but he was not without status, and the Secretary might listen to him if he were careful in his phrasing. He made up his mind to work out a plea that very evening.

"May I help you?" the companion asked, the ghost of a voice in the gathering dusk.

"Come here," Navbe commanded, and when the companion was beside him, he sank all his hands into the young flesh.

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It was Ambassador Lesh who gave him the news that the Secretary had called him back to Jan.

"When?" the Undersecretary demanded urgently.

"As soon as possible." There was an expression on the Ambassador's face that might almost be disgust. "He needs your services, it would seem."

"How many days before I must depart?" Navbe had unwittingly shown his interest in the order and felt that he had to brazen it out.

"Four days, Undersecretary. I think you can be ready in that time."

Navbe scowled. It was more than he was willing to tolerate, this superior attitude from an inferior. He would have something to say about it when he got back to Jan.

"The Terrace House is yours until you leave, Undersecretary." Lesh started to move away.

"I will expect you to prepare my belongings for departure," Navbe said smoothly. "All things suitably crated for the journey. That will include the bolts of cloth given me by the Papi, and that worked stone." It had been in the back of his mind to bring these products to the attention of the Merchant Council. That Ambassador Lesh had not done so would be a mark against his record.

"And the companion."

Navbe was getting out of patience with Lesh. "Send it back to its people. What good is it to me?"

"I can't do that." Ambassador Lesh turned on the Undersecretary. "It has been made for you, and it is yours. If you abandon it, it will die. It cannot go back to its people." The heat in his words alarmed Navbe. He had been aware that Lesh was too wrapped up in the Papi but had not thought it was this far gone. He would have to recommend treatment when he saw the Representative Master.

"Calm yourself, Ambassador. You make too much of these creatures. Certainly they are pleasing to look at, and they have their uses, but like all domestic livestock, they will transfer their allegiance in time." He put the directive in his sleeve. "Well, you will be busy the next few days, preparing to send me off." There was a quiet threat in his next words. "I don't imagine you will mention the companion to the Secretary. For the same reason, I will not mention the unwillingness you have shown in the exploitation of the crafts of the Papi. They are worth a lot. Were you saving them for yourself?" Then he stood back.

The Ambassador's auxiliary hands grew livid, but he controlled himself enough to say: "I will say nothing." It was only when Navbe had walked away from him that he dared to ask: "How *did* you get to those children?"

Klin Navbe only laughed.

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All his things were packed. Navbe surveyed the mound of crates in front of the door to the Terrace House and was satisfied. As last he was going back to Jan, where he would be with intelligent beings once again. He felt cleaner, better than he had since his arrival on Papill. It would be so little time now. He would be with real people.

Ambassador Lesh was not there, nor had Navbe seen him at any time the past two days. Such was the way of those of low status: when challenged, they hid. It was part of the natural cowardice of the stratum.

Behind him, Navbe sensed the companion, standing helplessly amid the desolation of the rooms. For the last day or so it had wandered disconsolately from room to room as the contents were crated and put outside the door. Now it stood, bewildered, looking at Navbe.

"Don't worry," Navbe said without turning to it. "I'll leave you a present."

"Leave me?" asked the Papi, uncomprehendingly.

"You'll need something to live on. All right. I'll arrange it with Lesh." His mouth puckered at the thought.

"No." It was a little word, barely said, as the companion sank to the floor, its huge eyes glazed as with a fever.

Navbe twisted in impatience. It was always this way with house animals. "You'll be fine," he told the companion, joviality in his manner to conceal his impatience. "You knew I was going away. Don't let it bother you so much." He nudged the huddled figure at his feet with his boot.

Four eager hands grabbed his leg through the folds of his robe. "Take me. Take me. Don't leave me here. You can't leave me here."

Disgusted, Navbe shook the foot free of the desperate fingers. "Don't be foolish," he snapped, striding back to the door.

"I belong to you," the companion said. "I was made to be part of you. You must take me with you." There was anguish in the little face now, and foreboding.

"I am tired of this," Navbe announced. "If you want to see me off, you may follow me to the landing place. If not . . ." He shrugged elegantly.

"There is nowhere I can go," murmured the companion to itself.

"Nara-Lim will take care of you. Lesh will see to it. Now, I want no more of this. You served me adequately, and you'll be paid. Nara-Lim can manage the fee, if you like." He rang a bell for the servants, knowing they would be slow.

"It doesn't matter," the companion said blankly, looking away from the Undersecretary. "If you go, it doesn't matter."

Why is it these animals take everything so personally? Navbe asked himself as the servants came along the terrace. "Here, you," he called to them. "These are to go to the landing place. Nothing is to be dropped or broken, do you understand?"

The crates were loaded into the boxlike rolling platforms and dragged away from the Ambassador's house to the landing field.

"Come along," Navbe said to his companion. "Walk out with me, why don't you?"

Numbly the companion stood, and numbly it followed Navbe across Ambassador Lesh's estate.

The squat craft waited, a mushroom ready to assault the sky. Around it Papi and Janif workers were loading and pampering the machine, readying it for the surge upward, away from the soft mists of Papill for the bright scraps of light that were stars.

Ambassador Lesh was not there.

A low status officer examined the directive Navbe held out to him and made him welcome with becoming deference, concealing his hands and moving his mouth as little as possible. This was much more to Navbe's liking.

"I will board soon," he informed the officer and was pleased to see the officer rigid. As he turned back to his companion, he felt the first tuggings of civilization on him and found the sensation a warm delight.

"Well, companion, here is what I've promised you," he said, handing the creature a voucher and the

border from one of his sleeves. The companion took the sleeve and pressed it to its face. The voucher slid away on the wind, unheeded.

"I forbid you to behave in this way," Navbe said to the companion as it looked at the ship with hopeless eyes. He found the manner attractive, even stimulating, but it was a feeling he could not afford now.

"Don't go," whispered the companion. "Or take me with you. I will die without you."

That was truly too much for Navbe. He wrinkled his face in frustration, and then, with a half-smile he said: "But I'll be back, of course. I'll want you here when I get back."

Joy transformed the delicate face. "When? When? I cannot live long without you, but if you are coming back, I will try ..."

It was remarkable how easily the creature was fobbed off. Navbe chided himself for not thinking of it sooner. "I will be here in the season of the Amber Rivers." That was sufficiently far in the future that the companion would have time to forget him.

"I will try to live until then," the companion said eagerly. "I will try. It is long, but you will be back." It clutched the sleeve border fiercely. "I promise I will wait for you. I will live until you come back."

"Good," said Navbe absently as he watched the last of his crates moved on board.

"Until the time of the Amber Rivers. It will be hard, but I will live."

"Fine, fine." The Undersecretary put his badge of office in place and went to the boarding ramp. The young officer stood waiting for him. Without a backward look he went aboard and the door swung closed behind him.

The companion waited in the landing place where Navbe had left it, the sleeve border in its hand, thinking of the reunion that would come in the season of Amber Rivers. Somehow it would have to live that long, for the joy of its master, for the better part of itself.

When the craft rose into the air, it covered the companion with dust.

The End