

*being a fan work set in the world of C.J.Cherryh's Foreigner*

# CONNECTION

KATHRYN WOODS PRENTICE





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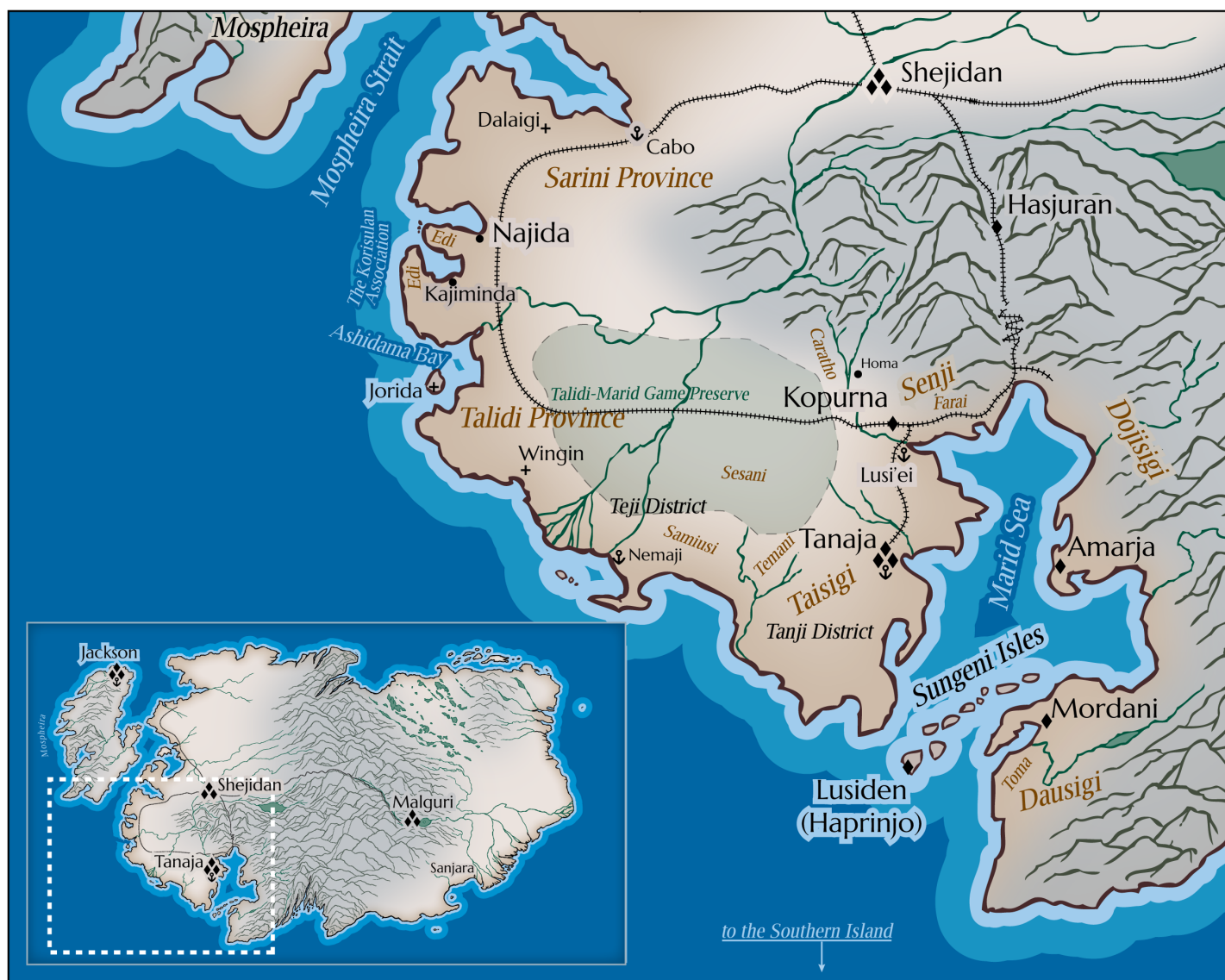
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*To my mother & father, my husband, my daughter, and my various friends — because you all graciously endured me talking endlessly about this story while I was writing it, it is better for it, and I am forever grateful.*

*And to C.J. Cherryh, the pathfinder — I cannot possibly thank you sufficiently for taking us with you into this wonderful place of yours.*



## PROLOGUE

---

*Bren-paidhi, Lord of Najida Estate, to Ilisidi, aiji-dowager, Lord of the East  
Aiji-ma, I was delighted to learn that you are visiting Machigi-aiji in the Marid.  
My staff tells me you traveled by ship, no less, but I was not surprised to learn that you  
were among the first to test the new passenger route from your port at Sanjara to  
Tanaja. You have ever been a pathfinder.*

Bren Cameron, the translator and lord of his own lands on the Najida peninsula, leaned back and took a sip of his tea. He tapped the end of his flattened steel quill against the desk thoughtfully and carefully, not wishing to splatter ink. His was an unusual situation, being the only human allowed to live anywhere on the mainland of the planet, much less own an actual *estate*, and it had very much to do with history.

Some two hundred years ago, the human colony ship *Phoenix* had experienced an anomaly while traveling in folded space. Whatever had happened — and even now no one had a clear idea of what that had been — the ship had found itself so far of course that none of the visible stars matched up to anything in the whole catalogue of human cosmology.

They had, after some trials and tribulations, found a star very much of the sun of the now-lost planet of their origin; desperately low on fuel as resources, they had traveled to its system and found a habited planet capable of supporting oxygen-breathing, carbon-based life.

And it did support life - sentient life: the atevi, in the main tongue and lingua francs of their world, a humanoid species just entering its own steam age when the aliens arrived.

Those first humans had built an orbiting space station and the *Phoenix* had departed, leaving a small population on the station while the ship itself left the system to search for some marker, some way home. The initial station population had, after debate and conflict, abandoned the station for the planet below, falling to the earth of the atevi in their petal-sailed capsules.

Two hundred years later and the descendants of the first human refugees from space were now safely confined to the island of Mospheira, after a disastrous first attempt at integration had failed so spectacularly that the War of the Landing, as it was called, almost wiped out the human population.

*I know you even as you read this, you are probably thinking, “shameless flatterer, that paidhi!”, and perhaps this is so. But over the years, I have come to feel true admiration for your intelligence, your skill, and above all your ability to recognize an opportunity and seize it. As a human, I lack the ways to convey this admiration in a truly atevi way and so must do it, as always, with too many words, which I am sure come across as ingratiating. But aiji-ma, it is true. It is the only way I have to express my regard for what you have achieved.*

*It was the wiring, Bren thought, pausing to take another sip of tea. It was always the wiring. Atevi were just human enough, in culture and form — never mind*

that they even the shortest one of them was at least a head taller than the tallest human, their skins jet black, and their eyes not only gold but chatoyant — that the first humans had made the almost deadly mistake of thinking of them as *friends*.

“Friendship” - there wasn’t even a word for it in Ragi. Instead, it was “man’chi”, that homing instinct that turned an ateva instinctively towards a leader.

The gap was insurmountable. Humans couldn’t keep from yearning to call their atevi acquaintances *friends*, and atevi couldn’t help but see these child-sized people as capable of understanding how atevi *associated* through man’chi.

After the war, the Treaty restricted this possible point of failure to one human and one human only, the paidhi — the translator — whose role it was to be fluent in the language, understand the biological and cultural divide, and control the flow of technology to the atevi. It was the paidhi’s job to keep the pace of change constrained, slow enough that it would not destabilize atevi society a second time and bring about a second war, one the humans would most assuredly not survive.

In the two hundred years since the first meeting between human and ateva, however, the transfer of technology was largely complete. Bren Cameron, once simply the interface between the human government on Mospheira, had been folded into atevi society itself.

He had gone native.

*I am perhaps bold in advancing this opinion, aiji-ma, but failing to make you the aiji of the aishidi'tat was perhaps the best decision those fools of the past legislatures in the capital have made. Had you been aiji of the aishidi'tat, aiji-ma, I fear you would have been trapped in Shejidan, and not free to move in the way that you have in fact moved, to the benefit of all of the people. That you are now able to sail to Tanaja and enjoy the respect of Machigi of the Marid is testament to the effectiveness of that freedom.*

Gone native indeed — his human detractors on the Island would say so, seeing him holding not only his title as paidhi-aiji — translator to the ruler of the Western Association, one Tabini — but also a lord in his own right, of this his estate of Najida on the main continent’s west coast. As if that was not enough, Tabini had made him Lord of the Heavens, granting him as his personal domain the whole of the stars above.

Not to mention his quietly scandalous relationship with Jago, one of his two senior personal guard, and a member of the Assassins’ Guild to boot. It wasn’t “love” that he shared with her — he still, after all these years, wasn’t sure what it was.

What it was, was...complicated.

But it was, ironically, his inability to fully understand — on an emotional or instinctual level — that had made him so useful to Tabini and, in particular, Ilisidi, Tabini’s formidable grandmother and lord in her own right - one might even say “aiji” and not have the wrong of it — of the whole of the East. He could, at times, see *through* the emotional issues that clouded atevi interactions, specifically because he could not see them *at all*. This blindness, combined with his quick wit, his masterful diplomacy, and his exceptional mastery of the Ragi language, had allowed him to achieve breakthroughs in previously intractable disputes. He had not a small part in the Association’s current explosive growth and prosperity.



*I am happy to report that Lord Geigi sent word to me this morning: the Marid's team of meteorologists onboard the station correctly identified a large developing storm that would have assuredly caused much damage to freighters already enroute to Sanjara. They not only successfully rerouted the ships around the storm, but also ensured that east coast communities have been warned in time for them to minimize damage when the winds come ashore. The people of the Marid have lost no time in embracing the new educational institutions you sponsored and the work of their young students is bearing admirable fruit.*

Case in point the first, the space station orbiting above was atevi now, their share of the heavens - operated in partnership with humans, but undisputedly theirs. The human government was simply not designed for agile, swift reaction, and even now a full five years after the return of the *Phoenix* to the atevi solar system, still did not have ground-to-station capabilities. It was the atevi who operated all five shuttles that the world had. It has been Bren who had urged Tabini to grasp the opportunity, and grasp it he had.

Case in point the second: the region of the south of the main continent was an association of five major clans and all of their septs, which — after it had been forcibly made a part of the planet's main government, the Western Association, by Tabini-aiji's father and predecessor — had been nothing but a source of rebellion and coup, highly disruptive. The Marid, it was called, had laid claim on the continent's west coast and developed enmity with the people there, especially the clans of the Gan and the Edi, the original inhabitants of Mospheira, who had been resettled on the coast there, but who had could not truly be said to have actually *settled*. They had, in fact, become something like pirates, in constant conflict with the established lords of the region but even more so with the Marid, whose repeated attempts to make inroads on the coast they rebuffed, often violently. It was a long-standing feud, and one not legally sanctioned through the only legitimate arbitrator of inter-atevi violence, the Assassins' Guild. A mess, in short.

The Marid had been a constant source of conflict, both internally from endless infighting between its clans and in its reaching out to influence the rest of the world, by which it had directly sponsored or supported not just one but *two* coups against Tabini-aiji. Bren had been embroiled in both of these and had just barely survived, the most recent one reaching from the Marid across the intervening Sarini province and quite literally into his very own house.

*I am also very happy to write that the region between the Marid and Sarini province here in the west has been, to the best of my knowledge, very quiet. Though I cannot discount that surviving elements of the Shadow Guild may still be present, it seems that they have been driven far enough underground as to present no further difficulties. With any luck, such elements — if they do in fact exist — may peacefully be absorbed into the lands in which they fight themselves and, giving up their vain desire for power, finally find peace. In this, aiji-ma, I am sure you find me hopelessly naive.*

An offshoot of the legitimate Assassins' Guild had split from that traditionally apolitical organization, a largely independent body that mediated legally lethal disputes

between persons unable (or unwilling) to resolve their difficulties otherwise, and which was responsible for ensuring that collateral damage to non-involved persons and property was minimized. The Assassins' Guild remained apolitical so that it could serve as an agent of balance within the aishidi'tat. However, this offshoot was very, very *very* willing to interfere in politics for its own gain and had not shown itself particularly concerned with finesse, either. This "Shadow Guild", as Bren had named it — had manipulated the infighting clans of the Marid into that second coup. Then, when that coup failed, the Shadow Guild had attempted to engineer an assassination of the Marid's new lord, Machigi of Taisigi clan, in order to seize power in the region themselves.

At only twenty-two years old, the young lord had earned himself no small number of detractors when he boldly, forcefully, and fairly unilaterally seized power there, and undoubtedly the Shadow Guild had supporters in its attempt to overthrow him. They had done so by doing some spectacularly illegal things, such as placing indiscriminate explosives in a public road and kidnapping both a local child and a human woman — Bren's ex-fiancee and his brother's partner, no less — and attempting to make it seem as if Machigi were the source of those actions. The legitimate Assassins' Guild in Shejidan had fallen for it, and had moved with swiftness to assassinate Machigi and his forces, thus becoming yet another catspaw of the Shadow Guild.

*Almost* assassinated Machigi, that was. But Ilisidi, the aiji-dowager, lord of the East, grandmother of Tabini and almost — almost — aiji of the Western Association herself, had seen through it. Neither she nor Bren had thought Machigi that phenomenally stupid — everything that he had done thus far had indicated that the man had a quick, calculating intelligence. So Ilisidi had sent Bren in as her negotiator to meet with him and offer him an alliance with her as lord of the East. She would, through her influence in Shejidan as Lord of the East (and Tabini's grandmother), call off the Shejidan Guild, make the Marid the linchpin of sea-borne trade between the West and East, make a place for its people in the orbiting station above, and all of this under the condition that Machigi fully seize control over the whole of the Marid and give up the Marid's claim on the west coast. This is what she had sent Bren in to negotiate on her behalf. *So, in other words, simplicity itself.* Certainly, Ilisidi had expected him to succeed — she always did — where everyone else thought he was committing suicide.

But Bren had done it — he had gained Machigi's agreement. Such was his value. Two years ago it was. Not only had Ilisidi accomplished what her aiji husband, her aiji son, and her aiji grandson had not been able to do and finally brought the South into balance with both the East and the West, but she had also had engineered lands and lordships for the unsettled Edi and Gan on the west coast, settling them once and for all.

*Should the topic happen to arise when you are guest in Machigi-aiji's house, I would like to reassure you and him and his council that the Edi and the Gan have become most satisfactory neighbors. For two years, now, they have been fully subject to the law of the aishidi'tat and, I am happy to report, seem to be growing very well into their roles as fully-fledged members. Certainly, the older generations still have their hide-bound ways — the Grandmothers are both as still as forceful as ever, aiji-ma — but the youngsters had clearly been studying the Western court and its ways. I am gratified to observe that neither the Gan nor the Edi are assimilating as much as they are incorporating — they are maintaining their traditional ways while taking to*



*courtly behavior and processes very well. I believe they will bring a lively diversity to Shejidan that will serve the Association well.*

*Aiji-ma, at some point in the future convenient to you and your staff, I would very much like to present to you some of the truly rare and fantastic textiles the Edi and the Gan heretofore have only produced in quantities small enough to keep entirely within their families. Now that they have land of their own and are reaping the peaceful rewards of their membership in the aishidi'tat, they are beginning to produce these textiles in large enough quantities to support a limited export. As you are the principle architect of their prosperity, aiji-ma, it seems only fair that you be the first from outside the region to hold these precious works in your hands.*

Bren did truly hope that the peace that had settled over the western part of the continent might, just maybe, last for a little while. He had not failed to be caught up in every single outbreak of violence, it seemed, and in fact his cozy little coastal estate had suffered severely for it — an explosion in the house had destroyed his priceless stained glass window, and his garden had almost entirely been wrecked. The only silver lining in that particular cloud was that he was able to effect some improvements in the name of reconstruction, expanding the available guest quarters and even constructing a hall large enough for events, as well as improving the view down to the tidy little bay at the base of his estate's grounds. It was shaping up to be truly wonderful and it was all his.

*I would be greatly honored if, after your visit to the Marid, you might consider gracing Najida with your presence — I have recently completed renovations and would treasure the opportunity to shamelessly show them off to you on behalf of my staff and the people of the township who put so much work into the house and its grounds. Please consider the inestimable honor it would bring to us if you should be our first guest in my renewed home.*

As much as he served Tabini-aiji and the Western Association, Bren would gladly die for the old woman; she only had to say the word, and it would be done.

*Signed, Bren-paidhi.*

**I**  
**KELIKIIN IN THE WAKE**

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## Chapter 1 - From the Dictionary

**a·i·ji /aɪ'i:dʒi:/** > 1. **n.** ruler of a multi-clan, multi-domain atevi association. > 2. **suf.** title for a person recognized as lord or leader of one's clan or sept. > formal **suf.** title applied to the name of the holder of one's *loyalty* or loyal service, used as verbal confirmation or affirmation of that *loyalty* (c.f. man'chi). > 3. informal **n.** term for a person born without the ability to feel upward *loyalty* but who receives it from others (not applicable to pathological isolation; c.f., hadjaijid). ■ **neutral pl.** a·i·ji·in /aɪ'i:dʒi'i:n/. See vol. 2 for an overview of Ragi numerical philosophy & court requirements, prefixes, affixes, and infixes.

- students are reminded that term in *italics* do not have one-to-one correspondence with Mosphei' and require further reading. Proceed with caution -

### - Notice -

**Access to the dictionary to the general public has been granted by amendments to the Treaty of the Landing as specified in the Restoration Accords. Users are strongly encouraged to make use of all available resources, including histories and commentary, in international communication. Please direct questions, comments and concerns to the Mospheira State Department at 5-35-1739.**

### - Notice -

## Chapter 2 - Disaster

*He is going in and out of consciousness — it's a splash of water that brings him to. It is dark and yet there is a bright, roaring orange monster nearby. The deck is tilting beneath him, back and forth. What happened? An explosion, he recalls fuzzily, as the ship's sailors had tried to wave off the smaller boat that had made a run in at them. He couldn't recall seeing anyone aboard the little craft — it was odd, that. It is hard to remember, because his head is a mass of pain, discordantly clanging like a broken bell.*

*More water hits him in the face. Is his aishid trying to wake him? He blinks and licks his lips, tastes copper and salt. He does not see anyone. Where is his aishid? I ordered them to protect the dowager, he remembers, but nothing after that. Then the deck, tilting again, does not rock back the other way. It keeps tilting, tilting and he is sliding and now falling and the orange beast is reaching out for him with yellow and white teeth and the heat hits him in the face and*

*he is in the air and*

*somehow he hits the water where it is not burning. He just manages to take a breath before the sea closes over his head. The sea is moving, it is alive, it has just swallowed him and now swirls him this way and that in its mouth, tasting him on all sides. It is getting ready to force him down its gullet.*

*He looks up and sees the surface of the ocean from below: on fire, it is the only light there is. It is "up" and he knows he has to move that way. He strikes out with his arms and legs and somewhat to his surprise, they obey. He remembers how to swim, but the blanket of orange above him seems to be receding. It is the weight of his boots, he realizes, pulling him down into the deep. His lungs begin to burn as he kicks them off and, finally, he is able to make headway upwards.*

*The current has borne him beyond the fire and he breaks through into the air just as his vision is beginning to dim, howling for life. He looks around as the waves lift him, drop him, slap him in the face, and sees the fire on the water and beyond that, illuminated by the glow, his ship. The sea is pulling him away from it, farther and farther. He cannot draw a breath to let out a cry — it is just enough to get air through the froth of water that is trying to force itself down his throat. "Aiji-ma!" He hears an anguished voice call out across the water. Tema-ji, he thinks. At least one of his aishid lives and it is the best news he has had for, oh, the last five minutes, which to his aching head make up the entirety of the universe.*

*It is so, so dark — full dark, now. It is a night of the new moon, and a cloudy one at that. He can no longer see the ship and the fire itself is but a small orange blob: he is being swept out to sea. It is not a good place to be.*

*Something touches his fingers. He jerks back, thinking that it is one of the creatures of the ocean coming to determine if he is edible. But it is only a large piece of wood, probably blown out of the ship. It is large enough to climb upon and allows him to keep most of his body out of the water, even though it heaves alarmingly, tossed about on the waves like the matchstick that it is.*

*Separation from his aishid tears at him, a great gaping void. Whither will they turn without him? But I am still aiji! Some part of him insists. Aiji of this little piece of wood and of this large, large sea. He can no longer hear the cries from the ship or see the fire: it is pitch black, all around him, and he is alone.*

## Chapter 3 - Rescue

Machigi woke to the sound of waves gently lapping against something that sounded wooden and hollow. Incongruously, there appeared to be a wall next to him in the water. No, wait, it was curved. Was there such a thing as a curved wall? There was a flapping sound and he looked further up to see a pale-colored canvas sail fluttering in the breeze. Comprehension dawned: *a boat!*

He was half soaking wet and half crusted with dried salt, still clinging somehow, despite having been asleep, to the piece of wood that had found him in the dark during the night. It seemed to him to be early morning now, judging from the pale light the flooded the world. He struggled to push up against the board despite its attempts to jiggle out from under him — he tried to gain height, some sort of vantage, craning upwards, and found himself looking into a blurry face. “Nadi?” Said the face, and now his vision cleared. He was looking at a woman, her expression one of unconcealed concern.

A swell abruptly heaved him upward and the wood tipped alarmingly and threw him into the side of the boat. He grunted and scrabbled at it, fingers unclawing themselves to grasp the lip of the boat’s side. The sailor in the boat caught him by the back of his shirt, almost lost him when the swell subsided and tried to suck and scrape him back down against the boat’s side — the boat tipped and for a moment he thought it would capsize on him, but she gave a mighty heave just as the swell returned and he thumped, hard, tumbling into an ungainly heap against the inside of the boat, still tilted at an angle.

The boat righted itself neatly and the inside became the bottom, punching his breath out of him as he rolled again. He untangled his limbs and sat up, struggling to regain a sense of *what* and *when* and maybe, if he was very lucky, *where*. He found himself in the bow of the boat — a small sailboat, really, of the kind handily worked by one person and indeed, there was only one other person aboard. His gaze settled on the sailor, who had reached out to rest a hand on the line that kept the sail boom secured while the wind was tugging at the canvas sail above their heads.

She appeared to be a young adult, maybe about his age. Her black hair, tied loosely at the nap of her neck with what appeared to be rough-spun cord, had been bleached in streaks by the sun. The breeze whipped several loose strands around the edges of her face, which she ignored. She was wearing simple seafarer’s clothing: a plain shirt over un-dyed trews — if he had to guess, he would say they were fashioned around her waist with a string. A commoner, a fisher most like, with a sturdy build and strong-looking arms. He did not think she was from Taisigi lands — something perhaps about the bones of her face marked her as non-local. Other than that, though, there was nothing particularly remarkable about her at all except for her eyes: they were disconcertingly keen and an odd, mottled shade of gold. They reminded him of an autumn sunset on water as seen through dappled shade.

“Nadi?” She said again. Her voice was a dusky contralto and he realized he was staring.

“One is grateful—” he wanted to say, but his voice came out as a unintelligible croak. She wordlessly handed him a canteen and he took it more eagerly than he



wanted to, drinking from it with a greed that would have appalled the staff at Tanaja. *Gods less fortunate!* He could not recall having ever drunk sweeter.

While he was drinking, the sailor moved to the boat's stern, so surely that the boat barely rocked. With one hand on the tiller, she took the boom line the other. She unwrapped several turns of the line from around its starboard cleat and, with a neat flick of the wrist, freed it. The sail immediately filled, rounding out into a curve, and the boom swung over to port. The sailboat began to make way and the piece of wood that had saved his life dwindled in view. He would not miss it.

"One is grateful, nadi." Now, properly lubricated, his voice worked. He made as if to move sternward to return the canteen, but she said, "please keep it, nadi. You will need more water. It is best if you remain still for now." In truth, he was grateful she had said this, because all his body was beginning to speak to him in a most uncomplimentary and insulting fashion, and he was glad to lean back where the sides came together and the bow made a shape that seemed to fit his back very well.

The boat rolled gently as it moved through the water and almost lulled him back to sleep, but he had no intention of sleeping in such an ignorant state. So, dismissing his body's demands, he took a few minutes to get his bearings.

He was in a sailboat to be sure — the large sail attached to the mainmast was supplemented with a smaller triangular jib, a classic profile common to boats of this type along the mainland's coasts. It was moderately equipped, a pair of oars neatly tucked into the side at his left hand, along with with hand-held fishing gear that confirmed to him his suspicion of her vocation. On his right hand, there were a few other boxes, two small barrels, a net neatly folded into a cube with a smaller hand-net laid atop it (more proof, if he had needed it, that she was a fisher), two large coils of rope, a large bundle of what appeared to be seaweed wrapped up in string, and some rolled cloth that he supposed was blankets or possibly extra clothing. Along the boat's centerline, just off to one side of the mast, was a longer cylinder of oiled canvas with grommets sewn in along the one long edge that was visible. These seemed to match up with pegs around the boat's gunnels; he realized that it was a rain cover that likely doubled as a rain catcher. Everything was neatly lashed into place with extra cord. A broad hat woven out of long grasses sat in the bottom of the stern at the sailor's side, going unused at the moment.

*What* thusly satisfied, for now, and already guessing it to be early morning — *when* completed, *such progress I make!* — he moved on to *where*. Unfortunately, he was able to scan the entire horizon and see nothing but water. There was no land, which was bad, and also no other sea-going vessels, which was worse. Surely his aishid, if it had survived, had gotten the dowager safely into port and had sent out search and rescue parties. *This must be so*, he thought; it was necessary to him that he think so. *But wherever they are, this boat is not.*

Perhaps, then, it was time to add another element: *who*.

## Chapter 4 - Introduction

When she had told him to stay still in the boat's bow, her accent confirmed his suspicion about her non-locality, but he could not for his life place it.

*I will need to take care not to reveal who I am.* It helped that his shirt — lace hanging in rags from collar and cuffs — and dress trousers were a wreck and that his hair, having lost its ribbon, had come completely unbraided and lay about his shoulders in an unconstrained manner that would have appalled his staff. In short, he in no ways appeared noble; perhaps this would work in his favor. But it was absolutely vital that he knew in whose company he had found himself. *Best be plain, like a commoner, and direct.*

"Who are you, nadi?" He asked.

She tilted her head, considering him. "The owner of this sailboat," she replied. "Who are *you*, nadi?"

*If she will not give her name, I am not obliged to make one up. Let us both be cagey, then.* "A traveler," he said cautiously. "Become separated from his ship."

A raised eyebrow as if to say, *well, obviously.* "How?"

"Pirates," he said. He had always found it helpful to mix in a little truth *now* if one thought one might need to lie *later*.

"From a large ship?" She asked. He hesitated and she added, "The piece of wood one found you on, nadi. It was large."

"Yes," he said.

"What happened?"

He did not like that she had taken control, that she was the one asking questions and he the one answering. *It should be the other way around.*

"They rammed the ship. One was thrown overboard." Before she could speak, he got in a question of his own. "Where are you from, nadi? From Tanji?" Even though he knew that she was not from there, nor from any of his lands.

"As you are the passenger, best restrict yourself to providing answers for now, nadi," she said firmly. "Your time for questions may come later, if one is satisfied."

It was shocking. *She dares—!* He fumed silently.

Something of the thought must have flashed across face despite his best efforts to remain impassive, for she raised an eyebrow again and chuckled. "Oh, does one challenge you, na...di?" Her eyes sparkled, challenging him to supply the missing consonant.

*Impertinent woman!* He refused to take the bait and instead took a breath to steady himself. "It is not important," he said.

"Certainly." The dance had not left her eyes.

He decided, for his immediate safety, to change the subject and perhaps obtain a clue indirectly. He indicated a carving, a geometric band, stylized flowers and shells and waves, around the base of the mast just below the boom. From the quality of it and the other decoration around the vessel, some master carver had worked here — it was genuine artistry, exquisite. It looked too new to be something she'd inherited from generations past. And again this begged the question: *Who is she, that such a master would work on a simple sailboat like this?* "It is lovely work. One has never seen anything like it. Is that common, where you come from?"

She shrugged and again, failed to accept the hook. "It is one's own," she said. She reached down beneath her seat and produced a wicked little knife. He did not need to touch it to know that she kept it sharp. "Sometimes, when waiting for the fish to bite, one has a great deal of free time." She wagged the blade and it winked in the sunlight, and now he knew she was armed.

But he barely marked it. "Yours?" He raised an eyebrow and leaned forward to take another look and no, he had not been mistaken before. He could not help but be deeply impressed. "This is first-class work, nadi!"

She tilted her head. "How would you know?"

*Gods less fortunate!* He was utterly speechless, having so neatly been caught out, this had never happened before in his life, he blamed the explosion, there must have been head trauma —

She laughed and bowed her head, tucking her knife back into its storage spot. "You need not answer, nadi." She sobered up and said, "One thinks it would be best not to know, actually. One feels it would be safer for both of us if one did not know."

"Are you sure?" He still stung at having been bested. "Perhaps one might be worth a ransom," he suggested, irked.

"Oh? Perhaps one *should* call you 'nandi', then." She smiled. "No, such a thing is outside an acceptable world view. One is *not* a pirate."

*Oh?* "What are you, then?"

She pointed at the fishing gear. "A fisher will suffice."

"I know of no fisher who carves like that."

"Perhaps you do not know enough fishers."

He let out a snort of frustration. "But if there is a crisis in the boat between here and there," he complained. "If one needs to call out to you, one needs a name."

"Will not 'Fisher' do, nadi?"

"I suppose." It was not satisfactory. But then again, it was her boat. 'Fisher' it was.

"And perhaps, for safety's sake, I should simply call you 'You,' nadi," she said, using the impersonal, neutral, unnumbered pronoun. "In that way, there is no temptation to offer clues. One knows that you are important, by the way you hold yourself, by the way you speak. For your sake and one's own, one does not wish to know more."

For many years now, he was utterly unaccustomed to being called anything other than 'nandi' or, now, 'aiji-ma', which he had grown to like very much. So the simple 'nadi' had been grating enough, but 'You' — it was not just insulting and breathtakingly rude, it was downright *outrageous*.

And yet it was absolutely perfect for his present needs: to survive, incognito, long enough to make it home. He dipped his head, just the slightest bow. "Very well. One will be 'You'."

## Chapter 5 - Accommodation

Getting on towards mid-day, she passed him her hat. “Do not concern yourself for me. One is accustomed. One will put up the rain cover if the sun beats down overly.” He felt foolish wearing it, but it cut down the appalling amount of light that was going into his eyes. Then she broke out their luncheon and despite his hunger, there was nothing to recommend it. It was the dried fish from storage, more properly a jerky, barely seasoned and splintery in the mouth, washed down with water. He thought of sliced vegetables in a seasoned broth, seasonal game-and-grain richly sauced, of poached eggs, and fruit compote, and afterwards an elegant glass of brandy from an old vintage, taken in his favorite chair in the map room, in front of the great expanse of windows overlooking the bay. *His bay*. He wondered what the kitchen staff had prepared for the mid-day meal today. And who was eating it.

Still, it was nutrition. It was what his body needed, that, and the water — he hadn’t realized how dehydrated his night in the ocean had left him. And now that things were working, he realized that he had other needs. “One, ah —“

“Off the stern, please, nadi.” She locked down the tiller and moved forward, positioning herself in the bow and searching the horizon ahead to afford him privacy. Once he had relieved himself and rearranged his clothes — *his rags* — they switched back to their original places.

He wanted to replace his ruined, salt-encrusted clothes, and for that he would need to get back to his city. “One would be grateful if you would take one to Tanaja, Fisher. But at night,” he said as he sat back down in the bow.

Fisher shook her head. “That, one will not do, nadi. Choose another place.”  
“Why?”

“Let one simply say that it is outside of the permissible range, and one would prefer not to have to work one’s way out of that sea.” This did not at all have the ring of full truth to him. “One is also not certain that sailing directly into Tanaja Bay would be safe for either of us.”

He had been growing aware, for some time, of the fact that her speech was not the speech of a commoner. She had been using the indirect and polite “one” in place of the direct and simple “I”, and used formal modes of phrasing. She had done it so naturally that he himself had slipped into that mode, the mode of court, without realizing it. It was incongruous with the idea of her being a simple fisher, much less being a commoner of the Marid. And: “the permissible range,” she had said. So where, then, was she from? *She does not want to sail into the Marid Sea, for reasons that have to do with more than having to work against the wind and tide.*

He tilted his head. “Why would it not be safe?”

She gave him a level glance. “This morning, one noted the burn marks and splintering on the wood you were trying to use as a raft. As well as the considerable damage to your clothing which, though certainly ruined, appears to have been finely made. One surmises that *you*, at least, are no common sailor, and that you did not come to that situation by choice. And you asked one to take you in at night,” she added.

He remained silent. What was there to argue?

“Instead of the bay,” she continued. “One can take you to the coast south and west of the Marid Sea. Towards the western border of the Tanji District’s boundaries. It



would be a considerable distance for you, but an offset approach to Tanaja could be safer, perhaps? One suspects you have resources ashore that you could bring to bear, distance notwithstanding. It will take two days to reach the shore, to make landfall in the early hours of the third.”

*Two days! Unacceptable!* He looked at her, considering. She did look strong, but he was certain he was stronger. There were plenty of tools in the boat, plenty of cording and rope. He wouldn't even have to kill her — surely she would have to sleep, or at least nap, and as soon as she had closed her eyes he could overwhelm her, swiftly enough to keep her from getting to her knife. He could bind her, and take over the sailboat himself, release her once he'd gotten to shore. He had plenty of experience with small craft such as this and was confident he could do sail it.

But he was not precisely sure where he was, for one. And for another...*offset approach?* It was a tactical term. *She uses courtly forms of speech, weaves words into a net as well as any lord — better, even! — and now this? Who is this woman?*

Besides, the reason he had suggested Tanaja at nightfall was because he was uncertain of the situation there. *Someone* had attacked his ship, and the dowager as well. It might have been Edi or Gan pirates or any of the other innumerable bandits that plied the waters, but he doubted it. He suspected, rather, that it was someone closer to home. Someone who, despite the growing prosperity — or perhaps because of it — was deeply unhappy about his alliance with the East. Fisher was correct: strolling boldly into Tanaja without knowing the situation there or the disposition of his aishid was not wise.

He was not a superstitious number-counter, but when one had three reasons *not* do to something, one had better pay attention.

He continued to think about it while she patiently waited for him to make up his mind. If someone in the Marid had attempted to assassinate him, then that person or persons might now think that he was dead. They might be moving on to the next phase of their plan, whatever it was. Perhaps, in fact, it might be well to let them think that they had been successful, and get comfortable with their situation. They would be less likely to expect him if he appeared after a delay. *Two days might be about right.*

The situation was exquisitely ironic. He had supported, however ~~eleverly~~ indirectly, a coup against the aiji in Shejidan. And now there appeared to have been a coup — *a second one!* — against *him*. Ilisidi of Malguri had demanded that he take, and keep, control of the Marid as a condition of their alliance. And he had done it and secured that alliance...or so he had thought, right up until the moment, last night, when he had fallen into the heaving sea.

Assuming Ilisidi was safe, which he did, what would she do now, she who characteristically moved with such swiftness when times were unsettled? What would she do in reaction to his apparent lost of primacy here? Would it undo his association with her? He hoped that two days were enough to recover it. *And by all the gods fortunate, unfortunate, and unclear in their felicities, recover it I shall*, he told himself grimly. He felt the muscles at the edges of his jaw work as he ground his teeth together. *I shall reassert myself so assuredly that no one will ever, never or ever, attempt something like this again. Heads will roll, and those lucky enough to remain attached to the bodies of their birth will bow, so help me — my lords will bend the knee once and for all.* The thought of it, of confronting his enemies — and more particularly of *ending*

*them* — sent a thrill through his body. For the first time since Fisher had pulled him out of the water, he felt like himself.

Machigi looked up. “Very well,” he said to her. “One accepts.”

## Chapter 6 - Suspicion

“Fisher,” he said after a while. “Do you intend to stay awake until the day after tomorrow?”

She gave a minimal shrug. “One has done so before.”

“Let me take the tiller, from time to time,” he said. “One knows how to sail.”

She stared at him for a long time without speaking. He raised his hands. “One has agreed to your proposal,” he said. “One will by no means act against it. Your plan is safer; it is agreed. Besides, bringing the boat to the shore will require care. One would prefer you not to be exhausted at that point.” *Because the actual point is to get ashore in one piece.*

She remained silent. But just as he was sure she would refuse, she said, “very well. Can you sleep now?”

*Oh, great fortunate gods of earth and sea and sky, yes,* he wanted to say. But he simply nodded. She dipped her head in return. “Sleep, then,” she said. “Then I will give you a turn later and perhaps doze for a little while.” She tied down the tiller and, with his help, set up the sun shade part way so as to cast a little shadow where he head would go. He rearranged some of the cloth bundles into a pillow and lay himself down. And before he knew it, he was asleep.

*He was in the central garden-courtyard of the legislative building in Tanaja. He was inspecting, perhaps. Or touring. Or supervising. In his hazy dream-logic, the quest kept changing. It settled: he was searching. Something was lost, or forgotten, or it was something he had missed, and he by all means had to find it.*

*But he could not. He searched the garden from corner to corner, and he discovered that the last one opened up into another section of the garden that he knew had not been there previously. It was more akin to an arboretum and it made the garden bigger on the inside than the outside, with ranks of trees stretching out into the distance. If the thing he needed to find was out there somewhere, he despaired of finding it, for it was so vast. And so of course knew, in his heart of hearts, that the object of his quest was out there in the trees, and the only thing he found was that he had run into a deadline of which his dream-logic only now saw fit to inform him.*

*The world was shaking because had run out of time, because he had failed. A mouth opened up in the earth and swallowed him whole, and it was wet and he was in water, deep and dark. As it closed around him, he looked up through a quivering ceiling of fire and saw a person looking down, a person who—*

He abruptly awoke, feeling an odd motion of the boat under his back. Unsettled by his dream, he decided to feign sleep, just for a moment. To compose himself. So he stayed prone and kept his breathing slow. Through his slitted eyes saw that at least two thirds of the afternoon had passed and the sun was perhaps three hands above the horizon and sinking down, off of the sailboat’s port side, just forward of the beam. The boat was slightly heeled over, the wind coming at them as if being breathed out by the sun, the sail bent in the direction of the deepening night. She had not betrayed him, they were indeed sailing north by northwest. In between his eyes and the setting sun, however, was the reason for the ship’s strange shimmy: Fisher was dancing along the angled deck of the boat, moving as if it were perfectly flat.

*She...dances?* He had not expected her to be so graceful, stepping with ease and accuracy around and between the lashed down supplies. As he watched, he began to feel that the motions were strangely familiar. And then, abruptly, he could feel the blood draining out of all of his extremities as the realization sank in — it was not dancing he was seeing. *Unarmed combat!*

His memory flashed back — “*offset approach*” — and he sucked in his breath as slowly as he dared, trying to stifle a wave of alarm. *What would an Assassin be doing out here? Is she in communication with the shore? If she could get word to Tema, she would have told me.* It was too much to bear; he sat up abruptly. She stopped mid-dance and settled back down at the tiller, unlashed it. “What *are* you?” He demanded, glaring at her. “Are you *Guild*, nadi?”

She boggled at him. “Me?” She asked. “Are you asking if one is an *Assassin*?” He barely nodded, teeth clenched. And then, appallingly, she *burst out laughing* at him. He surged to his knees, got one foot planted on the deck. “*How dare you*,” he grated, fists clenched.

And now, for the very first time since she fished him out of the sea, her eyes flashed in anger. The expression dropped out of her face and the politeness out of her speech. “You, sit down,” she said in a cold, cold voice. “In what possible way could you ever consider me a part of the Guild in Shejidan?”

It could be an act. But she seemed genuinely offended. It did not add up. And he remembered suddenly that she had a knife. He sat down. “That. What you were practicing. Unarmed combat. I have seen it.”

“Do you think that the Western aishidi'tat is the only place where such things are practiced?”

“But the form, the motion—”

“A person’s body is shaped one much like the other,” she said flatly. “There will be motion common to all styles of fighting. That one can fight does not make one Shejidan Guild.”

He settled back, arms folded. Part of him wanted to keep arguing — to ensure that, in the end, he would be in the right. But he was in the wrong and he knew it. He had touched her pride and given him a glimpse of that person who was more than a fisher — she was the master of her world. *Perhaps her world is only this boat, but it is still her world, and I am a guest in it.* “Nadi,” he said gently, relaxing his arms. “One apologizes.” He had not failed to note the way she said ‘Shejidan Guild’; wherever she was from, it was a place in tension with the Western association. He could respect that.

Fisher sat, unmoving, and unspeaking, for a good long while. Then: “One forgets that you are injured, nadi. One will endeavor to be more patient.”

*If only she knew.* But as her guest, he would swallow his pride. He let out a soft breath. “Let me take the tiller, nadi.”

“How does one know you will not rush to the attack while one sleeps?” She asked, still prickly. “Would it be imprudent to close one’s eyes, if you believe one is Guild?”

“One thought you wished to be more patient? One will endeavor to be less offensive in return.”

“What guarantee does one have?”

He spread his hands. "None." He let out a soft sigh, reluctant, but: "Truly, one apologizes," he said, as humbly as he could. "One made assumptions, and was rude."

She eyed him. But then she nodded and shifted over to the other side of the stern and he moved to take her original place. She loosed the tiller where she had secured it and let him take it. Then she pointed over the transom, at the boat's wake. There was a rope trailing behind the boat, sharply angled away; he noted that there was perhaps a sixth of a half-circle's worth of distance between the rope and the transom.

"The southern current," he said.

"Yes," she said. "Keep it at that angle, for this direction of the wind. If the wind changes, or when the night falls, wake me, and so long as it is clear, the stars will guide." It was a clear a test as anything: with this, he might not know where he was, but he knew now how to get to land.

"Yes," he said. She settled herself in the bow, but he could see her eyes glowing within her shadowed face as she watched him, for a long, long while.

*Fool! Do not, do not, do not lose this person's trust.* He was just beginning to appreciate just how much more than a common fisher she really was. He might actually survive this, if only he would forget that he was aiji. Just for a little while longer.

It was only much later when his brain caught up. *Why would a fisher need to know how to fight?*



## Chapter 7 - Illumination

The sun had been below the horizon for a while. “Fisher,” he said, keeping his word, and she stirred and sat up. She stretched, blinking, and glanced around. “You let one sleep too long, nadi,” she said reproachfully.

*At least I did not kill you in your sleep. Did you notice?* He tilted his head up and looked where the River of Stars stretched across the sky and smiled a little. “These are the stars of Tanaja also,” he said. “One knows the way.”

She came to take the tiller. “You should rest some more, if you can,” she said.

“One is not that weary. One will look ahead.” At her nod, he went forward.

*How extraordinary is the sea*, he thought, seeing glimpses of waves now and then. It was still a night belonging to the new moon, but the sky was clear and the River cast enough light that he could see some way ahead. His people were sea-farers and all of this was in his blood, as if his ancestors had held man’chi to the stars and the waves and the wind singing in the sail. He felt it, as sure a connection as —

Something sparked in the water cast off by the boat’s bow, just a little flash of gold in the water. Then another, then another. The bow wave took on an edge of golden sparkles. He looked back along the boat and saw the water peeling away all clad in light, and Fisher was silhouetted in the growing glow of the boat’s wake.

“Kelikiin!” He called to her.

“It is their migration, nadi!” She called back.

And so it was. He followed the glow back to the stern and placed himself on the other side of the transom, twisted so as to watch the coruscating light, now very strong. It was strong enough that he could see their guide-rope behind them — there would be no need for the stars with such a light.

He carefully leaned over the edge and let his fingers trail in the water. The infant kelikiin were invisible except for their bioluminescent glow, of course, but the oldest, though very small, were large enough to discern, even with the boat moving along at a fair clip as it was. He watched as the bigger kelikiin swirled around his fingertips — little creatures with a circle of five eyes, the tiniest of pinpricks, on their button-like heads, from beneath which trailed slender fronds, some of them plain and some of them lined with the tiniest frills along their lengths, all glowing gold against the passage of the craft. It was unclear as to whether they were being tossed by the waves and the wake or if they were under their own power — he liked to think the latter, that something about the boat had drawn them thither, this enormous association of minuscule luminous animals flocking to mark where he and Fisher had gone. He looked up again at the stars, trying to mark out the station in the heavens. Some of his people were up there, now, learning to observe and predict the heretofore unpredictable storms of the southern coast and guiding the Marid’s fleet safely to the East. Would they be able to look down at the earth and see this road of light marked out across the sea?

He sat back up and looked at Fisher, her face in profile to him, features edged in gold from the light behind them. That light drew his gaze back to it; he could not look away from it for long. It was yet another piece of the heritage of his people that made him want — no, *need*, deep down in his bones — to get back to Tanaja and reclaim his place. It was his. They were his. It was all *his*, to hold and to protect. He was filled with ferocity again and not a small amount of wistfulness.

“One had hoped to have shown—” he started, and then stopped. *Ilisidi*, he was going to say. He had wanted *Ilisidi* to see this, these tiny glowing wi’itkitiin of the sea, because she was one to appreciate the beauty of the natural world, and shared his desire to see as much of it untrammelled as possible. “—An associate,” he finished lamely. “This. The *kelikiin*. But they had not yet reached where we were.”

If she had heard the hitch in his speech, she made no note of it. Instead, she said, “A pity to have missed it. An extraordinary sight, for those not accustomed to the open sea in this season.”

He watched for a while, dividing his attention between the stars and her face and the *kelikiin* in the wake and then, intending to spell her from the tiller again some time in the dark of the morning, he settled himself in the bow and slept. This time, he did not dream.

A day and a night remained, and the day ahead looked to be overcast. The guide rope still strained at the proper angle behind them, marking the current, so their inability to sight the sun was not an impediment. In fact, it was something of a relief to not having it beat down on them as the day wore on.

It seemed that the system that they had — trading catnaps, taking turns at the tiller — worked well. He had kenned to her habit of relieving herself when he was asleep and now that his body was back under his control, he did the same.

When it was time for his duty at the tiller and she was free to attend to other things, he watched, curious as to how she would spend her time.

Sometimes she fished, and sometimes she even pulled up a catch, which she would slice very fine with her knife. They ate it raw and it was delicious and oh, so much better than the jerky. When she was not so interested in actual fishing, she would cleverly affix her pole to an oar-lock. This freed her hands, so while the hook trailed alongside the boat, she whittled. She was working at a block of wood, roughly hand-sized.

As he watched, he understood that she was making it into a cup. Her hands were true and sure, swiftly boring out the inside before shaping the outer curve. Then she settled into working a decoration into that outer curve, around the rim of the cup, and he could not even see the knife’s tip move, so tiny and delicate and precise were its motions under her guidance. He entirely forgot his work at the tiller, watching her instead, and perhaps she felt his eyes on her, because she looked up. Catching his eye, she tilted her head, looking pointedly towards the wake. He shifted in his seat like a child, embarrassed, and turned to check the guide rope.

It was fine.

Later, she pulled a handful of seaweed from the stored bundle of the same. He watched as she shredded the dried stalks in her hands, breaking up the outer husks of them and extracting long, vanishingly fine fibers from their cores. She shook the remaining flakes of the seaweed’s husks directly into the sea and repeated the entire process until she had a neatly aligned pile of clean, pale core fibers at her side. Then she dipped a cup of water out of their freshwater store and surprised him by pouring it into her lap, on the leg one opposite the pile, drenching that leg of her trews. While he watched, she pulled a few of the fibers from her stack and began to roll them against her wet thigh. They twisted together under her hand and became thread.

Intellectually, he knew perfectly well what she was doing. It was part of his nature — his duty as *aiji*, even — to revere the skillful making of things by hand, so he had always taken care to learn about all of the things his people made. In this way, he knew the process of hand-twisting plant fiber into thread. He knew they were called ‘singles’ and then in a little while, she would twist several of those singles together but in the opposite direction, and he knew that, thusly locked together by their opposition, they would become a cord.

*A good metaphor for rulership, that, he suddenly thought. When I return home, I must not crush the opposition entirely. Some must remain, because it is that tension between me and them that will make us stronger as a whole.*

As for the making of actual — as opposed to metaphorical — cord: he had never actually seen it *done* and it was fascinating to watch her doing it. Simply knowing the process failed to give one a sense of the time it took, much less the skill and artistry of it. The knowledge of the process alone often failed to convey the *story* of how the thing came into being, which was so much more than the thing itself. In watching her, and in her awareness of him watching her, he realized that he himself was becoming part of the story of that which she was bringing into being. He was now part of that cup she had made. He would be part of this cord. He was a part of the story of her whole life now as well.

And now for a *third* epiphany: he had forgotten about the tiller — *again*, to her vast amusement.

*Gods less fortunate!*

## Chapter 8 - Discovery

Midway through the second day they crossed a vast stream of fish, snaggle-toothed ikevara'tiri, their vivid black and yellow stripes clearly visible even though they were swimming the height of a man below the surface of the water. Questing after the kelikiin, he knew. "May your hunt be delayed," he told them from his post in the sailboat's bow, making Fisher laugh and flash him a smile from her place in the stern.

His breath hitched in his throat and a frisson went through all his limbs at once. The sensation he felt in reaction to that fleeting smile of hers was not unpleasant, but it troubled him deeply.

As aiji, he *received* man'chi, he did not give it. It was part of who he was. He had not felt attachment since he was a child — it was a feeling that had vanished from his emotional repertoire even before he had reached puberty. *What is this that I am feeling?* It was most definitely *not* man'chi, he decided. He was sure that in a crisis, he would in no ways abandon anything to turn towards her — he would go his own way, as he always did. But whatever it was, it was making him feel as if he had walked into one of his aishid's wires and had become trapped there.

Fisher was looking over her shoulder at the wake at the guide rope with some intensity. He leaned out to starboard as far as he could so that he could see the end of the rope as it stretched eastward with the current. As he watched, the rope slowly straightened until it was gone from his view.

She looked bow-ward. "We have left the current," she told him. "We will make the shore before dawn."

*So soon!* He thought, and was surprised at his reaction. Why did bother him? Important tasks awaited him there, things that most urgently needed his attention. In the beginning of the journey, he had been anxious to get back to it. Now he felt himself wishing for more time, which was irrational. Was it that, for the first time that he could remember, he was actually at *peace* out here? No assassins, no scheming lords, no poison, no paranoia. Just wind and wave and sky. The other living things out here would only devour him if he fell in and drowned — they were not conniving and plotting to cut him to pieces and take his power. They just were. Like he was. Like she was.

Fisher opened her most decorated storage chest, the little one all with carvings of seaweed made into puzzle knots, and pulled out an even smaller box, also ornately carved. *A box within a box*, which amused him. But when she opened *that* one, he knew it for what it was: a compass. He watched as she shifted and bent, setting the compass down on the deck in front of her where she could see it. She carefully aligned the box with the bow, and although he could not see it, in his imagination he could see the needle shift and line up with earth's magnetic field. There was north, there was south. She made a light adjustment to the tiller and he knew that the boat was back on its north-northwest heading; in the absence of the current, Fisher knew the way.

*The compass!* He stared without seeing. *That* was what he was feeling, like had a compass needle inside him that had, for his entire life, been pulled off of true. And now it was moving, towards *her*. *It is not* man'chi *I feel*, he realized. *It is* a'hrani.

A'hrani, connection, the word itself never spoken aloud in the machimi for fear of releasing its power. Only indirectly named, if necessary and usually in hushed tones, as "apparent connection" or "brittleness". It was the knot that held until it gave at the

worst possible moment, the static friction that held the snow bank together until that last tiny snowflake touched down and loosed the avalanche. In the machimi, a'hrani was the thing that persons *mistook* for man'chi, usually to their doom. A'hrani muddled man'chi, obscured it until some terrible event shook it loose, letting the heretofore hidden and constrained man'chi swing back to its proper orientation. And when it did, it tore through anything and everything in its path. In the machimi, a'hrani always lead to tragedy.

*They have gotten it wrong*, Machigi thought. *It is something more, and it is not in any way brittle or false.* Or was it because he was an aiji, who felt no man'chi towards anything in the world, that a'hrani was the only force that could bring him into that kind of alignment?

He realized he had been staring at Fisher for some time now and she was staring back at him. With a shock, he could see what he was feeling reflected in her eyes.

The needle inside him came to rest.

*This is insane.* He swallowed. "Fisher—"

She straightened up and folded her hands in her lap. "It would be foolish," she said, barely a whisper. "You are a lord of this place."

He did not deny it. "Need it matter?" He asked. "I think it does not," he said, giving up all formality with her.

"It would, if —"

"I do not care, Fisher-daja," he said, letting the corner of his mouth quirk up.

She rolled her eyes and huffed. "'Daja', you name me," she threw up her hands. "You — you are a *fool*."

But she had not said no.

"Secure the tiller," he said softly. "It will abide for a time." She regarded him with large dappled-gold eyes. He told her, "If you tell me no, I will not speak of it again." He reached out a hand to her, palm upward. For a moment, she did not move.

And then she did. She lashed the tiller in its place and checked the boom on her way to him. For another moment, she crouched next to him and searched his face. He did not lower his hand.

She placed her hand atop his, palm to palm. Her palm was rough and calloused; the rasp of it across his own sent a wonderful shiver through his whole self. He brushed a thumb against the back of her hand and there, her skin was as soft as silk.

"Yes," she said, and he pulled her gently to him.

"I have no idea who you are," he marveled.

"We are naked and wrapped in one another's arms, and this is only now occurring to you, You-ma?" She asked lightly, laughing, as she combed his hair with her fingertips. "Should I tell you?"

Yes. "No," he said. "Let it remain a mystery."

She ran a light fingertip across the scar that ran across his neck and up along his chin and he leaned into the touch. He knew what she was wordlessly asking. "It is part of that other world," he murmured into her hair. "If I tell you, I will drag us there. I will tell you if you ask it of me."

"No," she said. "Let it stay there, and us here, for the time being."

"Very well," he said. "For the time being."



There were many ways for persons to bring one another pleasure without the chance of sparking new life in one who was capable of bearing a child. They explored several of them, for the time being.

## Chapter 9 - Landfall

When he woke, she was at the tiller, fully dressed. “Stay down, please. I am working close to shore and may need to move the sail without warning.”

He kept his head down but glanced over the gunnel. It was just before dawn and a heavy mist, typical of this season, blanketed the water. The wet air was thick enough to breathe and was redolent with the smells of the shore: salt, growth, and rot. Sound was distorted by the moisture, so that cries of waking birds and animals made it seem as if the land was no more distant than the length of his arm.

He watched her face, set in hard concentration, lips slightly parted to improve her hearing. He felt, rather than heard, the scraping of the boat’s keel against the rapidly-shallowing sand the sand of the shore. He put on the awful, reeking scraps of his clothes. Then the keel began to bite and the boat slowly ground to a halt a few paces from a shoreline he could hear but could not, through the foggy air, see.

“Now is the time,” she said softly. “If you’re to be safely away and into the trees before the mist burns off, you need to go ashore now.”

“Come with me,” he surprised himself saying it.

“I cannot,” she said. “It would be...unwise. But you could stay with me,” she offered, sounding hopeful and sad at the same time, as if she knew what he would say.

So he said it. “I cannot.” He moved back towards where she sat in the stern, where the boat was least like to rock when he debarked, and saw her hand lifting: something dangled there, on a cord.

He recognized it, remembered watching her roll it into being along her thigh. It was made into a loop — *a necklace* — and at its lowest point there hung a pendant fashioned from a piece of wood, delicately carved.

He reached out and took it. The little carved piece nested in the center of his palm: a complicated interlace of lines, here curved, here straight, which incorporated the shape of two *kelikiin*, as if they were dancing through one another in the boat’s wake. It was exquisite. She must have made it for him with her own hands when he was sleeping and in that moment, it was more precious to him than all of the treasures in Tanaja.

“It is beautiful,” he said, looking up after a long moment staring at it. “What is it — a symbol? I do not recognize it.”

She nodded. “Think of it as a rural thing. Something like *baji-naji*.”

“Something like?”

She smiled. “Yes. Though it is closer to ‘it will be well’.”

“‘It will be well,’” he murmured, carefully tilting it in his hand. “Rural, you say.”

“It would be best, I think, to keep it to yourself.”

“Ah.” She had given him a secret, and a clue — a pair, in fact: the pendant itself and the fact that it might mark her as someone questionable. *A peasant’s symbol?* He already knew that whatever she was, she was no peasant. The infelicity of the two clues nestled into his mind where it would, he knew, remain as an itch until he had matched them up with their solution.

He slipped the cord on over his head and tucked the pendant under his ruined shirt before bracing himself against the gunnel, ready to go over the side. But before he

went, he hesitated, turning back. “You could still come with us.” He offered a clue for her in return, with that royal “us”.

But if she marked it, it was apparently nothing she had not already guessed. She shook her head sorrowfully. “Perhaps our paths will cross again.”

“I have nothing to give you in return,” he said, delaying.

She smiled. “I will always have the memory of You. Go, now, before the light comes.”

He went over the side and splashed down, his bare feet sinking into the sand, a pinch here and there where skin too long accustomed to shoes met unfriendly stones. She came over the side as well, and together, they pushed the boat back and clear of the sand — it felt good to be joining his effort to hers at her side, and for the flash of a moment, he wanted to put his arms around her. But she had slipped back aboard and the moment was lost, leaving him to give the prow a gentle push to set her on her way.

He waded ashore, sand turning to mud and then mud squelching between his toes and then at last, there was solid earth beneath him. It had been a while since he had last been to sea and now that he was ashore again he felt the swooping dizziness of an inner ear still accustomed to the waves.

The tree line. It was up ahead. If he put the rising sun just to the right of straight ahead of him, and if he followed the trees where they marched away from the shore, he would be going towards Tanji District. He reached the trees and ducked into their shade.

He knew that there was a hunting lodge in the district’s southwest, one that he had visited several times before the Troubles. Once the sun was fully up, perhaps he could take some bearings and find it. With any luck, he would be able to gain access and get a coded message to his aishid, if they still lived. There were a number of ways to do it, but he had to get there first or, failing that, try his fortune in a village. The difficulties of that challenge stood on the enemy’s side of the ledger. On his side, though — he marked it with a short, bitter laugh — his once-fine clothes were little more than rags and his bare feet were caked with mud and sand and, now, fine bits of bracken and grass. In other words, there would be no one who, upon glancing over him, would mistake him for a country gentleman, much less the aiji of the whole of the Marid. It was not much of an advantage, but he would take it.

The sun was fully up over the horizon and was beginning to disperse the sea mist. He topped a slight rise and stopped beneath an ancient ilkani, its slender leaves draping down around him in long, lacy curtains. Peering through the cascade of green, he could see patches of clear water down below as the sun did its work. The pale triangle of Fisher’s sail entered one of these as he watched, bowed into a graceful curve by the wind that was carrying her away from him. He thought, perhaps, that he could see her turn and look back towards the land.

Perhaps they *would* meet again. But in order for that to happen, he would have to reach Tanaja, and he would have to retake his place as aiji there. And in order for *that* to happen, there was one more thing he would have to do: he would have to live.

He put his back to the sea and began to walk.

**II**  
**THE KILLING FLOOR**

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## Chapter 10 - From the Dictionary

**man'·chi /men?'tʃi:/** > 1. n. instinctual tendency to turn to a leader, *loyalty*. > 2. n. animal flocking instinct. (c.f., hadjaiid, pathological isolation).

- students are reminded that term in *italics* do not have one-to-one correspondence with Mosphei' and require further reading. Proceed with caution -

### - Notice -

Access to the dictionary to the general public has been granted by amendments to the Treaty of the Landing as specified in the Restoration Accords. Users are strongly encouraged to make use of all available resources, including histories and commentary, in international communication. Please direct questions, comments and concerns to the Mospheira State Department at 5-35-1739.

### - Notice -

## Chapter 11 - Restoration

Machigi sat in the audience room, a cup of tea forgotten and forlorn at his side. In little while, after it had cooled, the staff would whisk it away and replace it with a fresh, hot cup. He would likely ignore that one, too.

In a break from normal protocol, Tema and Frochano sat in chairs pulled up close to form an intimate trio. Because his teacup was not in his hands, neither were theirs. But it did not matter — it was time, after all, for business.

He was clean and dressed in clean, pressed clothes, the frothy lace of his shirt perfect, an elegant brocade overcoat lending reassuring weight to his shoulders, his hair combed and perfectly braided in the Taisigi colors. How horrified staff had been when his aishid had brought him back to the estate! All them were well-trained and supremely competent, many of them trained by the Marid branch of the Assassin's Guild and linked back to the headquarters in Shejidan — with his approval and intent, of course, it was a way to maintain settled ties in the face of the Marid's new independence — and knew how to maintain their formal decorum with exquisite professionalism. So he had been gratified to see them shocked to outright anger at his state when he had returned. But return he had: he had stalked back into his house under his own power and their anger had merged into the bow wave of his rage.

Sometimes rage served very well, to focus a household. Or a clan. Or an entire Association. *I will turn this focus on the perpetrators.*

He had not, in fact, made it to the hunting lodge. Instead, he had reached one of the villages of the province. In his filthy, destitute state, the villagers had not known him for what he was. But they had been kind, nonetheless, to a stranger who had obviously fallen on bad times, and had given him access to the one telephone in the whole tiny community. He had gotten out a short, coded call to his aishid and in no time whatsoever, they had swept in and whisked him back to Tanaja.

A long bath, clean clothes, a decent meal, attentive staff, familiar company — people and places and processes that he knew were *his*. And he was once again in this, his audience hall, the place that was the interface between his power and the wide world outside its doors.

The hall was full of beautiful things: priceless porcelain vases and sculptures on hand-crafted tables inlaid with stonework, all arranged by the kabi master for numerical, aesthetic, and physical harmony. On the walls: tapestries and paintings in the classical geometric style — some had elegantly repeating patterns, and some were more chaotic in form at first glance, but all of them spoke to an underlying sense of ultimate order. On the floor: the vast and costly antique rug, its russet border offsetting the central motifs of waves and abstract seaweed shapes worked in the muted greens and blues of his clan.

He thought, suddenly, of Fisher's boat, full of practical supplies but with the surprise of the decoration she had carved into the frame of the boat with her own hands. Yet those decorations were almost hidden: unpainted, unadorned, a person had to spend some effort in observation to see them. It contrasted greatly with this hall, where the costly, atiendi treasures of the Marid — the antique, artistic heritage of its clans — could not be missed.

*It is not, he thought. That the hall is overwrought, and the boat superior for its subtlety. The boat is just different. Simpler. Unburdened by accumulation.*

Accumulation, that was the word. All of the things of this hall were beautiful things, but that was not why they were here. They were concrete reminders of the long history of the region and the capabilities of its people. They were the physical evidence of the power of the Taisigi as the traditional source of Marid rulership. *Look upon us, they said. And behold the graceful and civilized results of Taisigi clan governance.* The gods of Fortune and Chance knew that the Marid needed such statements, for the history of the region was one of almost constant internecine warfare and instability. Machigi had changed that; in fact, in the two short years since his association with Ilisidi, he had overseen an explosion of peace and prosperity that had guaranteed that the Marid — technically a district of the global Association, as the East was, *technically* — functioned with de facto independence. As the East did. Instead of *nandi*, people called him *aiji* with increasing frequency now, and the *aiji* in Shejidan did not direct him, any more than he directed Ilisidi. Tabini *asked*. Having achieved that independence of rule for himself and his people, Machigi was determined to hold onto it.

And so everything in the hall and on his person spoke to that determination. The weight of his coat, for example, was reassuring not only because of its actual weight, but because of it represented the whole structure of support — in history, resources, and dedicated people — that held him in the place. In a day and age when *atevi* had gladly given up the chaotic, imprecise fog of war for the Assassins' Guild's orderly, accurate violence, his elegant coat served as his armor, and the priceless artworks on display around the audience hall were his siege weapons.

It all went a long way to making him feel secure again, to calm him, to prepare him for what came next.

He had a swift debriefing of the events in the *Breath of the Sun*, the ship in which he had been hosting Ilisidi. The small boat did indeed run in on them, as remembered. As he had ordered, his *aishid* and the dowager's security made a bid to get her to the non-engaged side. The boat had exploded before they could turn to him; it had caused extensive damage, and when the initial explosion had ebbed, they could not find him. He realized, listening, that the boat must have taken out such a chunk of the ship that he fell down a deck or two. This was why they could not find him, and why he had been too stunned to cry out to them. Then, as the ship took on water, it tilted and he had fallen out.

"We escaped on the ship's small boats," Tema recounted. "As for the *Breath of the Sun*, *aiji-ma*, it is lost. It went down not long after we debarked."

*A shame.* It had been an elegant ship, a grand yacht, and his very own. "But the people?" Machigi asked.

"All safely ashore, *aiji-ma*," Tema replied. "But for yourself, whom we could not find."

Machigi sensed the shame in his guard's demeanor. Tema had never before failed him in any thing, and there were many times when, but for this man and the rest of his *aishid*, Machigi would have been dead. "*Baji-naji, Tema-ji*," he said. "Chance and fortune tipped the scale here. It in no way reflects on your competence. I remain confident in the *aishid*." Tema dipped his head in gratitude.

With that settled: “Tell me about the boat that attacked us.”

“The only resource the enemy had, we believe, aiji-ma. We were not harassed or attacked in the small boats,” Tema said. “We made it safely ashore and back to this house without opposition.”

“And the dowager?”

“Departed, aiji-ma. But she left elements of her security behind in support. They supplemented the household guard while we were searching for you.”

Machigi grunted, thoughtful. It was a good sign, that. *Our association with the East still holds, that she did such a thing and did not simply leave.* “Contact her security with a full update, Tema-ji. Ilisidi of Malguri should know that I have returned here, and that our alliance still holds.”

“Yes, aiji-ma,” Said Tema.

“We believe the small boat was remote-controlled, aiji-ma,” Frochano said.

It was a shocking revelation. Machigi narrowed his eyes. “Remote-controlled,” he repeated.

“Yes, aiji-ma.”

In other times, the use of an explosive-laden remote-controlled vessel, as unheard of as such a thing was, to attack a ship full of people other than the principal target would have been a shockingly illegal act. *By now, it is almost banal.* Clearly, some cell or another of what the paidhi called the Shadow Guild had escaped the predation of the Shejidan Guild and made another attempt at him, possibly with assistance from other clans in the region.

“It was just one boat, you say?” Machigi asked.

“Yes, aiji-ma,” said Tema. “A better plan would have been to have several, to swarm your ship. This suggests that this is a small cell of perpetrators, aiji-ma, with limited resources, and desperate. It is possible that the Shejidan Guild was closing in on them and that this was their last ditch attempt to clear the way for a designated ally or allies.”

But the use of the remote-control technology, in an unmanned boat, at sea...it was new. And troubling.

“Let us ensure that this effort was, in fact, the last,” says Machigi darkly. “Make inquiries, Tema-ji. We wish to know who stood to benefit from this action, and who provided support. In particular, where did the technology to drive the boat come from? Reach out to the paidhi’s security. If anyone would know about either an autonomous or remotely-controlled system like this, it would be the paidhi. We must also determine the true target of the attack. Was the attack against us, against the dowager, or against some other person we do not yet suspect? But keep these inquiries tightly controlled. There are assuredly issues within both the government and the lords. Tread carefully. But we will know how this happened.”

“Aiji-ma.” Tema rose, Frochano rose, and they both of them bowed. Frochano departed, but Tema hesitated.

Machigi raised an eyebrow. “What is it, Tema-ji?”

“One requests to ask, aiji-ma...after you fell into the water, how did you return to land?”



He knew this question would eventually come, and it was not unreasonable. His security needed to know what had happened to him in order to understand resources, or to anticipate threats. *I absolutely should tell Tema everything.*

But he did not want to speak of it. It was not that he was ashamed about what had happened between him and the woman in the boat — that was a gift, he thought, from Chance and Fortune. But the trouble was that he did not understand it, or why the meeting and parting had left a lack in him that he still keenly perceived. It was if he had lost a limb. Perhaps once the ache had faded, he would be able to tell his aishid, and perhaps they would even help him understand.

But not today. “A fisher rescued me and brought me to the shore,” he said shortly.

“Who, aiji-ma?”

“I do not know, Tema-ji. Demanding the fisher’s name would have required I give up my own, or lie about it. I thought it best to remain incognito, and not to lie, lest the lie come unraveled later.”

“Do you want us to locate this fisher, aiji-ma?” Tema asked. “For reward or recognition?”

“No,” Machigi replied firmly. “That is unimportant. I require your full attention towards finding how it came to be in the first place. *I must know what happened,* Tema-ji.”

Tema clearly wanted to ask more, but stopped. He had known Machigi all his life and something on Machigi’s face must have warned him that the aiji did not want to speak more on the subject.

“Aiji-ma,” Tema said with a bow, and left.

## Chapter 12 - Revelation

In a little less than a month, Tema and his forces had assembled a coherent picture out of the results of their investigation. They had not yet determined what persons outside the Marid had provided technical support to the attack, but overall it was extremely satisfactory work and sufficed — *for now*. Machigi called for an assembly of his small council and met his five Ministers in the assembly room.

As he entered, they rose from their places around the great marble-topped table with its seasonal setting, now of dried wreaths of grain supporting a single, large piece of driftwood. He took his place at the head of the table and did *not* call for tea.

Their expressions were impassive in the courtly fashion, but he had known them long enough to see little clues of surprise there. No tea meant grave business. And yet he simply called for each of them to give a report, an update of the completed, current, and future plans of their respective ministries.

Maisuno, the Minister of Agriculture, was halfway through his report on the plan to expand the Taisigi root inoculation program to the less-productive fields of the eastern Dausigi lands when Tema, standing within Machigi's line of sight, gave the barest of nods. Machigi held up a hand and Maisuno stopped short his report. "Aiji-ma?" The minister asked.

"News, nandiin," Machigi announced. "Tema-ji, report."

Tema stepped up to the other end of the table and settled into a formal posture, his hands clasped behind his back. "Nandiin, at the direction of the aiji, one has completed an investigation of the attack on the *Breath of the Sun*." He gave them a formal debrief, a recitation of the investigation, complete with footnotes, while Machigi carefully watched the faces of his ministers. They all of them looked appalled, with the exception of his Minister of Trade and Commerce, one Lord Disidri, a woman of middle years from the Homa district, who had gone as pale as it was possible for an ateva to go.

"—Ultimately," Tema was finishing the report. "The investigation concluded that three principle persons acted to use the opportunity of Ilisidi of Malguri's visit to assassinate Machigi-aiji, intending to place Bregani of Senji clan as aiji in his place. We assess that Bregani-nandi knew nothing of this plot, and that the perpetrators only intended for him to serve as a figurehead for a short time, after which they planned to assassinate him as well, blaming his death on age. With nand' Bregani dead, they would advance to rulership one of the last remaining members of the illegitimate Guild, those foreigners who attempted two years past to overthrow Machigi and take control of the Marid. That man was Velendari, Bregani's primary advisor. Assisting him were Elaijani in the staff of the Ministry of Information—"

Lord Kaordi, the Minister of that body, sat bolt upright in astonishment.

"—and nand' Disidri, Minister of Minister of Trade and Commerce."

Disidri leapt to her feet. "Lies, aiji-ma!" she cried, but Frochano and Kochi grasped her by her shoulders and forced her back down.

"Silence," Machigi snarled at her. "We have seen your shadow ledgers." He would not grace her with 'nandi', no, not now. "We saw how you attempted to conceal your accumulation of personal wealth. You were foolish enough to keep a written account of your actions, *and we read it*."

Disidri whimpered. Her eyes found the door and she jerked in vain against the hands of his security in that direction, which told him all he needed to know.

He looked to the rest of his council. “And so, with full Guild approval, I have filed Intent.” He held out a hand and Gediri placed the scroll in his palm. He unrolled it and read aloud.

“A filing of Intent. Machigi-aiji against Velendari, primary advisor to Bregani of Senji clan; Elaijani, staff of the Ministry of Information; and Disidri, Minister of Trade and Commerce —”

Disidri trembled in her chair, held fast in place.

“—who,” Machigi continued to read. “Without filing Intent, attempted to bring death upon our person, doing so indiscriminately and with illicit technology, threatening through their imprecision to bring harm upon honored guests of the Marid, servants and staff, and by extension to destabilize the governance of the aishidi'tat.

“And against any persons, known or unknown, in the man'chi of these their principals, who aided and abetted this illegal action against us, to include associates and family of their majority, exempting all persons of minor age, whom the state shall support should they lose all appropriate caregivers in the execution of this warrant.

“I personally declare Intent to file feud, because of the offense not only to the safety of myself but to the stability of the Marid, with Tema of the Agrai township of Tanji district as my registered and licensed agent. I publish it and cause it to be published, and place it in public records with its seals and its signatures and sigils.”

He finished the pronouncement and lay down the scroll. Disidri let out a stifled sob. He spared her only the barest of glances. “Remove this person from our sight,” he said to Frochano and Kochi, and they did.

“Perhaps it is time to find *all* opposition in the Marid and bring them to heel once and for all, aiji-ma,” Kaordi said, once Disidri was gone. Machigi knew the man was stung by the betrayal among his own staff and wished for to prove himself. “This Intent could be amended.”

Machigi thought of the necklace around his neck, stifling the urge to touch the place where it rested beneath his shirt and coat. He has successfully kept it hidden from staff for now, slipping it on and off during those vanishingly rare moments when he was truly alone. He was wearing it, even here. He thought of the cord, of its threads locked together by their opposition, and about his epiphany on the boat.

“No, nandi,” he said. “I hold that opposition *within* the Marid, by citizens of the Marid, is productive. My opposition keeps me honest and alert — it keeps me sharp, nand' Kaordi. It is these elements from *outside*, these interlopers who bend the man'chi of the weak to their foreign agendas, who operate with no care for the good of the Marid — these are the ones I will eliminate.”

Kaordi bowed his head. “Aiji-ma.”

“Diri-ji, carry out the publishing of the filing. Post and broadcast. My security has already located and is tracking the other principles and their associates. Tema-ji, as soon as the grace period for notification has passed, gather all those who supported them. Family, close associates — bring everyone whose man'chi could possibly be hidden, in accordance with the filing. Do it swiftly. Bring them all to the audience hall tomorrow morning. The moment it is legal, we want them all here.”

We, he had said. It was the aiji who had spoken, not the man.

## Chapter 13 - Determination

When at first light the traitors' associates were herded into the audience hall, they found the aiji seated in his chair on the dais, waiting for them. Machigi watched their expressions as they realized that all of the furnishings in the room but for that dais and chair had been removed. Gone were the priceless porcelains on their pedestals, the historic wall hangings, and the great antique rug. No table stood at the side to receive petitions. He could see the looks of shock on the faces of his guests as they were led in to this empty, echoing hall through the still-decorated, perfectly elegant, and above all *civilized*, foyer, and were brought to the center of the audience hall's now brutally bare stone floor.

At his order, his staff had left the outermost doors open. The view was clear, over the shoulders of the guests, to the outside. A cool breeze blew into the room from that direction, smelling of salt and green and the freedom of wide open spaces.

He sat in his chair, chin on his fist, glowering silently, flanked by his aishid, as the assembled people stirred uneasily, knowing that there must be a reason that the treasures have been removed. They were here because of the Filing, published only the night before, and he knew that it had not escaped their notice that his security, in the impeccable black-and-silver of the legitimate Marid Guild, were arrayed along the walls on either side of them. There was a deathly hush in the air, as no one beholding the aiji's face would dare to speak.

He lifted two fingers of his other hand. At the signal, security herded in three people from a side door with rifles pointed at their backs, until they had settled in a line in front of him, facing the assembled people. He could see fresh shock and now outright terror, on the faces of these people as they recognized the newcomers.

"Behold," he said from the dais, his voice filling the room, echoing off of those bare, bare walls. "These three, whom we know you know very well. We have learned of the plot against us — *the failed plot, nadiin!* Those whom you aided or supported — did you not know what they were? The last, desperate remains of foreign designs on the Marid, the last leader of the breakaway Guild and those two of our own who turned their man'chi away from the South."

He stood up. The gathering saw that he had a long knife in a scabbard on his hip, the weapon's hilt so plain that it spoke of great age. Machigi rested his hand on the hilt as he walked in a line behind the three.

"Velendari, of the bastard Guild offshoot, who used his position within the Senjin Marid as a cover for his activities, who planned to elevate his lord to aiji, then kill him, and sit in this chair" — *my chair* — "in his stead."

"Disidri, Minister of Trade and Commerce, keen to develop her own wealth by her association with traitors."

"And Elaijani, of the Ministry of Information, a spy, who provided Velendari with intelligence and attempted to shape the reactions of this government."

Machigi a step backwards onto his dais so as to better address the people in the hall who were frozen in place, watching him with wide, terrified eyes.

"Had they succeeded, they would have destroyed the prosperity born of the independence the Marid has recently won. And threatened that independence itself! The prosperity of all the Marid, all of the Marid's growth, and the Marid's new trade

with the East! All to return these lands to infighting, so that this rebel and his associates would gain in personal power, which they hold to be of more value than that of the entire Marid. But they failed! *We* are aiji of the Southern Association, and we will not allow outsiders and upstarts to threaten our unity!”

“Tema of Agrai township, Tanji district,” Machigi said. He pulled out the knife and it whispered silently from its leather sheath. He held it up so that the light rippled along the blade, light that shimmered across its watermoss pattern of the ancient style. It was, in fact, a well-known weapon from the Taisigi state treasury, long passed from aiji to aiji in the days before firearms. There was no mistaking the long and above all *well-used* history in his fist.

Tema stepped up and solemnly received the knife from his principal. “Carry out our feud,” Machigi said. A horrified gasp rose up from the assembly.

The three traitors did not have time to react. Tema noiselessly flowed forward and with a quick and sure motion, cut Velendari’s throat from behind. Blood spurted in a great gout of red as the rebel Guild leader clutched his neck and surged forward, propelled by pure adrenaline. He made it to the first rank of the horrified guests before collapsing in a heap at their feet. The other two had begun to turn in the direction of the threat, eyes wide with alarm, hands come up to defend themselves, just beginning to back away. But Tema plunged the knife in Disidri’s chest in a flash before she could even get her arms in the way, buried in her heart. Even as she was crumpling to the floor, he had the knife out again and into the side of Elaijani’s neck before the man could complete his first step to flee. Elaijani, his cry choked off by the steel in his throat, slid off of the knife and fell, a bloody froth on his lips. They were the three of them on the floor, gasping their last, as Tema, bowing low, presented the knife to his aiji with both hands, his arms red to his elbows. Machigi accepted it with both of his hands in turn, dipping his head in acknowledgement, before he stepped back up to his chair and turned to face the assembly. He stood there, waiting, until the last desperate gasps of the traitors faded into silence.

“These three were all that remained from those who sought to turn Shejidan against us by making a bloody knife and laying it at our door,” he snarled. He brandished the ancient blade and it glittered, bright-and-dark mottled silver and gray and all over the pattern, bright, bright red. The blood, still fresh, ran down his wrist and turned the lace of his cuff from pale green to crimson, it dripped from the pommel to splatter on the dais at his feet. “They lay it at our door, nadiin, but we pick it up!” His voice rose to a roar: “And here it remains!” He drove the tip of the knife deep into the arm of his priceless Saie Period chair and it stood up and quivered there, its flat facing the hall so that the assembly could well see the blood running down it. Then he sat and let his equally bloody hand come to rest next to it, red oozing from between his fisted fingers. At a gesture, security came forth and dragged the bodies aside. There was a large pool of blood at the foot of the dais and now, an appalling trail to mark way of traitors — both past *and future*.

“Now,” he said to the huddled mass made up of what seemed to be mostly terrified eyes. “There remains you, nadiin.” He let that sink in, watched their gazes shift from one another, to the knife in the chair, to him. “There remains a chance for you. Understand that we are set firmly in our place, and we hold the whole of the Marid. For the first time in a generation, nadiin, the Marid is independent! For the first time in a

generation, nadiin, the Marid is united! For the first time in a generation, nadiin, the Marid stands in firm alliance, not with the West, but with the *East*. The lands of the Marid stands in the center of sea trade between East and West, because we — you and yours and I — are the *only* people skilled enough to do it. Because, nadiin, the sea is in our blood and our bones and our hearts. And we lift our eyes to the sky, with our people taking the Marid into the sea of stars itself.”

He leaned forward, voice low and intent. “In the distant past, the Marid was renowned for tradition, industry, art. The world clamored for the goods of the clans, nadiin! But within living memory, the world has only known this place for the squabbles of its lords and those lords’ repeated attempts to export nothing but rebellion and foolishness. *I tell you that we have put this to rest.* We have restored the unity of the Marid and we say to you: we mean to skip the broken gap between honorable past and united present and carry forth the strength and tradition and industry of the Marid into the future! This is what we offer you: an honorable place in this undertaking. But for that, *we must know where your man’chi lies.*”

Dead, shocked silence. Then voices began to rise up from the gathered people. “With you, aiji-ma—“

“Aiji-ma!”

“You, aiji-ma!”

Machigi’s eyes narrowed. *Of course* this is what they would say— who would not, with that still-dripping knife stuck upright in the arm of the chair? He could feel that some of them were sincere, having opened their souls to his vision of the future. And that was good. But he did not, in his bones, sense anything like unanimous man’chi in this room.

“It is one thing to *say* this,” he said coldly, therefore. “But another to *feel* it.” He once again lifted the first two fingers of his off-hand and his aishid stepped forward, rifles clasped at an angle across their chests, to form a barrier between him and the persons before him. Then the security forces on either side of the traitors’ associates produced knives and began to advance toward the center. The uneasiness of the people flashed into terror as they found themselves trapped between these two walls of steel. There was nowhere to go except forward, toward Machigi...or, failing that, to turn their backs on him and flee to the outside.

Some did edge forward, and then rush, across the pool of blood to fall to their knees at the feet of his aishid. At his nod, his guard parted only just so, so those ones could look up into his face and see that he had accepted them.

But there were others who turned and fled, seeking instead the safety of the outside world. Those who ran for the door were neatly cut off by more security coming in from the foyer. Unable to escape, they could do little more than cry out in helpless fear as the aiji’s forces surrounded them and cut them down. Machigi watched impassively, determined to bear careful witness to this thing that is being done with the force of the law but — never to forget — *at the direction of my will and my will alone.*

The bare stone floor was awash with blood. When the work was done, it took a few minutes for those who had been dispatched to stop gurgling and finally expire. Then there was a renewed silence in the hall; the survivors dared hardly breathe and nothing moved but the expanding pools of blood from the crumpled bodies. Then Tema stepped forward. “What are your orders, aiji-ma?”

“Let them go, that still live,” Machigi replied. “When threatened, they turned towards us. We are confident that their man’chi is firm.”

“And the rest, aiji-ma?”

“If we have orphaned any children today, go ensure they are provided for in accordance with the terms of the Filing. As for these,” he made a casual gesture in the direction of the bodies. “Take them to their proper place, Tema-ji. In the garden.”

“The garden, Aiji-ma?” Tema said, puzzled.

Machigi turned his regard onto his senior security. “Let them provide the fitting and honorable service to the earth in death that they could not in life,” he said. “As compost.”

And he rested his chin on his bloody fist while it was done.

## Chapter 14 - Analysis

*Bren-paidhi to Ilisidi lord of the Eastern Association, salutations*

*Aiji-ma, you asked me to assess the thoughts and reactions of the aishidi'tat to the recent news from the South, so that you may understand whether perceptions of your alliance with the Marid might change.*

*I cannot deny to you, aiji-ma, that the reaction has been one of shock. It is well understood that Machigi's actions were perfectly legal, given that he filed Intent in the proper form, and his feud was carried out by his duly appointed agent and that agent's subordinates. No person not subject to his Intent was harmed, and all of the treasures and property of the state were unharmed. This is not in any way contested by anyone.*

*But it is the public nature of the thing that brings great unease to those who would normally be favorably disposed towards him.*

*As for those who would normally be unfavorably disposed, the reaction has been of utmost horror and displeasure. Those who had already laid the claims of savagery and ruthlessness at his feet, and who objected to any normalization of relations with the Marid, now claim themselves vindicated, especially the lords of the Edi and the Gan, who despite your masterful move that resulted in Machigi abandoning the Marid's claims to the West, continue to despise him. Aiji-ma, they name him Vakhe'in of the Marid.*

Early on in his career, a group of human business people on Mospheira had attempted to obtain a license to build and operate a meatpacking plant. Every paidhi had to deal with this or something like it: some proposal grounded in an utter lack of understanding among humans of the importance of kabiu — propriety, or the “spirit of good example, as he sometimes put it — to the majority of the planet's people. Even in the more progressive parts of the mainland, atevi did not raise animals for meat — one hunted, and only took game within its proper season. So an industry that engaged in wholesale slaughter and packaging of meat for mass sale would have egregiously violated that all-important concept of kabiu. “Violated” is too gentle a term.

When the news that such a concern was being considered leaked across the Strait, this word, “vakhe'in”, suddenly acquired prominence in speeches both in the hasdrawad and the tashrid. Both chambers of the atevi legislature had been outraged, and it had threatened all his work. He had done a major revision of the word's entry in the only authorized Ragi-Mosphei' Dictionary — practically rewritten the damned thing as part of his attempt to convey to Mospheira just how deeply, deeply offensive the idea of the meatpacking plant was to the atevi. It had been an exhausting feat, finally convincing the government to deny the license. *God! What an uproar it would have caused if it had gone through!*

“Vakhe'in”, noun, singular. Plural, “vakhe'iin”. Originally the Dictionary had defined it as “wild animal” or “beast” or sometimes (especially in machimi) “butcher”, but Bren had come to know that it held a far deeper horror than these Mosphei' words could convey. The vakhe'in was a creature of atevi legend known for killing. It was not a mere animal, however, that killed for survival in accordance with the natural way of the world. Animals were, by their very nature, kabiu. But the vakhe'in was a monstrous creature that did not kill to live or to feed its kith and kin — it kills indiscriminately and



out of season, wastefully disposing of life to satisfy its own dark joy. Alternately, it was a beast (or person) that killed without limit, selfishly taking all the prey for itself and leaving none for following seasons or generations. Sometimes it referred to an animal suffering from disease or injury that would cause it to behave this way, and when such an animal was found, it was always subject to immediate termination.

The vakhe'in, in short, was the embodiment of that-which-was-not-kabiu, and even those atevi who considered themselves progressive shuddered at it. So the fact that Machigi's opponents in among the lords were now applying this word to the man did not bode particularly well for peace in the future.

*Certain antagonistic lords in Shejidan, wishing to dip in the well of horror that was the scandal of the proposed meatpacking plant on Mospheira of so many years ago, have taken to referring to his audience hall in Tanaja as "the Killing Floor". They are particularly appalled by the fact that this occurred in the place meant for public petitions. And because the Edi and the Gan are a people who value lively public discussion in common spaces as central to their consensus-building style of governance, they have been too happy to side with these critics. If I had any hopes that your brilliant actions to settle the Marid would ease them out of their hatred of the south, aiji-ma, I fear they may be dashed.*

*Aiji-ma, you may remember well the archives aboard Phoenix, and the stories which so captivated the imagination of your grandson. Do you remember dragons, those great scaly beasts that collected gems and jewels and precious metal into their lair, and would fight any hero who would attempt to retrieve them? The Edi and the Gan, but particularly the Edi, I think, are like such creatures: they have made their two-hundred year history of conflict with the Marid into a hateful jewel that is precious to them. Perhaps, in time, in the next generation or after, they will learn to open their claws and let this awful treasure go. But now, aiji-ma, I can only think that they use it to justify their continued disdain for the South.*

*Of the opposition to Machigi, however, I would assess that the Edi and the Gan are the loudest of the lot, and that however disturbed they may be, overall the majority of lords support a continuation of the present balance of power and alliances in the aishidi'tat. In time, the memory of this will fade, especially if trade continues and the economy thrives. It short, I do not think that there will be a concerted effort to remove him, and the alliance of the West-Central, South and East associations will hold. Please accept my felicitations and best wishes for continued development, growth, and prosperity in all your endeavors.*

*Signed, Bren-paidhi*

...

*Ilisidi Lord of Malguri, the aiji-dowager, to Bren-paidji*

*We have received your letter and convey our thanks for your analysis, as thorough and thoughtful as ever.*

*The actions of Machigi-aiji do not concern us. We hold them to be internal matters, conducted — as you yourself noted — within the full bounds of the law, and with a great deal more finesse than other actors in the region have managed in the*

*past. It does not shock us that one who has been subjected to repeated assassination attempts and illegal coups by unsettled persons within his domain would find a novel way to test man'chi.*

*“Novel” — God!*

*The continued tension between the west coast and the Marid Association concerns us. If left unchecked, it will only continue to grow. At worst, it may flare into violations of the law if the Grandmothers feel justified in reengaging in irregular activity against the south. At best, it will bring distraction to the hasdrawad and the tashrid and slow their progress in matters of import.*

*In the interest of peace and the settling of distractions, we propose to broker discussions between the Edi, the Gan, and the Marid. Malguri being too far and too strange for the Edi and the Gan, and Shejidan being already too full of politicians, we request the use of your estate at Najida for such a conference.*

Bren blinked and read the last line twice. And a fortuitous third time, in the vain hope that perhaps he'd misunderstood it the first two times. But alas, he understood it all too well. *Ilisidi didn't. Just. Propose. This. At. My. Estate.* But no. She had done just that. And this was Ilisidi, which meant that he could not say no.

*We have every confidence in your staff to handle such a potentially volatile meeting of minds within the boundaries of your house with their customary flawless hospitality, and are even more confident in your extraordinary diplomatic abilities. You will, we are sure, bring to bear your unique perspective to persons who might otherwise fail to see them, blinded by unfortunate history, cultural differences, and differing approaches to leadership. You have never failed us, and we are assured of your success in this endeavor as well.*

*We look forward to breakfast on your new terrace, Bren-ji. We shall enjoy the early morning breezes from sea, the magnificent view of the bay, and of course, your delightful company.*

*Signed, Ilisidi of Malguri*

Breakfast. She had just proposed bringing two lords and — including herself — two aiji under his roof for a conference, and this shortly after one of the four proposed attendees had just conducted — what was that *other* thing they were calling it? Oh yes, “the Massacre at Tanaja” — and she expected *him* to be the fortunate fifth. And then, after breezily assuring herself of his ability to somehow bring them to peaceful agreement, she had invited herself to breakfast.

Bren leaned back his head and groaned. He had *just* finished renovations and repairs from the *last* Marid-centered disaster at his estate, and now this. *My house is going to be destroyed!*

**III**  
**CONFERENCE AT NAJIDA**

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## Chapter 15 - From the Dictionary

**a·i·shid /eɪˈʃɪd/** > 1. **n.** association, collective of persons bound by *loyalty* (c.f. man'chi) > 2. **n.** basic unit of close support and/or security around a lord or leader, typically four (4) to form a fortunate five (5) in company with their principal, bound by *loyalty* (c.f. man'chi)  
- RELATED aishidi'tat (c.f)

- students are reminded that term in *italics* do not have one-to-one correspondence with Mosphei' and require further reading. Proceed with caution -

### - Warning -

**Access to this dictionary is strictly restricted to authorized paidhi-track students under supervision, and to other cleared personnel as designated in writing by the State Department**

### - Warning -

## Chapter 16 - Overture

Machigi looked into a bank of shocked and angry faces. Then his small council began speaking all at once.

“The paidhi proposes *what*?”

“Outrageous —”

“He wants you to meet with *savages*? To what end, aiji-ma?”

“Aiji-ma, this is an unforgivable insult —”

All but nand’ Siodi, whom he had recalled from Shejidan as his trade representative two years ago. Her service there had been exemplary but he had needed her back in the Marid — now, he needed her to replace the traitor Disidri. Siodi, who had long served his interests as his representative, both to the Sungeni Isles and to Shejidan, weathered all of this with her usual calm inscrutability. He respected her greatly as a thoughtful person who was adept at finding, and using, aspects of situations that no one around her noticed. He raised a hand in a dismissive wave and the rest of the council stopped their complaints.

“Nand’ Siodi, your thoughts.” Machigi said.

“One is curious as to whether the dowager has made any recommendation or request, aiji-ma.”

“The proposal comes through the paidhi from her, in fact.” He tapped a thin, folded folio on the table before him. “And she wrote separately, encouraging me to go.”

“Aiji-ma, it is a trap,” said Kaordi. “One is sure of it.”

“This does not concern us,” Machigi said. “We have survived traps before, even ones about which we were *not* forewarned.”

Kaordi jerked in his seat as if pricked.

“Is Marid the equal of Malguri,” Gediri asked indignantly. “Or does Malguri take Marid to be under her orders? You must not be seen as complying with her directives.”

“The dowager in no way orders us,” said Machigi, letting his voice take on a dangerous edge. “No one does. Not even you, nandi.”

Gediri’s skin went somewhat gray. “Aiji-ma, of course not. One would never —”

In that same tone, Machigi continued over him. “We have accepted the paidhi’s invitation.”

Dead silence. It was left to Siodi to bow her head and say, “Aiji-ma, nand’ Kaordi is correct. The Edi and the Gan are uncivilized — bandits and pirates. Have they ever been anything but? One advises that even if this is *not* a trap, no good can come from recognizing them in any way, from hearing their worthless words, or by granting them the honor they would acquire from the aiji’s presence at such a conference.”

“Savages they may be, but they have joined the Western association,” Machigi replied. “We wish to test whether the aiji in Shejidan is able to bring them to heel.”

“They have always stood in our way, aiji-ma.” said Kaordi.

“No longer,” said Machigi. “We have given up our claim on the west coast, nandi, in returned for association with the East and independent rule here — have you forgotten? We had understood that the port on the east coast is developed enough to support the largest of our supply ships, that trade has already begun to flow between our two associations to the benefit of the Marid, and that our fishing fleet has met with success in the Eastern seas. And you have not reported harassment to our shipping

from the westward shores. That, in fact, it has appeared to have ceased.” He raised an eyebrow and dropped his voice dangerous. “Have we been misinformed, nandi?”

“No, aiji-ma. One argues only that this means that is no reason whatsoever to treat with the Edi and the Gan. The Marid does not need them for any thing — even if they are truly reformed and under control, which one very much doubts.”

“If they are not, then we will either find an alternate agreement with them under our own terms, or we will at least know,” Machigi said steadily, fingers still drumming against the letters. “And if they are, then we will know that as well. Besides, the idea amuses us. And we wish to test the Marid.”

“The Marid, aiji-ma?” Gediri asked, alarmed.

He banged down his fist. “Coups, nandiin! Have we finally brought all the hidden plots against us out into the light? You have told us that it is done, once and for all. Well, let us go to Najida and see if anything remains here to be tempted out of the woodwork by our absence. We leave it to you to ensure that the association remains peaceful — peaceful, compliant, and supportive, nandiin! — while we are attending this conference.” And he pointedly looked in the direction of the garden between the palace and the legislative hall, where the plantings had recently been...*supplemented*.

The eyes of the small council all shifted in that same direction. Machigi thought he might have heard one or two of them swallow. *You think the garden is green enough, nandiin*, he thought. *Prove it*.

As if in response to that thought: “Yes, aiji-ma,” said Gediri quietly.

## Chapter 17 - Ingress

It was a short flight to Najida Township's little airstrip from the port at Tanaja — the plane barely had reached its cruising altitude before it was time to begin its descent.

In addition to his aishid and a hand of support guard — literally, there were five of them — he had only brought two body servants, Tarsiti and Samano. They were both Marid born and also members of the Assassins' Guild and would follow with the luggage presently, though it would not take them long at all to get everything into the suite the paidhi had assigned them — he had traveled lightly, relatively speaking.

The paidhi and his staff, and only they, met him and his people at the estate's main portico, while the house's main doors were thrown open to the main building's central hall. Inside and spilling out onto the steps, the paidhi's servants lined up on either side, offering deep bows.

The paidhi offered one of his own. "Nand' Machigi," he said. "Aiji of the Marid, one is deeply honored by your visit to this house. We hope to offer you and your staff every courtesy. Please allow me to show you to your suite," a singular honor, to be shown to assigned quarters by the lord of the estate himself, but not entirely uncalled for given Machigi's own status, and the paidhi's staff withdrew inside to make way....and to make sure that the visiting lord's security did not feel hemmed in by unknown persons. "Staff has arranged for refreshments inside, should you wish to rest after your travel. I hope the journey was smooth, nandi."

"We are grateful to you and your staff for your gracious welcome, paidhi-aiji," Machigi replied. "The journey was indeed smooth. And short. My staff will make arrangements with yours to settle our quarters but as for us, nand' paidhi, we are eager to begin" — *to be done with* — "this conference of yours. Are the other attendees in residence?"

The paidhi bowed again. "Indeed they are, nandi." He accompanied his guest up the main steps and into the main hall. Kochi, Sarjada and the hand of extra personnel peeled off to consult with their colleagues in the paidhi's staff and get settled. "They are already present in the meeting room," the paidhi said. "I will take you there directly if it is your wish."

"Is is," said Machigi.

At the far end of the hall, sunlight streamed through an immense stained-glass window. The paidhi must have caught his reaction to the piece, for he dipped his head and said, "It is a new work, nandi. The previous one, also in stained glass and an antique, was destroyed in the attack on the house." By this, Machigi knew that he meant the attack of the Shadow Guild, the one he himself had met with his own forces, coming up from behind them on the road to the Marid. He had pinned the Shadow Guild up against the Shejidan Guild and the Edi irregulars who had risen up in defense of Najida and had helped to disperse them — a thoroughly gratifying action, one that left him grudgingly open to the idea of cooperation with the tribes.

"Remarkable," Machigi said of the window, for it was. It depicted a tree, which itself was a departure from the more abstract and non-representational styles of conventional atevi art. But there *was* a classical kind of geometric patterning to it, hidden within the shapes of the glass that formed the image of the tree and those that made up the background fields of color. It was altogether subtle and clever.

“A gift from the dowager, nand’ aiji,” nand’ Bren explained. “So that she might bring prosperity to my lands and my neighbors, she hired Najida Township to craft it,” the paidhi explained. “And she engaged artists from the Edi and the Gan to create a new design using the old as their inspiration.”

“The seaward tribes!” Machigi said, intrigued despite himself. “Perhaps there is more to them than one had previously thought.” He was willing to give the paidhi that, given that the man had arranged this conference at his own estate — at Ilisidi’s behest, of course, but he had still done it.

“I think you will be pleasantly surprised, nand’ aiji,” the paidhi said, leading the way across the main hall into the side passage that lead towards the new wing. The light from the stained glass window reached even here, on this end of the hall, transforming the elegant carpet under their feet to a shifting pattern of greens and blues that reminded Machigi of the sea, touched here with a bit of gold and there with an earthy red-brown. “Being so long shut out of the larger economy of the mainland, and too poor to export anything, no one besides themselves knew of their industry—”

*Besides banditry*, Machigi thought. *Which they exported very well indeed.* It was an ancient, reflexive complaint. *Be open to other possibilities*, he told himself sternly.

“— in particular, their textiles are a wonder. I know the curators of the textile museum in Shejidan will be agog, nand’ aiji, positively agog with some of these products, and certainly the East will be interested, with their reverence of traditional crafts. The Marid could gain by transport of such goods.” Machigi doubted it. *But he is a diplomat and this is his event, and he does his best to paint a broadly sunny picture for success. And who knows? Perhaps there is something there.*

They exited the main house’s graceful little garden portico and crossed the garden itself, the air full of the scent of summertime blooms in their low beds, opening up to the noon-day sun overhead. The paidhi’s gardeners had erected trellises and arches over the garden’s paths to support flowering vines, and their party passed through three alternating bands of shade and sun before reaching the estate’s new west wing.

The paidhi lead him along a hallway therein and into a room on the wing’s seaward side. It was a very large room, decorated with excellent taste and perfect for large dinners or receptions, with floor-to-ceiling double-glazed windows on two walls. On the one side, the window looked into the paidhi’s garden. The other window afforded a view, across a cozy stone terrace, of Najida Bay, spreading out at the base of the rocky bluff on which the estate was situated. It was not the vast, city-rimmed and ship-filled view that only granted the occasional glimpse of actual water that Machigi had from his own map room; instead, it was an expanse of relatively open blue but for a few boats, here and there, and a graceful yacht riding at anchor down below. He felt a pang for his lost *Breath of the Sun* and found the scene serene, provincial, and charming.

What was decidedly *not* charming, however, was the scowling array of people waiting for him: a large arc of persons arrayed behind two large chairs and in those chairs, two women. *The Grandmothers.*

They were very large women, long ago gone not so much to fat, but to *solidity*, nearly spherical in their chairs. He knew that among these people, physical weight was a symbol of power and he found himself understanding it fully, impressed by the power



they projected. It was not at all what he had expected of people that he had never considered to be much more than sea-going brigands.

The Grandmothers were dressed in quite formal clothing, though of a style that differed from regular atevi society. He would have said that it was of a country cut, only it was made of obviously expensive material and was layered, which only added to their bulk. This was topped with additional layers of shawls, some of which had a curiously golden-like sheen that was almost lost in the bewildering array of the rest, woven in the tribes' traditional earth-tone hues. There had to be half a lifetime's worth of work in those shawls alone — in the two years since their elevation to lordship in the Association, they and their people had acquired wealth, and they wanted everyone to know it.

Behind them, in at least three ranks, were a large number of people. These were also dressed in country clothing made of luxury cloth, but he was unable to think of them as anything other than motley. *So many people!* They could not possibly all be security.

He remembered something that Kaordi's staff had told him in order to prepare him for this ordeal: that the Edi and the Gan ruled by consensus, usually achieved through much public debate which, to outsiders, would look and sound very much like a brawl. He had been mystified by this utterly alien way of doing things. It occurred to him that these must be the Grandmother's small councils — though, by the sheer quantity of people here, they could not be said to be *small*. "But," Kaordi had added. "In the end, it is the Grandmothers who have the final say, aiji-ma." *So, for all that, perhaps not all that different.*

Ilisidi sat to his right in her own chair, a mere wisp of a woman by comparison, but for all that projecting more power than the two tribal lords could hope to muster, combined, in their entire lifetimes. The aiji-dowager was clothed in black lace over black silk, and everywhere on her person there were flashes of rubies and — here and there — amber. Rings glittered on the fingers she had wrapped around the head of her formidable cane, itself lacquered a deep black, its copper-shod tip resting firmly against the floor. She had her own entourage standing behind her, but a small one of only four persons, her own aishid. In its very minimalism, this also spoke to her power.

He came to a halt in the middle of the room with his own aishid of four, a match for Ilisidi and hers. In the face of all of that baleful tribal regard, he felt very much like a person facing judicial proceedings, which he supposed he was. For a moment, no one seemed to be inclined to offer him any courtesy. *Let the trial begin!*

Then, with great care, Ilisidi took hold of her cane and levered herself to her feet. Her silver-haired senior guard — *Cenedi*, the name came to him — offered her the merest assistance in the form of a hand under her elbow. With a rustling of costly cloth, so too did the Grandmothers rise — with some reluctance, it seemed to him. *So*, he thought. *They do esteem Ilisidi highly.*

He inclined his head politely to the aiji-dowager. "Nand' Ilisidi," he said. And then, because he too esteemed the dowager, he likewise dipped his head to her companions the tribal lords, putting an expression of neutral pleasantness on his face. "Nandiin Grandmothers," he said.

The paidhi stepped in. "Nand' Aichano, Grandmother of the Edi," he said, working his way from one to the next. "Nand' Pentai, Grandmother, of the Gan. Ilisidi,

aiji-dowager, Lord of Malguri. Nand' Machigi, aiji of the Marid." *An introduction that no one needs. They know who I am.* And, by the hard frowns on their faces, they were not best pleased to be in his presence. Ah, yes, Kaordi had warned him about that. *They are more free and passionate in their physical expression than those of the court at Shejidan, aiji-ma, and may seem outrageous in every reaction.*

Indeed.

The paidhi's staff had brought him a chair, and the moment it was in place, Ilisidi sank back down into her own. And so he, too, sat. The Grandmothers sat, settling down slowly so they maintained the higher honor of sitting last. He did not care. He was simply wondering what, if anything, would come of this. *Nothing, I'll wager.* Perhaps Siodi was correct, and that this would ultimately prove to be a massive waste of time.

There was a general shifting of persons in the Grandmother's retinue as individuals jockeyed for the best vantage point, he supposed, from which to glare at him. Two of Aichano's entourage did not move and, by their stillness, drew his eye. They were two women, one middle-aged and one young — they stood out to him not only for a self-contained quality that was at odds with their more unrestrained fellows, but also because instead of wearing clothing of country cut, they were attired in wrap-around gowns that consisted of many layers of silken fabric alternating with what appeared to be a very fine matte linen. It was an elegant effect. Instead of the country folk's broad shawls and surcoats, they both of them had stolas: long lengths of some extraordinary cloth draped behind them and looped over their forearms, graceful siblings of the shawls of the same cloth he had seen buried in the Grandmothers' wrappings. The cloth shimmered in the light, now gold, now green. *What is that?* He wondered, entranced. *This must be the textile the paidhi mentioned.* It was such a surprise to see something that fine in the couture of people he had always known as barbarians that he almost failed to notice that he knew the face of the younger of the two women standing behind the Grandmother of the Edi.

*By all the fortunate gods!*

It was Fisher.

## Chapter 18 - Confrontation

*This cannot be.* But it *was* — he would know those shade-dappled eyes anywhere. And he felt, in the core of his being, that compass needle finding north again.

She was certainly not dressed in the clothes of a sailor *now*. Her courtly clothing and that extraordinary cloth draped through her arms suited her as perfectly now as the wind tousling her hair at sea had then. She was no willowy court beauty, but she stood tall and confident behind the Grandmother, completely at her ease. *By all the great fortunate gods of the sea*, he thought. *My Fisher is regal.*

If she had been at all surprised to see him, it was not reflected in her face: she met his astonished gaze with one of level amusement. This gave him another shock. He had no idea who she was within the hierarchy of the Edi but clearly she was someone of note.

He had been sitting there, silently staring, for long enough that the assembled Edi and Gan began to mutter among themselves, expressions unhappy and growing ever more hostile by the moment. If anyone in the room had said anything, he had utterly missed it. The Grandmother of the Edi, seeking to find the destination of his gaze, twisted in her seat to look behind her.

*Tap tap!* went the dowager's cane. "Nandiin, nadiin," she said in that quiet voice of hers that managed to fill the room, still all competition, and draw attention entirely to herself. And a third *tap!* of the cane. "Let us begin by expressing gratitude towards the paidhi for the use of his estate, by his provision of elegant and comfortable surrounds, and by the gracious competence of his staff."

Their host, so acknowledged, gave a deep and graceful bow before settling into his own seat.

"We are here," Ilisidi continued. "To settle the long-standing disputes between the Edi and the Gan and the Marid, now that the Marid's lord has, by association with us and the East, given up his claim to the west coast. And now that the Edi and the Gan are lords in their own right —" a nod to the two Grandmothers, who returned the nod with grimly proud expressions "—it is time for an understanding to be reached, between not one coastal association and one unsettled region, but between *three lords* firm in the man'chi of their people."

Aichano leaned back and readjusted her shawls. "An admirable goal, Grandmother of the East," she said. "If the Marid is truly ready to give up its attempts to obtain our coast." *Our coast!*

"We have agreed to it, Grandmother of the Edi," Machigi said coolly. "We accepted and signed and sealed that agreement in the capital itself, with copies in the Archives for anyone to see but for the asking of it. If you cannot accept that as legally binding, what more is there?"

This occasioned not a little grumbling from the combined retinues, and Ilisidi cut across it: "Nand' Aichano, *we* are convinced of the legitimacy of the document. It bears our own signature."

The Edi Grandmother seemed reluctant to be mollified, but she did murmur, "Of you, Grandmother of the East, we were never in doubt."

"The coast has been peaceful these two years," Pentai admitted. "The seas have been free of southern shipping."

"It is all going eastward, nand' Pentai," Machigi observed. "We are far too busy being the hub of sea-born trade between the West and the East now." *Yes, let that sink in. Perhaps there is opportunity here, as the paidhi said.* "If the Edi and the Gan have established an industry for exported goods, perhaps there is an opportunity to do business with the East through our shipping."

"To agree to the shipping, we must agree to the lord," Pentai said with sudden coldness.

*What?* Machigi tilted his head. "Your meaning is unclear, nand' Pentai. Do you propose to do business with the Marid through some other government than ours? Because," and here he leaned forward a little. "There is no other."

"Yes," said Aichano. "Of that we have heard. Of that we have heard much to displease us, lord of the Marid," a doubled repetition that underscored the infelicity of that of which she had heard.

*What has she — oh. That.* "We are not inclined to discuss internal matters, Grandmother of the Edi," he said flatly.

Aichano's eyes flashed and she shifted in the chair, sitting up and leaning forward. "But we *are* so inclined, Machigi of the Marid," she said, her eyes boring into him. "We have been asked to come here and treat with you. And we ask, why should we treat with a man who gathers people in the public audience hall of his house and then kills them all?"

"We did not kill them *all*," he said mildly. *And it was a private event.*

The assembled retinues of the Edi and the Gan gasped and looked shocked. But not, he noted, Fisher.

"You did not kill them *all*," Aichano repeated darkly. "Are we to take this for mercy? What stopped you?" *Vakhe'in*, yes, it was as clear as day — he knew what people were calling him.

He put his chin on his fist and looked at her. *I in no ways owe these persons an accounting of anything I have done*, he thought grimly to himself. He knew that Ilisidi understood, and was satisfied. That would suffice; he did not care one whit about the Grandmothers' satisfaction.

But Fisher was standing behind her Grandmother, and he found that he *did* care, very much, about *her* regard. So for her, he would answer the Edi Grandmother's question.

On his own terms.

"How do you know that you hold a person's man'chi, Grandmothers?" He asked.

Pentai frowned and stuck out her chin. "We *feel* it," she said, not a small amount of disdain in her voice. "Do you not, Lord of the Marid? It would explain much. Perhaps, with age and experience, you will feel it as well," she said with false charity, and a murmur of amusement ran through her retinue and the retinue of the Edi.

He ignored the jibe. "And yet sometimes it is obscured, is it not? You are *old*, Grandmothers. Tell me, with all that experience that *you* have and *I* do not, have you never, then, experienced betrayal? Never, once, learned that a man'chi you thought you held was, in fact, not yours?"

"Of course we have," Aichano muttered.

"Then I ask again, how do you *know*? At what point, Grandmothers, is a person absolutely *sure* of the direction another's man'chi bends?"

There was absolute silence, and then it was Fisher who supplied the answer: “Crisis.”

“Yes,” he said, to her and her alone.

Then he returned his regard to two tribal lords. “We have explained it plainly enough,” he said. “And will entertain no further discussion of it.”

*That* caused a stir, and into that stir, Pentai spoke. “Is it true that you ground up the dead for your garden, Lord of the Marid?”

The murmuring of the assembled Edi and Gan hushed. It ceased, utterly, and they all watched him, a wall of silent accusation.

Machigi, his chin still resting on his fist, kept his face impassive. He favored the Grandmother of the Gan with a hard, unwavering gaze of his own and he did not speak. The silence dragged on, becoming more weighty with every passing second. *Let that serve as your answer, Gan.* The room took on a deathly chill.

*Bang!* went Ilisidi’s cane into that awful quiet. “We can in no ways settle matters for the future *between* our collective parties if we are bickering about matters of the past *within* the boundaries of the principals, nandiin,” Ilisidi said with decisive authority, her use of “collective” drawing her shocked and angry looks which she ignored. “We shall pause the proceedings for a short time.”

As if that were his cue — *and it probably was* — the paidhi stepped in and offered a low bow. “Nandiin, nadiin,” he said smoothly. “One has been informed that luncheon is ready. One has directed staff to distribute the meal separately to all parties” — *so that we may enjoy your hospitality in peace, paidhi? Will they be able to eat with the image of my hall in their minds, I wonder?* — “and recommends that the conference resume here in two hours’ time.”

Ilisidi leaned forward and gave a short tap of her cane, a clear sign of dismissal nonetheless. “Well!” She said briskly. “We are, all of us, making progress, by inches as it may be. Let us adjourn and return in a refocused frame of mind and perhaps attempt to gain a foot by the end of day.” She rose to her feet and led the way, her aishid silently falling in.

Machigi and his were not far behind her. He was definitely discovering that there was only so much *conference* he could take at a time.

## Chapter 19 - Declaration

He was not particularly hungry, so while the rest of the attendees were, he supposed, enjoying their luncheons, he rested in his suite's sitting room and drank a little tea while looking out the windows into the garden. His aishid took turns to eat, which he had encouraged — the paidhi's kitchen staff was excellent and the cooking not at all dissimilar to the Marid's own conservative style.

It was a good view from the windows of this elegant little sitting room. It showed the paidhi's garden in a state of change — the paidhi had completed his renovation and expansion of the estate almost two years past, but the garden was still growing into its reorganized space. It would take decades, but from what he could see, the paidhi's staff were supremely competent. It was lovely now. In time, it would be extraordinary.

He sat up suddenly and put down the cup with enough force to make it ring, startling Tema. "I will go for a walk in the garden, Tema-ji," he said.

"Aiji-ma," Tema replied with a nod. His aishid was always ready to move, and so he simply got up and walked out; Tema and Frochano settled into his wake with the ease of many years' service, leaving Kochi and Sarjada to maintain watch and communications in the suite.

They went through the main hall, turned right, went down the front hallway, and came out into the garden. The sun was just past its maximum height for the day, but there was a tree or two to provide shade in addition to the garden's trellises, whose flowers filled the whole space with fragrance.

Fisher had, he counted, six people with her — his mind automatically labeled them "Cousins" — and costly though their clothing was, they were still country shirts and trews and skirts and coats. Most of the Cousins wore sturdy boots but one of them had heavily embroidered slippers. Clearly, even in the case of the Cousin in slippers, they had clothed themselves not so much for court, but for action. He could not disapprove. What did not please him, however, was the fact that they surrounded her, and once they saw him and his security approaching, seemed determine to whisk her away.

At first, it seemed as if she was content to leave, and he let out a grunt of frustration. But then, as the whole of them started through one of the narrower trellis arches, she suddenly planted herself and turned. The five leading Cousins were trapped in or on the other side of the arch and could not come between him and Fisher without trampling through the paidhi's flower beds. The sole remaining Cousin — Foremost Cousin, Machigi's mind handily supplied — planted himself firmly in Machigi's path. They were all of them speaking rapidly in the Edi dialect, the words of which he could understand perhaps one word in five. He heard "sea-thief" and "savage" and "forbidden" and even "murderer" — *gods unfortunate!* — before she turned her head and snapped something he did not understand and did not need to for the tone of it, which stilled them into shocked silence.

*Well and good.* As he reached her, she grasped the arm of Foremost Cousin and simply yanked him back and off to the side. Rather than go over the stone border and trample the flowers, Foremost Cousin stumbled backwards and just managed to avoid falling against the trellis.

Fisher dipped her head oh so very slightly. “Nand’ aiji,” she said. Her face was impassive but amusement sparkled in her eyes. “One is pleased to see You safe.”

Machigi could feel, rather than see, his escort twitch with outrage at that particular pronoun. He gestured with a hand, calling off their reaction. “One is pleased to see you safe as well. However, if one had doubted that you were a fisher before, one is absolutely certain that you are not, now.”

“One also fishes, aiji of the Marid,” she said.

Tema could not contain himself. “Aiji-ma, *this* is the fisher who pulled you from the ocean?”

“Indeed she is, Tema-ji,” Machigi answered. “But I suspect she has a more noble title. And name.” He offered her the sketch of a courtly bow. “Shall we dispense with the subterfuge, nandi?” He asked her.

“Yes.” She dipped her head in return and the corners of her lips quirked so subtly that anyone who was not watching her closely — as he was in this moment — would likely have missed it. Then she raised her chin and set her shoulders. “I am named Rao of the Edi.”

“Fifth Daughter of Eljiso, the First Daughter of Aichano, the Grandmother of the Edi,” Foremost Cousin supplied in heavily accented Ragi, glaring at him over Rao’s shoulder. “And First Granddaughter of the clan,” he added pointedly.

*First...Granddaughter. Of. The clan.*

It was as if one of the Cousins, having gotten a running start from the far end of the garden, had just reached him and hit him with full force in the face with a stick. A large one. For, he realized, she was in the direct line of succession to the lordship of the Edi.

The *Edi*.

*Damn. Damn damn damn damn and six times unfortunate damn!*

## Chapter 20 - Proposition

“Rao-nandi,” he said, trying it out, feeling out the sound of it in his mouth. It is such a simple name for such a complex person. He was still so very surprised. At least the title fit. It fit very well.

She looked amused. “What, was the fact that *you* are the aiji of all the Marid supposed to be the only surprise this day, nand’ Machigi?”

“Baji-naji,” he said with a sigh. “I should have known.”

They began to walk down the garden path. This had the unfortunate result of freeing up the trellis arch and uncorking the Cousins. They caught up and trailed behind her, shooting angry looks at Tema and Frochano, who gave every appearance of ignoring them but who, Machigi knew, were paying close attention indeed.

Machigi glanced backwards. *So many Cousins for so small a garden.* “I understand the felicity of a company of seven, Rao-nandi,” he said. “But for a garden of this size, it seems somewhat excessive.” *Do they think I will seize her in the paidhi’s own garden?*

Their glowers made it clear that they did, in fact, expect him to attempt gardening here, of one sort or another.

Rao smiled. “I believe the aiji was somewhat indiscreet in his reaction when he arrived to assembly. Grandmother is suspicious.”

“‘Suspicious’ seems a mild word,” he said. “I wonder, why did she and the Grandmother of the Gan even agree to this in the first place?”

“Ah, they revere Ilisidi of the Malguri as the Grandmother of the East, nand’ aiji, and favor nand’ Bren extremely for his staunch support of the tribes. You may be surprised to learn that Grandmother has, at times, even thought favorably of *you*. She was very pleased when you established the common game preserve with Sarini Province, and voted for our admittance.”

“If that is so, nand’ Rao, it was not in evidence today.”

“Hm. Yes. It is not gossip, I think, to say that the events in your hall dismayed her.”

He did not care about that. “Did they dismay *you*?”

She looked thoughtful. “I do not favor such actions. But I understand why you undertook them.”

“Hm,” he said. “Would that your Grandmother could come to such an understanding.”

“Well,” she said. “She has not yet had a chance to come to know you, as I have.” Behind her, Foremost Cousin’s eyes widened in surprise.

“You did not tell her?” Machigi asked.

She gave a little shrug. “What can I say? If I said, ‘but Grandmother, he only knows me because I rescued him from the sea,’ she will attempt to turn it into a political point. I yearn for the Grandmother’s success as lord of the Edi but,” and here she grew a little fierce. “I do not wish the story of you to be turned into trade goods, good only for haggling over.”

“(Something) *sea*, Rao-ja?” Foremost Cousin said, incredulous — and once again Machigi only understood a few words. “(Something) Grandmother absolutely (something)!”



“Oh, Nicha-ja? (Something)?”

“Yes,” Cousin Nicha replied. “The Marid (something) debt. (Something) debt (something) Edi. (*Something*),” he added, sounding very firm.

Rao sighed. “Do you see?” She said to Machigi. “They do not listen, because I am only a Granddaughter. Because I am young. And this is why I prefer to spend time at sea in the first place.” She glared at Cousin Nicha. “Alone.”

“Being underestimated for one’s youth can be an advantage,” Machigi offered. “I have often found it to be useful.”

“Oh, aiji of the whole Marid?” Rao said, interested. “How old are you, if I may be so bold as to ask?”

*May you ever be so bold*, he thought. “Twenty four,” he said, heedless of the number’s infelicity. “You?”

“Twenty five,” she said. Then, eyes twinkling, she intoned solemnly, “One is impressed that you have united the Marid, and you still at such a tender age, nandi.”

And he held onto that power through his ability to remain impassive in the face of outrageous speech. “No one in the whole of the Marid would dare speak to me so,” he told her, but he was mild about it and raised an eyebrow in amusement. “My small council would demand a Filing.”

“Ah, but we Edi have been proper signatories to the Aishidi'tat these past two years, nandi, have we not? I doubt that the Guild in Shejidan would support a Filing for mere teasing.”

“Ah yes. I had forgotten you were no longer pirates, *nandi*.” A beat. “What were you doing in southern waters?”

“Pirates? Such an incendiary term, aiji of the Marid, and at the paidhi’s own peace conference. As for me, I was fishing.”

“Poaching.” *That* got the Cousins’ attention, as if either of them needed any more of it, and occasioned another terse warning in the Edi tongue from Rao.

“Fishing,” she said then, with a smile. “And watching the migration of the kelikiin.”

“Watching, eh? Where there is one tourist, there are others, Granddaughter of the Edi.”

She chuckled softly. “Do not be troubled, nandi. Believe me when I tell you that the Edi are not invading your waters in numbers. It is only me, and only once in a year, because your bay is the only place where the kelikiin flock.” She took on that grave mien again. “As *your elder*, I advise you not to put this forward as a point of contention with my clan. It will only cloud matters.” The act was, once again, entirely ruined by the sparkle in her eyes.

*Impudent! Impertinent! Brazen!*

*And...fearless.*

He was suddenly serious. He stopped and turned to face her. “Come with me to Tanaja,” he said. “And marry me there.” It was the second surprise of the day, that those words would come out of his own mouth.

Tema made a noise that sounded like a half-gargled bark. He choked it short and managed to get out a strangled, “*Aiji-ma!*”

Then, because the Cousins had sucked in a deep collective breath and become collectively tense, both his security took a step to either side of him now, he could see

them in his peripheral vision. He knew they moved to be ready to get in the way because even though the Edi were part of the Shejidan association now, the Cousins were still unpredictable irregulars. And if there was anything that Guild security disliked, it was irregulars.

Machigi ignored them all.

Rao had also stopped. She shot the Cousins a significant look over her shoulder. This had the effect of forestalling what would undoubtedly be *vociferous* objections, but he had no idea how long it would last.

She said, calmly, “did I not — just a moment ago — advise you to caution?” She opened a hand and indicated Tema. “I suspect even your staff would agree.”

*Agree? I think Tema might be one his way to an aneurysm.* The Cousins, he noted, looked like a steam engine with a faulty pressure relief valve: they were clearly ready to blow.

But he was undeterred. “Nonetheless.”

She turned to face him decisively. Cousin Nicha started to say something in the Edi tongue, the other Cousins bunched up behind him for support. But Rao turned her head ever so slightly and snarled something with such force that Nicha took an actual step back, directly into the other five. Having established her space, Rao turned her full regard on Machigi and again, he was struck by how *regal* she was.

She spoke flatly and directly. “You wish me to go with you to Tanaja,” she said. “Me, of the Edi.”

“Yes.”

“Of a clan that has been in deep enmity with the Marid for two hundred years.”

“Yes.”

“You are proposing that I leave my home and my people, and travel into what has been enemy territory for four generations.”

He set his jaw. “Yes.”

“You propose that we, you and I, outrage both of our peoples with a marriage contract.”

“Yes.”

“You do this even though it may be dangerous for both of us. Even though your own people may object, perhaps strenuously, to even the *idea* of such a contract, much less accept it.”

“Yes.”

“Because we spent two days, two nights, and almost a dawn together in a boat.”

“No,” he said. At the inquisitive tilt of her head, he said, “because the compass needle came to rest.”

She stared at him with her eyes of dappled gold, her lips parted, caught in mid-breath.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Tema was baffled and alarmed. *Most assuredly*, he thought, *he and Frochano must think I have lost my mind.* The Cousins certainly did so, because they began to speak, this time in a heated Edi/Ragi creole he could understand, and he was sure it was by design.

“Rao-ja,” said Blue Skirt Cousin. “This person insults you.”

“He insults all the Edi,” added Wide Belt Cousin.

“What else would we expect from a cold-blooded murderer?” Green Slipper Cousin sneered.

“Come with us, Rao-ja,” Cousin Nicha said in his accented Ragi. “Grandmother will have something to say and will rid you of this person.” It was a statement with which all the Cousins vigorously agreed. They dared, even, to pluck at her sleeves, trying to pull her away from him. “Come away. Do not suffer this madman any longer.”

*Yes, I am mad.* But he did not move. Their words meant nothing. Only she mattered. Because there had been two surprises today and even though he was not a superstitious number-counter, his soul yearned for a fortunate third.

“If you tell me no,” he said softly. “I will not speak of it again.”

“There is your escape, Rao-ja” Cousin Nicha interjected. “Say no.” But she paid him no mind.

“Yes,” she said.

## Chapter 21 - Indication

Any plans the paidhi had for the conference to resume were shattered; the house was in an uproar. Machigi sat at a desk in his sitting room, writing out a letter in his own hand, and listened to it. The noise was, by and large, coming from across the hall, from the suite in which the paidhi had settled the Grandmother of the Edi and her entourage. They appeared to be engaged in — how had his briefing put it? Ah, yes — *lively debate*.

As he worked, he began to mark a pattern in the upheaval across the hall: the alternation of a very small period of quiet followed by a much longer period of hubbub. His mind began to supply him with something like a script for what was happening.

Period of quiet: the Grandmother of the Edi was speaking, followed by Rao's response.

Hubbub: The Cousins, reacting.

*I can almost follow the argument just from the pattern of the noise*, he thought, amused. He knew that whatever it was that they were discussing — it was him, it had to be him — it was not going well, for every time the hubbub broke out, it was a little louder, a little more heated, more shouty, withal.

*If it goes on like this, I will soon be able to make out the words. I worry for her hearing.*

He finished the letter, rolled it up, and applied ribbon and wax with his personal seal. This went into his own messenger cylinder, a lacework of blue and green porcelain strands, in offset layers to render the contents secure, which he sealed with yet more wax. "Siti-ji," he said to the senior of his body servants. "When I indicate," he said. "Deliver this to the paidhi's staff. But not before."

"Aiji-ma," Tarsiti accepted the cylinder with a bow.

When Tarsiti had withdrawn to the inner rooms, Tema approached him. "Aiji-ma," the senior of his aishid said. "Is this wise?"

"Probably not," Machigi replied.

"Why did you do this?" Tema's brows were knit. "It seems an extraordinarily generous reward for saving you at sea."

"It is not a reward, Tema-ji. There is more to it, and one day I may tell you about it...once I have figured it out myself. For the time being, I am working on instinct, and must ask you to trust me."

"We trust you, aiji-ma," Tema said solemnly. "Though it would be helpful for your aishid to have had some advance warning."

"I did not plan it."

"So I gathered, aiji-ma." Tema said, stone-faced.

Machigi raised an eyebrow. "How long have you known me, Tema-ji?"

Tema thought about it. "Since you were fortuitous seven, aiji-ma." The man was only five years his elder — they had been children together, once.

*A lifetime ago*. "And in all that time, have I ever come across to you as slow to come to a resolution?"

"No, aiji-ma," Tema had to admit.

“You have never failed to adapt when I have made abrupt decisions — and my instincts have always worked out in the end, have they not?”

Tema thought about that, too. “Well, aiji-ma, there was the time with the extortionists on the waterfront — we had to drag you out of there, and most of them got away —”

Machigi blinked.

“— and the time that you went after Tiajo’s mole network in the bank yourself —”

“The midsummer regatta. Do not forget about the midsummer regatta,”

Frochano offered from her post at the door. “The port was blocked for a week.”

“*Granted*,” Machigi held up his hand, forestalling further testimonials. “Would you at least agree that, *in most cases*, I have worked out rapidly-evolving situations to my advantage?”

Tema and Frochano exchanged glances and there was an uncomfortable pause as they worked out the math. “In most cases, aiji-ma,” Tema finally allowed.

“By a narrow margin, aiji-ma,” Frochano added.

Machigi pinched the bridge of his nose. “Gods less fortunate.”

“If you merely wished to annoy the Grandmothers of the Edi and the Gan, aiji-ma, there are ways that would involve less...*commitment*.”

“Ah, but the commitment is what I want, Tema-ji. Be patient. As for the Grandmothers, annoying them is simply an unforeseen bonus.”

## Chapter 22 - Explanation

“What is this we hear, Rao-ja?” Grandmother demanded. “What is Nicha-ja telling us? We think he has gone soft in the head.” She gave the young man a glare.

They were in the sitting room of the generous suite that paidhi had allotted them, among the biggest in the whole house, that he had renovated just for them because he knew that the Grandmothers of the Edi and the Gan never traveled without their retinues.

The sitting room was set up tribunal style, which Rao should have expected: the Grandmother, in her chair, with all of her siblings and cousins and other people of the clan retinue arrayed in a semicircle behind her and two her sides. It was something like a parabolic array, and Rao was standing in the focal point.

She sighed to herself. She could in no ways see a satisfactory way out of this, but for her sake and his and the sake of the Edi, she had to try.

“Nichi-ja’s head is perfectly fine, Grandmother,” she said. “Machigi has proposed marriage and I have accepted.”

“Outrageous!” “Impossible!” “How dare he!” *Oh, how difficult this is going to be with the chorus*, she thought. *I wish Grandmother would dismiss them.* Was she the only one who had paid attention to the Central way, the *quiet* way, of dealing with such matters? But she knew Grandmother would not dismiss them. It did not matter that they had been in the aishidi’tat these past two years — it was simply not the Edi way. They would object like this, and egg on Grandmother, and try to egg *her* on, every chance they got. She found that she had balled her hands into fists and willed them to relaxation. *Ignore them.*

“Honored Grandmother,” she said. “The rift between the clans and the south has been going on long enough. It is time for it to stop. We have become members of the aishidi’tat. We must behave accordingly. An alliance would benefit everyone.”

“*Civilized people* ally themselves with one another,” Grandmother said acidly. “Only one half of this proposed paring is *civilized*.”

“It is not proposed, Grandmother,” Rao said calmly. “It *was* proposed. I have accepted.”

This prompted another outburst from the chorus and again, Rao sighed to herself. *They do not understand independence of action*, she thought. And sure enough:

“Rao-ja,” her mother said. “You cannot possibly make such an arrangement without the agreement of the clan. It affects more than just you, daughter of mine.”

“I must disagree, Honored Mother,” Rao replied. “As I do not wish to be a bargaining chip, it is *only* my agreement to make. What now falls to the clan is what to *do* with it — whether to find opportunity for *all of us* in this thing that *one of us* has done.”

“Yes, let us talk about what you have done, Rao-ja,” said Grandmother dangerously. “How could you possibly have agreed to anything that man has proposed?”

“Machigi is not—”

“*That man*, I say! Thief, murderer, pirate, that black-hearted scoundrel of the south. The man who massacred his own people in his own hall — he turned the

audience hall, that place where citizens have the right — a sacred right! — to gather and petition him, into a slaughterhouse! Do you doubt, Granddaughter, that any of those unfortunates petitioned him for their *lives* on that day? He dares to call *us* ‘savages’ after *that*?”

The chorus roared in approbation and the wave of sound rolled back and forth, reflecting off of the walls despite their tapestries.

“Why?” Grandmother wanted to know, when it died down enough for her to be heard. “Why you? Why *him*? Did you not hear him, Rao-ja? He admitted to atrocities. The garden, Rao-ja, need I remind you?

“But now he *knows*, Grandmother. And they know he knows. And every time they go into that garden, they are reminded how he made it green. He is *safer for it*, Grandmother, *and so are his people*.”

“Sheer barbarism, we say! We of the Edi would have *never* done such an unthinkable thing. Do you tell us, Granddaughter, that you condone this? That you would yourself have done as he did?”

“No, Grandmother. It is not what I would have done. But I am not aiji of the Marid. If that is what he had to do to secure his place and his people and the peace because of who *they* are, and if we Edi would never have to resort to that because of who *we* are, then perhaps we *should* associate with the Marid. Because we have something to teach them.”

Grandmother scoffed. “Ludicrous child. Seeking to change the world.”

“Perhaps I am foolish, Grandmother. But change has to start somewhere.”

“One very much doubts that this desire of yours to run off with that creature has to do with *altruism*,” Grandmother narrowed her eyes. “These are nothing more than dreams you use to justify this...this *urge*. Has he gained your man’chi?”

“No, Grandmother,” she said softly. “It is not that. It is a’hrani.”

She had dared say the word. There was a loud, shocked, collective gasp — even Grandmother’s mouth dropped open. Then: “False attachment,” Grandmother said flatly. “It will lead to your ruin, Rao-ja.”

“No, Grandmother. I assure you it is not false. It is a’hrani,” she said it again to give it power. “Grandmother, Machigi is aiji and feels no man’chi. I am aiji-born also, and feel no man’chi, only duty. You know this — it is why you made me First Granddaughter. I tell you that this is a strong thing because *there is no man’chi to cloud*. There is no man’chi! It is an *absence* that I feel — when he is not there, a part of me is *missing*. We both feel it, that absence. We turn away from it together.” It was the best she could do.

And clearly not enough, for the disbelief and scorn that poured out on her from the people in the room.

“Nonsense,” Grandmother said through the objections of the chorus. “This is nonsense, and more than nonsense, it is madness. *He is a beast*, and *you* have gone *mad*.”

“I assure you, Grandmother, that I am perfectly sane, and that nothing has made as much sense to me in my whole life.”

The letter completed, Machigi shifted to a chair with a clear view of the door and simply listened. It was quite apparent that things were getting much worse and it was

no longer amusing. “Siti-ji,” he said. “Give the letter to Samano. Pack up our things and be ready to leave at a moment’s notice.” He did not have to give the order to his security — Kochi immediately turned and departed to prepare their own equipment and the rest of the security team for a rapid departure.

He had established the option for movement, if need be. From the sound of things, it would in fact need to be. *But how am I going to extract her from all of...that?* He sat, chin on his fist, and thought about the layout of the house, about his staff, about what resources he had to hand, and began to ponder.



## Chapter 23 - Insubordination

“It must have been the boat,” Her mother said unhappily. “Something must have happened in the boat.”

Rao could almost feel the prurient wheels turning in the retinue’s heads, and stifled a groan. *Patience*. But — *my own mother!* “It is none of your business, and unimportant, besides. ‘Leave to the sea its own,’ is that not something you have taught me yourself, Honored Mother?” She said, sweetly. It was a proverb that the Edi had long used to justify those actions that outsiders termed ‘piracy’. Perhaps it would serve her here, now.

But alas, Grandmother waved the argument away with a hand. “Whatever has happened, Rao-ja, I tell you this as one who has lived a long lifetime and seen many things. Listen to me: young people often make inconsequential events far more important than they are. If there was canoodling afloat, what does it matter?” She waved a dismissive hand. “To the sea its own, indeed, Granddaughter. Yes, you saved his life. It is what any sailor would have done for any person lost at sea. This outsider is young and overreacts, and proposes this ill-considered, unthinkable, and in all ways foolish marriage. We are not surprised by this. But we expect better of *you*.”

Rao suppressed a sigh of utter exasperation. *She won’t even say his name*. “Grandmother, Machigi—”

“In time, when the newness of this thing has lost its shine, you will come to see how temporary it was,” Grandmother sailed right over her. “You will find someone among the Edi, and likely more than one, in your time. Certainly any of your own people would be much better suited than that southern savage. You are the First Granddaughter, Rao-ja. And you are so very young. You, too, are mistaking this seaward dalliance for landward stability. Do not not settle for a shipwreck, Granddaughter. Remember that the sea makes everything look bigger, and we are sure that he is small indeed.”

The Cousins tittered and laughed.

Rao would have none of it. “He is magnificently proportioned, Grandmother,” she announced firmly. “And a superb lover.”

*What did she just say?* Machigi wondered, blinking at the sudden cacophony. *They are all of them screaming in there.*

His aishid had gone absolutely still, in that utter relaxed state they went into when they were about to go into combat, but their faces were locked in confusion. None of them had ever heard such a commotion without that it be accompanied by *gunfire*. He would not have been the least bit surprised if, in the next moment or two, that actually happened.

Instead, the hubbub cut short — it just stopped, as if a switch had been thrown. *The Grandmother is speaking. And whatever she is saying, it is not good.* There were a few more moments of silence. But he felt it as the kind of silence that happened when the water sucked back into the sea, just before the great wave hit. He felt himself tense.

“In no ways will we allow the First Granddaughter to be so suborned!” Grandmother said. “No Granddaughter of this house will be aligned with such a house,

with such a person! Taisigi and Edi? *That man?* No! *Never*, we say, while these bones still hold up this flesh!" She shook a finger at Rao. "Set this foolishness aside, Rao-ja, or you will not only no longer be First, but you will no longer be *Edi*!"

In all her life, Rao had never taken well to an ultimatum, and she was not about to start now. She drew up the strength of the earth through the ground and through the stones and through her feet, and felt her spine stiffen. She drew in the strength of the sea, out there beyond the paidhi's walls, and the strength of the stars above and felt it all course through her blood. "So be it," she said.

Her mother gasped. "Honored Mother, no," she said to the Grandmother. "Please—"

Grandmother hitched her shawls to herself tightly. "Than so it is, Rao." No "-ja", no "Granddaughter." Rao's mother let out a wail of grief.

*Well, then.* Rao started to turn and her Grandmother barked out over her mother's cries, "Stay where you are! You will not leave this room!"

Rao lifted an eyebrow and folded her hands before her, settling her courtly manners on her like armor. "Did you not just cast one out of the clan, Grandmother of the Edi?" she asked, so quietly that her mother had to stop sobbing to hear her. "With all the respect due to a clan lord not one's own, nandi, one does not accept that you have the authority to keep one here now."

"Impertinent child! The Edi's loss will not be that vakhe'in's gain!"

"Oh, will it not?" Rao said, and all the retinue subsided, shocked, at the resounding power of her voice. Of *her*. "You may be the Grandmother of the clan, but do not think for a moment that this makes you all that the Edi are! Take away my inheritance, take away my place, take away my *future* in this clan, I do not care! But I will *always* be Edi!"

And with that she whirled and made directly for doors, without hesitation, opened them with her own hands. She was already in the hall before she heard Grandmother shout — "What you waiting for, fools? Go get her!" — and the footsteps of the chorus behind her. They were calling out to her. She increased her stride, full of fire, and plunged into the multicolor beams of light cast by the paidhi's stained-glass window.

## Chapter 24 - Commitment

Machigi heard the doors to the Edi suite open and swift steps approaching from across the hall. *She comes.* Half a heartbeat later, he could hear many more footsteps and raised voices: the Cousins, he guessed, pouring out of the suite's sitting room to stop her.

Machigi gave the slightest nod and Frochano smoothly opened the door to his suite. "Rao-daja", she murmured, as Rao sailed into the room with her chin held high. Then, as soon as Rao had cleared the threshold, Frochano smoothly and firmly shut the door. There was a thump against the farther side as the first Cousin in the van of the Edi forces fetched up against it. Frochano threw the bolt just as a person on the other side tried to open it. *Rude. And also suicidal.*

Machigi stood up as Rao crossed the room to him. He gestured, palm-upward, to the door to the dining hall. "Shall we go somewhere quieter, Rao-ji?" He suggested, just as the banging on the door started in earnest. She inclined her head, just so. "I would be grateful for some peace, Chigi-ji," and his heart skipped a beat. *Let them pound at the door to their hearts' content,* he thought exultantly. *They will not have her.*

He brought her to the dining room and ordered tea. "Deliver the letter," he said, as his staff brought in the suite's delicate tea service. Samaso slipped out and Rao's eyebrow quirked up. Only Frochano was evident in the room — Machigi knew the rest of the aishid and their hand of security were covering the doors and the sitting room's windows and even the sectioned crawl space between the ceiling and the roof above, staving off an invasion of Cousins until the paidhi's own forces could come to bear, to ensure peace in the paidhi's own house. Peace that he, aiji of the Marid, had completely destroyed. *Ah well.* Machigi did not regret it.

He did not explain the letter, nor did she ask. Instead, they drank tea together in perfectly serene silence. When they at last set down their cups, she gathered her hands in her lap.

"Grandmother opposes this marriage," she informed him.

He laughed. "Rao-ji, that much is apparent from the commotion and the ongoing assault on my door. I expected nothing less. I was in fact trying to figure a way to take you out of there, but then you solved the problem for me. Is her approval required, legally, among the Edi?"

"It is not," she said. "As an adult I am free to make my own choices, even if anyone — if everyone — objects."

"And you choose me."

"Yes," she said. "Also, Grandmother has disowned me," she added.

"What?"

"It is her right. Grandmother chooses who is in the succession."

He let out a breath. "She thinks I will refuse you if there is no political advantage in this."

"Perhaps," said Rao.

"But there could be a political advantage in any union, however small, between Taisigi and Edi," he offered tentatively.

“Well,” said Rao. “Grandmother has put paid to that as well, I fear. She has cast me out of the clan.”

He blinked. “Cast you out?” *How your Grandmother hates me.*

“Yes. I am exiled. So as for political advantage of any kind, that is done now,” Rao said. “From the Edi perspective, I am no one.” She took a breath to steady herself and regarded him with sincerity. “I will not hold you to the offer therefore. What is your decision?”

Machigi tilted his head. “This in no ways changes any thing,” he said. “I do not care.” His eyes narrowed. “If the Grandmother of the Edi is so foolish to throw away her most precious treasure, we will not hesitate to take it up. To take *you* up, Rao-ma, with the regard you deserve.” The royal *we*, there — it was the aiji who was speaking now, with that suffix of alignment, of *possession* — *I want to make this perfectly plain.* Her wide eyes told him that he had been successful.

But: “You were not wrong when you said this would be dangerous,” he told her. “More dangerous still that you have been cast out. You will have no staff from your own people. And you will not be welcomed, not at first — I mean to see that most likely opinion change, and I tell you that I shall. But it will be difficult at the outset. So I, in turn, will not hold *you* to the offer therefore.” He dipped his head. “What is your decision?” And he held his breath.

Rao regarded him silently for a long, long moment. Then she lifted her chin, resolute. “When do we leave?”

He could breathe again. “We are ready to go now,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “But your belongings?”

She indicated herself with a gentle downward sweep of her hand. “This is all I can offer.”

He smiled. “Treasure indeed. It is more than I dared hope.” He dared, in this house, to touch her cheek. She tilted her head, just so, to better feel the warmth of his fingertips against her skin. She dared, in this house, to reach up up in return, brushing a light thumb across the scar on his chin. “Shall I tell you about it now, Fisher-ma?” He asked, dipping his head to catch her thumb on his lips.

“No, You-ma,” she traced his smile. “Save it. Its story will be my prize if we actually succeed in marrying.”

Tema spoke up. “Aiji-ma. The assault on the suite has abated. I suspect that they are regrouping or appealing to the paidhi. If you wish to leave, now would be the time.”

Machigi rose and favored Rao with a slight bow. “Come, then, daja-ma.”

## Chapter 25 - Elucidation

*Machigi aiji of the aishihai'mar, to Bren-paidhi*

*Nand' paidhi (Bren read), if you are reading this, then I have had to quit the hospitality of your house in an abrupt manner. Please let me assure you that this in no way reflects upon the quality of your house, your staff, or your own competence. The quality of all of these is without question in the whole wide world. But it does perhaps reflect on the quality of certain of your other guests.*

*As I write this, I am not certain as to how they will react to my proposal to Rao-daja, or to her acceptance of it. But should they treat her poorly or subject her to abuse because of it, I am not prepared to allow them to continue down that path. I am in fact prepared to move us both to a path of my own choosing and in this, I will not hesitate.*

*If this letter is in your hands, then it means that I have indeed found the need to withdraw from your conference. I very much regret these disruptions to your and the aiji-dowager's most commendable plans for accord. Perhaps if the passage of time should result in cooler perspectives, we will be able to avail ourselves of your matchless diplomacy, and once again return to your table. With any luck, we will do so soon.*

That “we”, Bren noted, was not the royal “we” of an aiji, but rather the fortunate dual of pairing: one plus one.

*Please convey to your staff my official thanks for their impeccable service, and please reassure them, nand' paidhi, that my departure in no way reflects on their professionalism, courtesy, or service.*

*Signed, Machigi of the Marid*

The letter has been delivered to Bren, sitting with Ilisidi in her sitting room, along with the information that the aiji and Rao had departed so abruptly that Machigi had left his porcelain message cylinder behind. It is most likely an antique and a treasure and priceless, but he still apparently abandoned it without a second thought. *He already had the only treasure he wanted.*

“This letter was in no ways written within the past fifteen minutes,” He exclaimed, astonished. Perhaps it was because of his long association with the dowager, but Bren simply could not keep himself impassive. “He knew, aiji-ma. He *knew!* He had it all planned, the house is in uproar, the Edi and the Gan want to go to *war* —” *my meticulously-planned, hand-crafted masterwork of a peace conference is lying shattered on the floor, my peace is in pieces* — “and he apologizes for the inconvenience!”

Ilisidi laughed, outright *laughed*. “A pert boy,” she said, delighted. “With all the self-satisfaction of his youth. One suspects he planned far less than you think, paidhi. Your mastery of diplomacy was in no ways faulty — this has all the hallmarks of an opportunity observed, understood, and seized, wholly on the fly. By both of them.” The approval was apparent in her voice — it was, after all, how she had operated her whole long life. He should have expected nothing less.

“We did not need to be present to follow what was happening in your sitting room, paidhi,” she continued. *God. No one did.* “We observed that this young person held her own in the face of her elders and peers,” Ilisidi continued. “And, having done

so, charted her own course.” From Ilisidi, this was high praise indeed. *She sees herself in Rao-daja*, Bren thought.

“It is a good match,” The dowager emphasized the pronouncement with a solid thump of her cane. “It is a fine and proper match, I say, regardless of the Grandmother’s reaction! The young woman has a fierceness that pairs well with his, but a gentle regard for the world that will settle his rough edges and only serve to focus his will. She will bring an earthy grace to his house. All this time he was looking to the west, thinking it was the *coast* he wanted. Ha! Aichano is a fool to not recognize what this marriage could do for the Edi. They fit one another,” she added.

*An entendre?* Bren wondered, a little shocked, although it would not have been the first time. He knew that Ilisidi had a wicked sense of humor and was always trying to catch him, the human, out. And she often succeeded. He stole a glance at the dowager’s expression, but no, she looked entirely serious this time.

“Aiji-ma, help me understand,” he pleaded with her. “Being human, I lack a full understanding of ateva nature — even after so many years living among you, I still do not understand how this could have come to be. Did he obtain her man’chi?”

Ilisidi readjusted her grip on her cane and shook her head. “No, paidhi-ji. Rao-daja would not have been First Granddaughter if such a thing were possible. She is an aiji in her own right.”

*An aiji: not wired to give man’chi, only to receive it.* “Then how—?”

“Look to Jago, paidhi,” Ilisidi said, with that firm tone that told him not to push the topic with her. But she had not shut him off from that terribly sensitive topic entirely; in fact, she had all but given Jago, standing by the door as his escort, a direct order to explain it to him. *Finally!* He knew that explanation would not be forthcoming until much later in the evening, but he was willing to be patient.

*In the meantime...* “One cannot help but wonder, aiji-ma, if the reaction of his own people to this union will be much the same, or perhaps even worse, than that of her clan’s.”

The dowager dismissed the thought with a negligent wave of her hand. “We have no doubt that he is strong enough to maintain their man’chi.”

*Or we would not have allied ourselves with him in the first place*, he understood her to mean.

“I trust in your judgement, aiji-ma,” Bren said. He himself, though, was still a little worried. *I sincerely hope that he will not have another reason to resort to his particular brand of, ah, crisis management.*

As for himself, well, *he* was left with two furious Grandmothers. In his house. And it now fell to him, somehow, to mollify them. *God. I have no idea how I will do that.* He prayed that Ilisidi’s presence would somehow assist the impossible task he had before him.

*Damn it, Machigi!*

Much, much later — in the middle of the night, in fact, for that is how long it had taken him to calm down the Grandmothers long enough to get them fully extracted from his house and on their way to theirs — Jago slipped into his bed. “All of the guests are gone, Bren-ji,” she reported. “Security is on alert in case there are any lingering surprises. But we do not anticipate trouble. You may rest easy, if you can.” She knew

him far too well, though, to know that he could actually rest, much less easily, after all of that.

He sighed. "When she first wrote to ask for this, Ilisidi said that I had never failed her. I cannot say that *now*."

Jago ran her fingers through his hair, the followed the curve of his ears lightly with her fingertips. It had never ceased to amaze her how round his ears were. *Exotic*, she called them. "It is not anyone's opinion that you failed, Bren-ji, at least among the staff. There was no way that any reasonable person could have expected what happened today. We are all of us still trying to understand it, ourselves."

"I simply don't understand Machigi," Bren said. "He is young, he is brash, he is bold, but he is not *mad*. What kind of person comes to a peace conference and absconds with one of the other side's kin?"

"The Grandmothers were certainly generous with the word 'kidnapping'," Jago said. "But you were right to point out that nand' Aichano cast her out, and that Rao-daja used that freedom to made her own choice."

"I didn't even know that lords could *do* that, Jago-ji," Bren said. "I thought it only happened in the machimi."

"It is rare," she replied. "But not unknown. It is more common to file Intent. Safer."

He shifted in the bed and propped himself on his elbow to look at her. In the dim light, her eyes glowed. "Jago-ji," he said. "*What happened?* What is this word, a'hrani? The Grandmothers used it like an accusation, while they were accusing Machigi of kidnapping."

She pondered the question. Her specialty was guns, not words. "It is a feeling, Bren-ji. A yearning. Like man'chi, but not man'chi. You have seen it in the machimi."

"I have?" He was surprised. "I have never heard the word before today."

"It is not said," Jago explained. "It is the connection that confuses man'chi."

"False man'chi," said Bren, beginning to understand.

"Yes," said Jago. "That is one of the things it is called, to avoid using the word itself."

"Is it forbidden to say it?"

"Not forbidden, Bren-ji. Infelicitous. The word simply brings unease. Because of its power. To say the thing is to bring it into being."

Bren blinked. "I did not know that there were superstitions so strong as to stop a person's mouth."

Jago gave a little shrug. "It is rarely a topic of discussion to begin with. These matters are close-held, Bren-ji, even among atevi. You should not put it in your dictionary."

No. God. Humans would instantly map the word to "love" and it would cause no manner of issues. Even he felt himself felt a powerful and insidious temptation to believe that this was, in fact, the breakthrough that humans always thought would someday happen that would prove them and the atevi fundamentally similar after all. That he, Bren Cameron, would be the one to have made that crucial discovery. A seductive idea...but false. It was exactly those kinds of attempted correspondences, he reminded himself, that caused the War of the Landing. No, he would in no ways put the word into the Dictionary. "But the dowager wanted you to tell me."

“I believe she only thought it fair that you understand what happened so that you would not blame yourself.”

“So you are saying that Machigi-aiji feels an attachment — however false — to Rao-daja, or she to him? Is that possible?”

Jago frowned a little. “No, Bren-ji. Not for aijiin. Unless one of them is somehow not truly an aiji.”

Bren knew that aiji were born, not made — it was in the wiring. And he knew Machigi for what he was, an aiji through and through, reaching through blood and fire and smoke to grasp, and keep, the man’chi of his people. Of that he had no doubt. As for Rao — he did not know her. But the Grandmother of the Edi had set her into the line of succession. *She would not do that if she were not assured of Rao’s nature, would she? Can atevi be wrong about this?*

Something occurred to him. “Jago-ji, in the machimi, when a’hrani comes into play, it always affects man’chi, does it not?”

“Yes, Bren-ji. It clouds man’chi, so that people do not know until the crisis comes, all is revealed, and collapses into tragedy.”

“But how does a’hrani affect people who do not feel man’chi? How does it affect aijiin, Jago-ji?”

The light of Jago-ji’s eyes flickered in the gloom as she blinked. “I do not know, Bren-ji.”

“Perhaps it is something that evolved for such people,” Bren suggested. “So that they might still feel a connection to another person in the absence of being able to feel man’chi. Or for a hadjaijid person—” that was to say, one who could neither give nor receive man’chi or feel it in any direction: a sociopath, in atevi terms — “maybe it would allow such a person to still touch and be touched, and have a meaningful life.”

“Are you saying that the machimi are wrong, Bren-ji?” Jago was amused.

“Perhaps they don’t have the whole picture,” he said — the cliché worked as well in Ragi as Mosphei’. “I would like to think that all of this happened for a *good reason*, Jago-ji, and that things will not turn into tragedy. I think that is why the dowager is unconcerned. I think she *knows*.”

“Well,” Jago-ji said. “I think that if any person knew the truth of it, it would be Ilisidi of Malguri.”

Bren thought about all the rumors about the dowager — all the rumored *lovers*. “I agree, Jago-ji. I do agree.”



**IV**  
**IN THE HOUSE OF THE TAISIGI**

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## Chapter 26 - From the Commentary

When it comes to atevi philosophy regarding leadership, an important pair of concepts to understand are eun and an'an.

*Eun* - the propensity to make decisions from one's own center. Antonym *an'an*, the tendency to make decisions in response to external advice or opinions. Either could be a positive trait or a negative one. In the case of eun, if a person is a selfish, irrational, or vindictive personality, acting out of eun would not be good — one has only to think of the recent history of the Pretender Murini to understand a textbook example of the negative consequences of eun. However, when the personality is grounded in intelligence, farsightedness, and consideration for the needs of the collective, acting out of eun is strongly positive.

Likewise, acting out of an'an could be positive if those external advisors are good people and remain so, but generally the only persons who favor an'an are those who wish to manipulate and exploit a leader for their own ends while retaining some form of plausible deniability.

In general, atevi view eun as a necessary trait in a strong leader, while considering an'an as negative. This is largely to do with relative complexity. The failure of such a structure — and determining its points of weaknesses — is more likely and more complicated the more persons are involved. With eun, however, there is a clear single point of failure.

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Bren Cameron, Translator, *Commentary: Dictionary Terms Related to Atevi Leader- and Followership*, Field Commentary series #12, the University of Mospheira

## Chapter 27 - Arrival

The palace was all a-bustle and Gediri stood in the audience hall, planting himself in that one place — every building had one — where anyone needing direction could find him. He had received communication from the aiji's traveling staff that the aiji was already inbound from Najida and would be arriving shortly.

It was a much earlier return than originally planned, but it was not something particularly unexpected: Gediri had been pessimistic about Machigi being able to negotiate anything with a gaggle of jumped-up pirates in the first place.

But what *was* unexpected were additional instructions to him to see to it that Nevathi, the palace's majordomo, prepared the seaward suite, the palace's best guest quarters, for the extended stay of a woman of noble birth, and that Nevathi assemble suitable staff to serve as household to this guest. What was more, the major d' was to work with security to ensure that this staff be carefully vetted so that all of them were members of inland families, with as few connections to sea-faring clans as possible.

It was puzzling instruction and also difficult to execute, which was why it was *he* who was standing in this central spot and not Nevathi. The two clans with the most inland territory, to the north, were the Senji and the Dojisigi; the former had only recently come into alliance with Tanaja and the latter was *still* regrettably home, in its mountainous vales, to vestiges of the Shadow Guild — even after the Shejidan aiji and Assassins' Guild actions there to destroy the rebels and depose their puppet lord, Tiajo. Machigi's control over either of them was by no means absolute. And Lusi clan in the Sungeni Isles was entirely sea-faring. This left the inland peoples of the Taisigi and the Dausigi as possible candidate sources for staff.

*An oddly specific and difficult task, Geidiri thought. To find such peoples with limited ties to fishers and sailors.*

And then it hit him. *A woman of noble birth. Accompanying Machigi from the conference at Najida.* Any hope that this might have been a woman from Ilisidi's eastern retinue was completely dashed by the instructions for vetting the staff of this guest's household, and his mind followed the whole story to its relentless conclusion. *To be served by staff with limited connection to the sea — without, in other words, deep family history of conflict on the sea with the tribes of the Edi and the Gan.*

*Therefore, this woman is either Edi or Gan.*

Gediri's heart felt like it was seizing up in his chest. *Machigi, lad, what have you done?*

Sure enough, when Machigi returned within the walls of his house, he had with him a woman in clothing of an unfamiliar style. For the sake of hospitality, Gediri stilled the frown of consternation that wanted to grow on his face.

She was no beauty of the classic mainland nobility — she was not *ugly*, per se, but certainly plain, and everything that was striking about her was rather to be found in her bearing. *That* was extraordinary: the woman carried herself with calm dignity, strength, and grace. Like an aiji. It was immediately irksome to Gediri, given that she was nothing more than some woman from one of the tribes that had bedeviled the Marid unceasingly these past two hundred years.

*Well, he had to allow. Not unceasingly. It did cease. But will it remain ceased? Especially now, that Machigi has brought her here? He could not imagine that her people were any more happy about this than he himself was. Or did they offer her? If so, why ever would he accept?*

He was a bit taken aback by the quality of her clothes, the layers of it, the richness of its decoration, and her extraordinary shimmering stola. For a moment, it occurred to him that the tribes might be more than simple bandits and ship-wreckers. But then he dismissed the thought: *no. They have simply adopted the styling of some sophisticated clan to fit into the court at Shejidan.*

They retired to the map room for a meeting, the three of them, while the aiji's senior security posted themselves by the door. Machigi ordered tea and a light repast — the staff brought a plateful of small sandwiches and tea cakes — which, of course, meant that no business would be discussed until the offering had been consumed. And business, of course, was what Gediri most passionately wanted to discuss.

He did, however, get both an introduction and a confirmation: the woman's name was Rao, and she was of the Edi clan. *Tribe.* And she now knew that he himself was the aiji's Minister of Affairs. *His foremost counselor, yes.*

Gediri took no sandwiches, too upset to have any appetite, although he did allow himself one of the cook's little citrus cakes to at least keep up appearances. His jaw ached as he took a bite and he realized that he was much more tense than he was admitting, even to himself. He forced himself to relax and reached again for hospitality — for the sake of the honor of the house, if nothing else. “How did you find the journey, nandi?” He asked Machigi's guest, after she had finished a small sandwich and swallowed a sip of tea.

Her expression was properly solemn in the courtly style, but underlaid with a gentleness. This either spoke to a lack of control — or perhaps a mastery of it. “It was extraordinary, nandi,” she replied, tea cup cradled in her fingers. “One has never flown before. To see the land, the shoreline, the sea from such an elevated height — breathtaking. One understands that the Marid has citizens serving in the heavens, is that true?”

“Yes,” Gediri allowed. “They are aerographers, operating the satellites and observing storms in the southern seas. They predict the weather and find safe routes for our trade in the East.” He really could not help himself from being proud of it. “The historically impassable sea routes are no longer so, due to the skill of our people, not only on land, but in the heavens and on the seas.”

He half-expected her to make some attempt to point out something that would assure the primacy of the Edi as sea-farers over the Marid. But she did not. “A most wondrous accomplishment,” she said, and seemed sincere. “To the benefit of the whole world.”

Unsettling, that was what she was. She was confounding his expectations.

The sandwiches and first round of tea consumed, Machigi set down his cup and his guest followed suit. Gediri barely succeeded in preventing himself from banging his own cup into its saucer with excessive force. *Thank the fortunate gods! Now for some answers!* But because he had known Machigi all the young man's life, he dreaded what he was about to hear.

“Diri-ji, I have asked Rao-daja to be my wife and consort,” Machigi said. Gediri’s dread thusly took shape, a huge block of stone that settled into place with a terrible thump. It only remained to apply mortar to it, which the Edi woman promptly did: “I have accepted, nand’ Gediri,” she said.

No. How could he undo this construction? He had to.

“Rao was once the First Granddaughter of the Edi,” Machigi continued. He must have seen the confusion on Gediri’s face, for he added, “the Edi arrange their rulership in the style of the ancient Southern Island culture, through the women. The First Granddaughter is the second in line of succession.”

Once? Gediri had a very bad feeling about where this was going. “The Edi agreed to this?” he asked.

“No,” said Machigi. “Anything but. They have in fact disowned and exiled her for this defiance, which is why we did not bring any of her own people as staff.”

*So, in short, there is not even the possibility in this, however ludicrously outlandish, of an alliance with that tribe.*

“Tema-ji,” said Machigi abruptly. “What is the status of Rao-daja’s security?”

“In place, aiji-ma.” Tema, posted by the door. “And sweeping the suite.”

“It will be some little time before your quarters are ready, daja-ma,” Machigi addressed his guest. “We shall remain here for a while.”

“One understands, dena-ma. One would not wish staff or security to feel rushed. It has been a day of surprises for everyone,” she added dryly.

The Edi woman was clearly familiar with courtly formality and possessed of some small measure of wit. But — “dena”? Gediri thought. *He is not a gentleman — he is the aiji!* And that possessive “-ma” set his teeth on edge. *I must convince him not to do this. How far has this gone? It cannot have deep roots yet, it cannot. He was only at the conference the one day!*

“Forgive me, aiji-ma,” Gediri said. “I would be remiss in my duty to you if I did not point out to you that this is...unwise.” He dipped his head to their guest. “One by no means intend personal disrespect to you, Rao-daja, but these matters are larger than the personal. Aiji-ma,” he continued. “Any marriage of yours needs must be an *alliance*. You are the *aiji*.” As if it needed to be said.

“There are other reasons to marry, nandi,” Machigi replied. “Even for an aiji.”

“Other reasons, aiji-ma? I do not understand what other reasons would be more important than the political. Rao-daja, did I understand correctly that your clan has disowned you? One regrets to be blunt, but one must be blunt in this thing, for the sake of the aijinate.”

The woman bowed her head. “By all means be blunt, nand’ Minister,” she said. “One may take no offense at honest service to your lord, however direct it may be.”

He blinked a little, again surprised and unsettled by her. “One only means to ask, what do you bring, in terms of political power?”

“One would hope that there is something else to be had, other than political power. Must the aiji’s spouse be *only* a resource?” She sounded wistful, as if she already knew the answer.

“Forgive me, Rao-daja, but at this level of governance, *yes*. As a potential consort of the Marid, that is what you are: a resource. The aiji himself is a resource of the state,

as much so or more than he is simply a man. One must make choices that serve the Marid as a whole, not the individuals.”

“It is a fair point, nand’ Gediri,” she replied thoughtfully, even as he could see Machigi working his way to a hot objection. And once again, he was surprised — *she is remarkably intelligent for an Edi barbarian*. He began to think that perhaps he could turn *her* into an ally against this folly. *It will mean more to him, coming from the object of this...this obsession*. “Nand’ Gediri,” Rao said, breaking into his thoughts. “If one could prove a value beyond the personal, would that satisfy you?”

“How would you prove this, nandi?” Gediri asked her.

Her brows knit just ever so. “One is not sure...yet. Understand, this place is new, different, and not at all what one expected.” He must have let slip some expression, for she added. “Yes, we the Edi have our own prejudices about the clans of the Marid — our bad history is shared, is it not? But one is willing to learn — one *wants to learn*, nandi. The problem is clear —” as Machigi drew breath to object, she said gently, “I do not dispute that there are challenges, dena-ma. One urges both of you to suspend judgement *either way* for a time. Give me an opportunity to observe and learn, and see what one may bring to the table beyond merely one’s person.”

“Your person is not *mere*,” said Machigi firmly.

The woman dipped her head. “I am grateful, but also I understand that *you* are in no need of convincing.” She shifted slightly to address the aiji more directly. “A welcome would be better than a fiat, I think — better for you, but even more so for your people.” She returned her regard to them both, the aiji and his Minister of Affairs. “One does wish to be welcomed, and requests time to *earn* that welcome.”

And by the fortunate gods, Machigi actually appeared to be thinking about it. Gediri would have much rather to have settled the issue — in the *negative* — right now, but a delay would be preferable to an outright decision in the *positive*. It would give him time to further hone his arguments, and for those arguments to gain the weight they needed to throw the switch and shift this train onto a siding where it might come to an absolute stop — *as it must*.

“Very well,” Machigi finally said, to Gediri’s vast relief. “We shall wait until the Festivity of the autumn equinox.” It was a week of regional celebration that would occur in approximately two and a half months’ time. “At the end of the Festivity and days of petitioning,” Machigi continued. “We shall marry.”

Gediri had known the young man all his life, and knew that when Machigi decided, it would be *his decision*. He was a forceful leader, decisive from the place of his own concept of what he wanted for himself, his clan, the Marid. And yet he also listened to his advisors, because he was by no means a fool. So while his declaration certainly sounded definitive, Gediri had hope. *I have time. I have time to change his mind. Or the woman’s*.

In response to a subtle hand sign from his security, Machigi stood up. Perforce Gediri and the Edi woman also stood up. “I will speak with you later, Diri-ji,” Machigi said. “First I must see Rao-daja to her quarters.”

“Aiji-ma,” Gediri bowed and watched as they departed, together. Yes. *We certainly shall speak*.

## Chapter 28 - Installation

As Rao left the map room with Machigi in the company of his security, they encountered a very tall man of early middle age, dressed in elegant clothing in Taisigi colors. His stature and very wooden expression reminded her of a tree, sturdy and solid in service to the house. It was at once reassuring but also a little daunting — she hoped he would not also prove to be unbending to her attempt to make a place for herself here.

“This is Nevathi,” Machigi said to her. “The majordomo of the palace. He has been seeing to the preparation of your quarters. Nevathi-nadi, this is Rao-daja, our guest for the foreseeable future.”

The majordomo’s bow was graceful, belying his tree-like appearance. *Perhaps he can bend*, Rao thought, and returned it with one of her own. “Nandi,” he said in a deep voice. “The seaward suite is ready, aiji-ma.”

“Nevathi-nadi, one is glad to make your acquaintance, and grateful for your assistance,” Rao replied. She knew that he had been advised about her lack of personal staff, and had set something up for her in what seemed to her to be a remarkably short amount of time.

“Nandi,” was Nevathi’s polite, yet bare response, with another proper bow, and Rao allowed herself a little internal sigh. *I have just met the first and second persons who will object the most strongly to my being here, not counting his aishid.* It was not a fortuitous start, to have staff resistant to a person’s presence — it was the staff, she knew, who were the heart of a house’s harmony. She wanted them to *want* her, not to simply extend her hospitality out of duty. But there was so, so, so very much history in the way. *That history is wider than the Sea of the Marid, and as unhappy as the Southern Ocean’s Belt of Storms.*

They crossed the audience room. A door there was flanked on either side by twin stairs that arced to the wing’s upper levels. The door that the stairs framed was formed of delicately carved wooden panels attached to a solid steel core, three inches thick. It lead into the palace’s private, ground-level residence wing, and they went through it. The hallway beyond felt ancient, solid, and secure, the sound of their footfalls swallowed by thick, hand-knotted silk rugs, the walls made warm by an astonishing array of tapestries worked in muted colors and geometric designs, separated by plinths holding up gorgeous porcelain vases, each one different from the next, and each one filled with flowers, filling the hall with a rich, warm, welcoming perfume. A banner at the far end showed the sigil of the Taisigi clan, a stylized version of a taihi flower within a circle, a plant with broad leaves and bold flowers that could be found floating in the ponds and lakes of the region. The crest was worked in sumptuous embroidery in the clan colors. *This will be my crest also*, Rao thought. *If I win my place here.* The thought that she, an Edi, might soon be a lady of the Taisigi, sent a momentary shiver through her.

The banner was flanked on either side by tall, fluted porcelain columns similar to the ones that graced the palace’s main entrance. Unlike those columns, which were decorated with bands of sea flora and fauna, these were worked with bas-relief sculptures of more taihiin and geometric interlace. There were openings worked in between the sculpted flowers, leading to cleverly-hidden containers filled with earth, and the staff had inserted the stems and roots of vining plants into these so that the columns themselves were even more richly adorned with living leaves of delicate,

mottled green. *This is a house that values life!* the hallway proclaimed. *A bit ironic, given the Marid's reputation,* Rao thought, but the sight of it dispelled the chill.

There was, alas, little time to examine the hallway's decoration in detail, for their destination was only a single door down the hall and on the left-hand, seaward side. There was already a member of the staff there: a slender middle-aged woman in stylish clothing, presenting an exceedingly formal and proper appearance.

The woman greeted them with a very deep bow. "Aiji-ma. Rao-daja. One is named Basaro, and is honored to have been chosen to serve the daja as the suite's majordomo. If you would please come this way, one will introduce you to the staff." There was a coolness to her manner and Rao thought, *there is the third of those I must win over. Behold how something that should be felicitous becomes an infelicity. It is up to me to restore its luck.*

Basaro opened the double doors to the suite; as Rao and Machigi entered, he murmured to her, "Basaro-nadi is of Toma clan, in the interior of the Marid, and has been with her husband in the service of this house for a decade." By this he meant that the woman's man'chi was firmly established, and she was therefore safe. *He knows I am anxious and seeks to reassure me.* She was touched by his solicitousness.

Once inside — *oh! What a place!* She knew that Machigi knew the space well, but it was all new to her, a wonder of classical Marid style — an abundance of delicate design and patterns worked in colors ranging from the Taisigi's own muted blues and greens to brighter and richer shades of blue, green, gold, purple, silver.

This room, the reception room, featured a wide bank of windows that looked out directly over the city and the bay, and the view was, she found, literally breathtaking. The windows were edged with copper frames, engraved with stylized versions of more taihiin flowers and leaves. The copper had been allowed to develop a natural verdigris patina and lo! she had discovered a source for one of the clan's own colors, that same lovely, muted green. The copper framing held long, slender panes of hammered glass in pale blues, greens, and golds, which themselves framed the large clear windows that looked down over the city, its waterfront, and the bay beyond. It was almost overwhelming — no, it *was* overwhelming — everything demanded intent study, and she reminded herself sternly to pay attention to the *people*. A tour would be forthcoming, in keeping with the courtesies of the mainland, so the *things* could wait. It was the *people* who mattered most now. She focused on the majordomo and the persons lined up in the room to meet her.

As she discovered, Basaro oversaw five staff in the household:

Anjero, senior staff, a tall, graceful lady of her later years, her silvering hair plaited into braids on either side of her head and fastened across the crown of her head with ribbon in the house's colors, an old style.

Tamo, second senior staff, likewise elderly like Anjero who, though of middling height, appeared somewhat short when standing next to her partner.

Eskari, junior staff, a body servant assigned to tend to the guest's wardrobe, linens, and personal needs, thus among those whom Rao knew she would see often. Eskari was middle-aged, appearing almost young in comparison to the senior staff. She was a plump lady with a properly and professionally still expression, but one that could not quite hide the curiosity in her bright eyes.



Kasta, Eskari's partner on the junior staff, and almost a twin in terms of age and appearance. *A matched set, the two of them*, Rao thought.

And finally Jara, a very young junior maid, solemn and perhaps a touch anxious, no doubt due to the aiji's presence. *But 'very young' is relative, I suppose*. Rao realized that everyone else in the household was middle-aged or elderly. She and Jara were the youngest here. She detected the hand of Navathi in this. *He thinks I need experienced supervision, and much of it*. She knew that every one of them was a spy, but this did not trouble her — it was ever the way of the noble houses. *To whom do they report? To several different people. Navathi, naturally, as he is the majordomo. Gediri, certainly. And likely to everyone else I will be meeting in these next few days. So I must cherish this staff*. She let out a breath and murmured the proper pleasantries in response to each introduction.

As expected, Basaro offered to take her and the aiji on a tour. She wanted nothing more than a bath and bed at this point, but she did not want to start off this very tentative relationship with these people with impatience. So she dipped her head and said, "one would be very grateful, nadi. The suite is every bit as elegant as any one has seen in Shejidan—" *there, chew on that, you who think that I am some unlettered barbarian* "—more so, even, with this extraordinary decoration, design, and furnishing. The inlay work alone — astonishing, nadi."

Basaro was too professional to show a reaction, so Rao was left only hoping that she had surprised this dour woman in a good way. And perhaps the woman's spine had unstiffened a little, for she began to impart tidbits of history about the rooms and their furnishings instead of simply pointing out what they were.

But alas, no. Rao detected something of a patronizing tone: despite — or perhaps because of — the mention of Shejidan, it seemed that the woman had decided that she was a bumpkin after all, needing to be put firmly in her place. It began when she demonstrated the operation of the room's bell-pull — each room had one, a silken band that a guest could use to summon the staff — as if Rao could not possibly have seen one before.

Rao sighed to herself and reminded herself not to assume other people's mental states or motivation — *you are alone and in an unfamiliar place with people who do not share a good history with your tribe*, she told herself. *And this is leading you towards pessimism. Be questioning, yes, but remember to be open to the possibility, however, slight, of welcome. These people have given Machigi their man'chi and only wish to serve him well*.

Beyond the reception room was a short hallway, also featuring a large bank of seaward-looking windows. A door to the right opened up to a small sitting room, furnished with shelves and books and a cozy writing desk — "A piece of the late Ujae Period, nandi, featuring, as one is sure you are well aware, the shell-and-bone inlays typical of the artisans of that era." There was a fireplace set into the wall on the left hand, held in common through the wall with the next room beyond, a small dining hall, which they reached by returning to the short hallway.

The dining room likewise looked out over the city with large windows of the same style as the reception room — the weather outside was clear, and so the space was absolutely flooded with light. The dining room's table — "Not as large, of course, as the table in the palace's main dining room, but unique in its inlay of gray and green sea-

stone, also of the Ujae Period, naturally” — and was currently set with a centerpiece of shells and sea glass in the house’s colors of green and blue, the glass glowing where it was washed by daylight.

It seemed perhaps aggressive, perhaps, that none of the flowers or arrangements she had seen so far seemed to make any reference to the Edi, but Rao reminded herself that two hundred years of conflict was not like to make anyone in the house want to reflect the tribal colors in any thing. And also that they were probably also aware that she had been cast out. She made a deliberate decision, therefore, to view the display of the Taisigi colors as a message of welcome into the clan. *Although, of course, it means no such thing.* Nonetheless, Rao made appreciative noises which on her part were not at all for show — the suite was genuinely, truly, deeply beautiful. *I could spend hours with the books. Or looking out over the city.* She hoped she would not be so isolated here as to need to do those things instead of what she needed to do — she desperately needed to meet people and form associations here. Part of her rather feared that this would be the case — that Machigi’s staff would encourage him to keep her here, and that her only solace until the autumn festivity would be reading and looking. And then, having failed to prove herself, where would she go?

*Find your focus, Rao. Be here, in this place, now — not where the future may not necessarily lead you.* “Dena-ma,” she said to Machigi — was that a twitch she just saw in Basaro, with that intimate form of address? — “I would be most grateful to meet your kabiutera. The arrangement of this apartment is truly extraordinary.” And she meant it.

Machigi smiled. “Of course, daja-ma,” he replied, occasioning perhaps another twitch from the majordomo at his reciprocal closeness, and Rao suppressed a smile.

Basaro took them back through the sitting room and through another door into a short hallway, a door of a type that Rao knew from Shejidan and which they had already passed in entering the suite: a security door. It was as elegantly decorated as all of the other doors, but its thickness gave it away, indicating that were entering a place that could be sealed off to become its own fortress.

Off to the left, another security door, “to the kitchens and servant quarters, nandi,” Basaro informed her. “Should you need anything, day or night, staff will be able to provide.”

Straight ahead, there was a door at the end of the hallway but first, to one side, another security door, and that one brutally plain, so Rao knew it for the entrance to the suite’s security section. It was open onto a room with subdued lighting — she could barely make out that there were monitors inside, but the persons of the security team, lined up in an arc just beyond the doorway, blocked off most of her view.

Basaro paused and Tema took over to introduce Rao to her assigned bodyguards: Rajeno and Dvari, siblings-of-the-same-mother, both from Tanaja. Rajeno, the eldest and most senior, was a tall, articulate, strong-looking woman who gave every appearance of competence. Her brother, though, was a sheer wall of a man, almost as broad as he was tall — and he was tall, much taller than the average person — with a stony expression and a vocabulary that seemed to be limited to “yes, daja-ma” and “no, daja-ma”. Both he and his sister together came across as exceptionally intimidating, but Rao found a certain comfort in that.

Ojeka and Boragi, two brothers-from-the-same-father from Enjara in the eastern Dausigin Marid, were the junior pair of her security. Despite that status, they seemed just as alert and confident as their elders — comfortable in their skins. All four had been locally trained by the Marid branch of the Assassins' Guild and recently certified by the Guild headquarters in Shejidan, Machigi noted. They were all of them extremely grave, and Rao suspected that this was their natural state, rather than being due to the fact that they were in the presence of their aiji. They offered polite-and-yet-alert nods — no assassin would ever bow and risk taking their eyes off of their principal or the surroundings — and the silver fittings of their black uniforms twinkled in the light from the hallway like so many stars.

Introductions to security complete, Basaro continued onward to the door at the end of the hall. This was the bedroom, with a large four-poster bed and nightstand, a two tables sized for a single person, and several chairs. A door led out to what Rao knew would be the servants' back hall, and another security door was probably an emergency entrance — or exit — into the security suite. She hoped it would never come to that, her needing to be locked in here, and then beyond that, needing to be pulled into the doubly-fortified place where her security lived.

On one of the bedroom's tables — a small round tea table — there was a lovely little porcelain vase in colors of pale gold, cream, and green, filled with flowers. The arrangement was fortuitous and in welcoming colors and filled the room with its scent — not overly heady, just the smell of fresh life. Rao felt her anxiety loosen its grip a little.

Basaro showed them through another door through a small dressing room — space enough for staff to assist a single person with dressing and undressing — into the accommodation — a clean stone room with ladle and towels, very civilized. Beyond that was the bath room with its large stone-and-ceramic tub. It had a wide rim and an integral bench and Rao wanted nothing more than to fall into it and soak.

Fortunately, that was the end of the tour. The entire party trooped back through the suite into the sitting room; Anjero and Tamo, the senior staff, brought in tea in a porcelain service that was — invariably — another Ujae period piece, with a glaze decoration that suggested inlay without actually being inlaid. While the servants were pouring the tea, Machigi retrieved a box from one of the shelves. It was about shoulder width long, perhaps a hand-and-a-half span wide, and a hand deep. He set it down on the table as they sat and, as the staff waited to hand over the tea, opened it.

Rao leaned forward and found that the box was full of tools for hand working wood: a pair of fine whittling knives, sanding cloths, polishing compound and finishing oils in metal tins with screw-on lids, even a stack of wooden blanks in various sizes. *He must have sent a message back for the staff to assemble this while we were in the air.* She sucked in a breath, astonished, and looked at Machigi. "Dena-ma, for me?"

He looked entirely pleased with himself, and nodded. "Indeed. I know you do not intend to be trapped in this room, nor do I wish you to be. Staff will show you the rest of the palace once you have had some time to rest — you should know this place, all of it. But I know you like to work with your hands, so this is ready for you, should you ever need it." He nodded and Tamo took up the box and returned it to the shelves, bringing him his tea on her way back, which arrived in his hands precisely as Anjero brought Rao hers.

His look of pleasure shifted into something more anxious, perhaps. “Does it please you, this suite?” He asked, and sipped at his tea.

“Oh, I favor it so extremely, dena-ma,” she told him earnestly. “It is so beautiful, so striking. It is so very clear how professional the staff is, and how much regard they hold for the suite.” This was partially for the ears of said staff, as she knew they were listening. But it was also the truth. “I am quite overwhelmed.”

“It has been a day to be overwhelmed, daja-ma,” Machigi said. “And time, I think, for the day to draw to a close.” He took a final sip to drain his cup and set it down, and within half a heartbeat, Anjero had whisked it away. “Rest easy here. We will deal with whatever tomorrow brings, tomorrow. I would be very grateful to share breakfast with you then, to see what the day will bring, together.”

She set down her cup also and dipped her head. “Yes,” the simple yes of agreement. And then, “I am grateful,” she said, hoping that he would understand how deep this simple statement went.

He rose, she rose. He bowed, she bowed. Then he was gone, and she found herself alone in a household surrounded by people she had only just met, of a place in the world that had only known her people as brigands. *If they are to think of me as anything but, I must meet them with civilized grace. And a touch of trust.*

So she took a bath in a tub that was every bit as wonderful as it had promised to be and went to bed — the staff had already found clothing for her in her size in the Marid style, so she had a nightgown and bathrobes that fit. Eskari and Kasta, the chambermaids, took charge of her Edi clothing and stared, wonderingly, at the two under-layers that were woven of the same stuff as the stola, only with thread much more fine.

“It is bari’sata,” Rao told them. “A very difficult thing to make — it is quite strong once the thread has been set and properly woven, nadiin, though one does beg you to be very gentle with it. It requires special techniques for repair and, sadly, one does not have these skills.”

“Yes, daja-ma, one will take very special care,” Kasta said, seeming every bit sincere. “If one may ask, how is it made?”

“From a plant that grows in very deep waters off of the west coast, nadiin. Its fibers have an extremely short staple length and are notoriously difficult to spin.”

“How did people figure out that such a thread could be made from it in the first place, nandi?”

*Such a perfect question!* “One suspects that the first makers were very bored, nadi. Or exceptionally stubborn.”

“Or both, perhaps, nandi?”

Rao smiled, delighted. “Just so; one thinks you have it exactly right.” And things felt a little better, a little less stiff, in the room.

There remained only to slip into bed, which she did, and as Eskari and Kasta departed, they put out the lights. Rao lay in the dark, in that very comfortable bed, and wondered if she would be able to sleep. She saw her future as a long string of simply surviving, one day to the next. She knew that this was her anxiety whispering to her. *I have had a strong day, she told herself. I am in Machigi’s house, having placed myself there by my own will, and he will move the sea and skies and earth to protect me. And I am clever and educated and thoughtful and I will win these people over. I will. Like*

*it or not, Grandmother, I will open the Marid's eyes to the worth of the tribes. Or, failing that, to me.*

## Chapter 29 - Resistance

The sun had gone down. Machigi and Gediri sat in chairs pulled up to the windows of the map room, with Tema joining them to make a fortunate third. Machigi and Gediri had glasses of brandy; Tema, still on duty, made due with water. Beyond and below them, few lights were in evidence, but a full moon silvered the rooftops and water of the port.

“Have you considered that the Edi might have set this entire situation up in order to slip her into your household, aiji-ma?” Gediri asked. “That it may be a move on their part against your person?”

“No, Diri-ji. I had not considered that,” Machigi replied, turning his glass around in his hand. *Because I know it is not true*, he thought. But he thought of Rao, dancing along the boat’s gunnel, her bare feet sure on the boards. She would be *technically* capable of assassinating him and it was an old, hoary, lurid trope — the lover dispatching a target after consummating an apparent personal attachment. So it was a possibility, even though he himself was certain that the connection between them was a true thing, and that she would never move against him. He knew that if his aishid had not considered the matter before, they were listening and certainly considering it *now*, and that the security he assigned to Rao would be watching her more closely. He thought of the box of carving supplies he had gifted her — the knives — and suppressed a sigh. Not because he doubted her, but because it would cause additional anxiety in their collective bodyguards. Until they had established trust in her, they would see every tool that found its way into her hands as a potential weapon.

And he had not told any of them what he had seen her do in the sailboat. *I should tell Tema. I should trust my aishid.*

“It is a possibility, though, is it not, aiji-ma?” Gediri asked.

He pulled himself back to the now, to the story Gediri wanted to tell of the Edi: the tale of their proposed nefarious plot. It was part and parcel to the workings of the clans of the Marid, an old and familiar and predictable road — precisely the sort of thing he would expect out of, say, the Dojisigi. So it was perfectly understandable why his first counselor’s mind would settle so neatly into that path. But were the *Edi* capable of that kind of maneuvering? Were they capable of designing, staging, and executing such a machimi so convincingly? He had to admit that he did not know what they were capable of — none of them here knew that.

On the other hand, he also knew that Gediri had a vested interest in discouraging his marriage to her. The man had been hounding him regarding an heir since the moment he had assumed his father’s place, and had proposed any number of candidates for a contract over the intervening years: noble candidates from the Marid — lesser houses, to be sure, given the way that the Marid tended to eat its own. And given said tendency for self-destruction, he understood the man’s sense of urgency when it came to establishing the succession as quickly as possible. He knew that Rao was in no ways a suitable candidate, in Gediri’s eyes — what better way to insert a wedge than to suggest a threat to personal safety, in this place that had known centuries of plots, distrust, and illegal killings?

“Why would they do that, Diri-ji?” Machigi asked. “Why would they go through the trouble, and why would they go through that trouble *now*, when the Marid has given

up our claims to the west coast? And I *did* gift them with a sizable collection of netting once, do you remember?” He tried very hard to keep the amusement out of his voice.

“I know they are barbaric, aiji-ma, but do you truly think they would consider that a sufficient trade for *one of their heirs*?”

“No, Diri-ji,” Machigi said patiently.

His counselor heaved a frustrated sigh. “As for why they would try to infiltrate your household — I do not know, aiji-ma. Perhaps they feel we have been letting down our guard since our turn to the east, and see it as an opportunity. Do any of us know why those ship-wreckers do what they do?”

“No,” Machigi had to admit. “But we need to learn. There *is* opportunity, looking to the west. And we have a common cause against Ashidama Bay.” That place in the southwest, between the Marid and Najida, ruled out of its capital of Jorida Isle not by lords but by the merchants of Hurshina Shipping. The company was even more enemy to both the Edi and the Marid than they were to each other, for those who had eyes to see beyond their mutual loathing. “The opportunity there is not in terms of land or sea or natural resources. Rather, it is the people — I believe that they are more than what they seem. *That* is part of what she brings.”

“Are they, and does she, aiji-ma?” Gediri asked. “Her people lured ships onto the rocks with false lights and then looted the wrecks — when they were not actively engaging in piracy.”

“Have you forgotten our own history, Diri-ji?” Machigi asked.

“We were not *pirates*,” Gediri protested indignantly. “We were *privateers*. We had lords and letters of marque.”

“Hm,” said Machigi. “Now there is an idea. Perhaps I shall grant myself a letter of marque for Rao and claim her as a prize.”

Gediri boggled at him. “Aiji-ma, you cannot be serious—”

“Be at peace, Gediri. I do jest.” Machigi downed his brandy in a single gulp, and a servant stepped in to refill it.

“Aiji-ma, please,” Gediri said, his own drink untouched in his anxiety. “These matters are not for jokes. Whom you marry is important — your marriage must bring something to the Marid. I say she brings nothing — no alliance, no clan, no trade. Keep her as an uncontracted lover, aiji-ma, but I beg you: do not do this. You are the *aiji*. You should marry someone of noble station and strengthen ties within the aishihai’mar thereby — we cannot for a moment think that things are stable, and this is an opportunity to bind the clans together more closely! Or marry a lady from the East, and so further deepen our alliance with that Association. Were she still the First Granddaughter of the Edi, perhaps there might be a chance there, as outlandish as it may seem to ally with the tribes. But aiji-ma, *please*, she is *no one*.”

Machigi remained silent. *Gediri already thinks me mad; they all do. Bringing up a’hrani will convince them fully. They might even mutiny, in order to protect me from myself.*

Gediri had, perhaps, taken this silence of his as softening. “She is an intelligent person, aiji-ma. And it is clear that she is attached to you—”

*No, Diri-ji. She is not attached to me. That is the point.*

“—and I am sure that she will certainly understand. If we are persuasive, if we help her understand the greater issues at stake here, surely she will not object to

remaining here with you without contract? I am sure we can find a candidate for marriage who would understand the arrangement. It would not be the first time.”

“Diri-ji,” Machigi said, and surprised himself with how gently he was speaking. Then again, he had known his Minister of Affairs since he was a boy. He set down his glass on a side table. “I will not engage in a marriage of convenience.” He held up a hand to stave off the arguments he could see Gediri lining up, arrows punched into the ground at the archery range awaiting their turn in the bow. “I am willing to bend the truth, obfuscate, or even lie if it serves the Marid. I have done all of those things. In this, however, I will not bend. You say that she has no value, but this is because you do not know her yet.”

“Aiji-ma, this is precisely my question. I beg you to consider it from an outside perspective: this woman—”

“Rao-daja,” Machigi said flatly.

“Rao-daja, aiji-ma,” Gediri acknowledged. “As your consort, Rao-daja stands to gain the whole of the Marid. What will the Marid gain from *her*?”

“Enough, Diri-ji. I have already set the time I have given you to understand her, and to understand that she *does* bring value. Have I not said it? I will give you until the autumn Festival week, and will not marry her before then. Get to know her, and then come back and tell me that you do not find her worthy.”

Gediri seemed, finally, to relent. “Aiji-ma,” he said, with a bow. But then he added: “Until the Festival.”

When Gediri had gone, Machigi dismissed the staff. Frochano immediately slipped out to guard the door against intrusion, no doubt summoning more personnel from security to make sure the other entrances were secure. He waited until Tema, still seated beside him, gave him the merest of nods that indicated he had received the signal that such security had in fact been established.

“Tema-ji, I must tell you something in confidence,” Machigi told him, then.

Tema looked somewhat alarmed. “Aiji-ma.”

“There is something you need to know, something actually germane to nand’ Gediri’s concerns,” Machigi said. “Rao is trained in unarmed combat, possibly armed combat as well.”

Tema raised his eyebrows. “Combat, aiji-ma?” He thought about it and hit upon the answer himself. “Their irregular forces. When we fought the Shadow Guild in Sarini province.” He had been there, at the aiji’s side, and remembered. “Are you saying that she received training, before they surrendered such duties to the Guild?”

Machigi nodded. “It seems likely.”

“So nand’ Gediri’s concerns about the possibility of her being an agent gain some weight,” Tema suggested.

“No, Tema-ji,” Machigi said. “I am certain that it is coincidental, but it is a thing that unhappily fits the Marid’s own traditional intrigue as would a bespoke glove. But she is *not from that tradition*.”

“Aiji-ma, we do not know what tradition she is truly from,” Tema pointed out.

“That is true. But if we proceed from our historical prejudices, we will not learn what we need to learn.” Machigi took a breath. “There is more. Rao-daja and I — we are *connected*. *That* is what happened in the boat, and why I asked her to marry me.”



“A’hrani,” Tema repeated, frowning.

“Yes. She will not harm me, whatever her family might have hoped to achieve by her being here. Which I think is nothing — I do not think that what happened at Najida was machimi, do you?”

“No,” Tema pursed his lips, thinking. “One feels that the consternation on their part was genuine.” But he was also still worried. “Aiji-ma, this thing is false, is it not? That is the nature of a’hrani, that it is false.”

Machigi shook his head. “It is not. I do not have the words for why it is not. It is not man’chi. It is something else. But I have every confidence in it.”

“We should still remain cautious, aiji-ma,” said Tema.

“Inform those who need to know, Tema-ji, and take what steps you deem necessary. I have every confidence in you as well.”

## Chapter 30 - Inspection

It was just past noon. Machigi's guest — *fortunate gods let her only remain a guest* — had been in the residence for three fortuitous days, and so far Gediri had received no report from Nevathi or the rest of the household staff of scandal. It was unexpected and entirely inconvenient for his agenda — *to get her out of here as soon as possible* — that she was not behaving as he would have expected an Edi barbarian to behave. *She seems more rational than I anticipated. Very well. It is time to begin a more direct campaign of my own, then.* The household servants informed Gediri that their guest was in the garden, so he stepped out of the palace and into a cloudless day.

The garden was a vast space in comparison to what he knew of paidhi's garden at Najida, the latter being a small provincial estate — this was the state garden, and it took up a large plot of land between the palace and the legislative hall. Windows from the palace looked into the green and flowering and growing place, but the legislative hall presented a blank face upon which the gardeners had trained vines to grow. The bright sun beat down on the city, but a cool breeze was blowing down from the sea, setting all the blossoms gently astir.

He found Rao attended by her junior bodyguard, standing by a fountain in the center of the garden. He himself was without escort. *This is my place.*

The fountain was built of gray and blue limestone that had been recovered from the bay during the harbor's first expansion, some three hundred fifty years ago. It was faced in bands, and its basin lined, with shale from the same effort, and the pale fossilized skeletons of ancient creatures stood out in contrast to the darkness of the shale in which they had become embedded, framed by the occasional gray-green clump of aquatic moss. The garden's aqueduct fed the fountain with a low, gently boiling mound of water in its center. The leaves and white-and-blue blooms of taihiin spread out on the water's surface, gently waving in the ripples generated by the breeze. It was all ringed by tall kojutari trees, their great broad-leafed branches arcing out over the water to provide shade and prevent evaporation in the heat of the summer. So despite the brightness of the sun overhead, it was pleasantly cool here, and he was not surprised to find her in this particular place in the garden at this time of the day.

Gediri thought about what he knew of the west coast and its change of seasons. Here, their closeness to the equator and the warm southern ocean current moderated the temperature on the coast and kept it pleasantly temperate for most of the year. She would have grown up knowing of snow, which only fell on Tanaja on very rare occasions. *Will she miss the winter?* He wondered.

She saw him coming and turned to face him, offering a bow by way of greeting. Ojeka and Boragi, her security, rearranged themselves to offer them space — and to offer themselves good coverage of the scene. "Good afternoon, nand' Gediri," Rao said politely.

"Good afternoon to you, Rao-daja," he said. "If you do not have other pressing plans —" he knew that she likely did not — "may one keep you company for a time? We have not had a chance to speak, and one thinks it would be time well spent."

"One is grateful, nand' Gediri, although one is sure that you have pressing matters of state to attend, do you not?"

“One does not mean to be impertinent, nandi, but at the moment, you *are* a pressing matter of state.”

She took it well, as far as he could tell. “Ah, yes. One understands, nandi.”

*I think you do, at that*, he thought.

“Please let us not be so formal,” she said. “I wish for your honest counsel as well.”

“Very well,” Gediri said. “I will do my best, while you are a state concern.”

“I should like you to tell me how you govern here,” Rao said. She gestured at the stone wall at the far side of the garden, the side of a building in a pale stone meant to reflect the heat of the sun in high summer. “It is the Marid’s legislative hall, is it not?”

“Indeed, Rao-daja. The lords meet there, of all the major and minor clans and of their septs.”

“Do the sept lords have a vote, nandi?”

“They do not, but they may speak on any matter.”

“Is there only one chamber? There is no hasdrawad?”

“At the moment, no,” Gediri said. “We have not developed such a system for the commons as there is in Shejidan. The aiji wishes there to be a second chamber, so that he and the nobles have a fortunate third to balance them, and in fact we finished a chamber for whatever this is to be in the spring. But it lies empty for the present time, until the aiji and the tashrid have determined what form it would take.” He spread his hands. “Until very recently, the region was poor,” he said honestly. “The commons know their trades, but not much else. Most do not know how to read. Barter is still the main form of exchange here, and likely will remain so, although we have begun to design hybrid means to facilitate both barter *and* currency, so as to honor our traditional ways.

“When the aiji allied with the East,” Gediri continued. “He set up a means for trade that would bring in wealth and so it has, as well as the establishment of local branches of many of the Western guilds. The Scholars are still organizing offices and schools. Perhaps, in another generation or two, there will be a people who can adequately serve, and perhaps they or their children will sit in the chamber that now lies empty.

“Three things bring us fortune, nandi,” he said to her. “And the aiji works to use them to finally bring peace here.” He held up a fist and poked up fingers to illustrate the count. First, the small finger: “The continental divide, which effectively strangles whole-scale commerce between the East and West.” The adjusting finger: “The seas, which have ever been our domain.” The center finger, leaving the pointing finger and thumb in a tight association: “Now the heavens, so that we might conquer the southern storms.”

Gediri lowered his hand. “As for the other Guilds — they are, like the Scholars, in the process of setting up offices. With the exception of the Artisans, of course.” That Guild had ever been little more than a loose, and often times fractious, collection of sub-guilds, each jealously guarding its own discipline. “It will take much longer for the artisans’ specialists to find their counterparts here, and longer to gain admittance. Marid artisans are very tightly knit. It may be a challenge.”

“Artists are generally too busy with their own art,” Rao observed with a little smile. “Such association would require so much extra work.”

“Indeed,” Gediri said. “And so things do progress here, but slowly. As, I think, they should. For now, the second chamber serves as an adequate hall for conferences.

There are some plans for exhibitions of trade goods, now that the flow of commerce has begun to stabilize. The Bujavid has its museum — perhaps the second chamber will be that, for the Marid, until the generations to come have a use for it.”

They walked on a pace. “I heard of the agreement with the Senjin Marid, the expansion of the railroad,” Rao said. “Has that also helped to bring prosperity here — might it hasten development?”

He nodded. “That was completed in the summer of last year and the trains have begun to run. Both Senji and Taisigi have begun to see benefits and I am sure that will only continue to grow. It remains only for the question of the Dojisigi to be fully settled, since the Shejidan Guild withdrew and Machigi-aiji took responsibility for its governance.”

“You have not reestablished the lordship of the Dojisigi,” Rao said.

“Not yet,” he allowed. “And so it has been a source of problems. Unfortunately, the action of the Shejidan aiji drove much of the problems out of the Dojisigin Marid and into places over which we have less control.”

“Ashidama Bay,” Rao said.

“Yes,” he said. “You see it.”

She frowned a little. “I see a common problem.”

“Forgive me, Rao-daja,” Gediri said. “But I cannot see how it is a common problem now, given your circumstances.”

She fixed him with a piercing gaze, chin held high. “I will tell you, nand’ Gediri, the same thing that I told my Grandmother: she cannot unmake who I am, and what I am has nothing to do with titles or with my standing with *her*. Nothing she says will take away my past — she cannot pull the lines from my hands, seize the tiller, or the take the wind from my sail. I am what I am, daughter of my tribe, descendent of the far south, with the sea in my veins. What threatens the commons of the seas threatens me as much as it does you — it threatens all people — and it is my duty to do what I can, however much or little that may be, to defend those ways.”

*Beautiful words. But...* “What can you do?”

“I do not know yet, nand’ Gediri. But I know that whatever it is, I cannot do any of it alone.”

“No one can, nandi,” Gediri allowed. They walked on in silence for a few paces. *She is impressive. But the world is full of impressive people, many of whom who have much more useful connections. She in fact has none. How will I convince her to willingly step aside?*

*Does she know of the danger she faces here?* “Has he told you how he acquired his scar?” Gediri asked after a moment.

“No, nandi,” the Edi lady said. “I have asked him to make that story a gift to me should I be successful in proving my worth to you.”

“Ah, well, then, I will leave it to him. But you should know that but for elderly two uncles and a great aunt, none survive from his grandfather’s line. His father was assassinated four years ago.”

“I knew of it, yes.” She said. “It happened before his majority,” she observed.

“Yes. I held the regency for a year. And then he *arrived*.”

“A storm,” Rao said with a gentle smile.

He nodded. “A very apt metaphor. Before anyone knew *that* he had done it or even *how*, he seized control. But it lead to resentment among the lords of the north. Mind you, they had done very little for the benefit of the Marid as a whole — they seemed content to squabble for power between themselves, to maneuver for influence in the north, and to make their bed with the rebel faction of the Assassins’ guild. Then Machigi arrived and allied the Taisigi, the Dausigi, and the Sungeni in rapid order.”

“Leaving Senji and Dojisigi opposed.”

“Yes. Dojisigi in particular had made of themselves a nest for the Shadow Guild, while a Senjin clan colluded with the Padi Valley.”

“The Farai with the Kadigidi,” said Rao. She tilted her head. “Was his mother involved in those plots?” she asked. *She knows his mother was Farai.* But it was in no ways surprising that she would know; she would have memorized information about all of the great houses, he was sure.

“As far as I was ever able to tell, no, nandi,” Gediri said. “After Tula died, Mada seemed to lose all desire to remain in the Taisigin Marid. As her contract with Ardami had long been fulfilled — with the birth of Machigi, in fact — she returned to Morigi-dar. She is still there, from what I understand, living a quiet life — she never did allow any of the others in the Senjin Marid to use her against her son.”

“It speaks to her strength of character,” Rao observed. “How did his sister die?”

“Also assassinated, when she and the aiji were still children.”

Rao took a breath. “But he was still alive...and his mother left him, contract notwithstanding?”

He nodded. “He was ever closer to his father than he ever was to his mother. Tula was Mada’s firstborn, her favored child.”

“So he survived, then, and has not descended into revenge.”

“He understands now that the plots against his family ran deeper than the Marid clans. He seeks the Shadow Guild, Rao-daja. He will not rest until they are all of them dead. They know this. Should you marry him, you and he and any children you might bear will be targets until that bloody work is done.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Then we should see that the work is completed. Expeditiously,” she said, firmly using the collective “we”, and he could feel a fierce steel in her words.

“What if they kidnapped you?” Gediri asked, curious. “It is one of their tactics. They would trap him into attempting a rescue. I would strenuously argue against him taking that bait.”

“I agree with you, nandi,” she replied. “I would not expect it of him.”

“What *would* you expect?”

“I would expect him to hunt down and kill each and every last one of them,” she spoke with a matter-of-factness that sent a chill through him.

“But you might be killed,” Gediri said, appalled.

“He is young. You yourself know there are others who would gladly take my place at his side,” she replied with an ironic smile. The smile stilled and her expression became determined again. “I think it would be better, though, to solve this problem at the outset.”

*She is willing to go to war with them herself.* Gediri stopped, a little startled despite himself. He was uneasy. *Any other candidate I have in mind to propose to*

*Machigi would face the same future — I know all of them, and none of them will respond as she had.*

Rao paused and turned to him, bemused. “You need not be surprised, nandi,” she said. “I, too, have experience with the Shadow Guild, from a slightly different perspective. I well remember Machigi and his forces fighting the Shadow Guild from their flank.”

He could not stop his eyes from widening. “Were you personally involved, nandi?”

“Of course. The Guild called us ‘irregular’ and that we were. But we fought to defend Najida and they were glad of us, since they could not send enough personnel into the field at the time.” Her eyes sparkled. “After we were admitted to the ashidi’tat, we had to give that up, of course, and I had to focus on learning the *peaceful* ways of the court. Do you know, nand’ Gediri, that for a moment there, the Grandmothers of the Gan and the Edi were impressed by the aiji? He led from the front, like no lord of the Western Association ever would. Perhaps the Grandmothers were grudging about it, but there was some admiration. For a while.”

“And then?”

“Well, understand that none of us really trusted that the Marid did not still want the west coast, nandi. *Our* coast. We still had clashes at sea, though so many fewer since your alliance with the East. The recent events in the audience hall did not help, however.”

“One suspects that the Grandmothers could have overlooked that, eventually,” Gediri said.

“Perhaps. But then, as you are so delicately *not* saying, nand’ Gediri, *I* happened.”

“Well, nandi...” Gediri spread his hands. *You have said it.*

“Do the tribes mean so much to the Marid?”

“No,” he said. He walked on a few more steps and said, “I understand that you feel a strong association with my lord, nandi. You support him. I respect that. Indeed, I have known Machigi for most of his life. I have watched him grow, I protected him during the regency, I have worked to carry out his plans. I tell you truly, nandi, that I am your ally in this, in ensuring that he meets every success.”

“But.”

“But. The issue at stake is not the Edi or the Gan. The tribes are now part of the ashidi’tat and are allied with Shejidan. They do not need the Marid. The aishihai’mar is allied with the East, as counterbalance to the North, West, and Central Associations, and does not need the Edi or the Gan or any of the other clans of the Southwestern Association, our common differences with the merchants in Jorida notwithstanding. It is...forgive me, Rao-daja, but it is not *moot*.”

“You are saying that my status with the Edi is not relevant.”

“I am saying that it is less relevant than, say, the status of the ladies of the noble houses of the Marid. As you noted earlier, the Dojisin Marid is still unresolved. Marriage is one of the ways to solidify alliances. To settle them, nandi.”

“And yet Lord Ardami married Mada of the Farai, joining Taisigi to Senji, and it did not bring peace,” Rao countered. “The clans of the Marid have been marrying each

other, and the clans of the north, for hundreds of years, and it never brought them peace.”

“Peace came when the Marid looked beyond its borders,” Gediri replied. “Not to the west or north, but to the *east*. It is that alliance that has given us a chance to counterbalance the others. It was an alliance that was not possible until Machigi took the reins of power and *pulled*, and Ilisidi of Malguri noticed and offered alliance.

“Your point about marriage having proved a less than successful strategy in the Marid is well made, nandi,” he said. “But I wonder if it would not be best to focus on the alliance with the East. At the moment, this alliance is not so much between associations as it is between *individuals*: in particular, Machigi and the dowager. It is weak, therefore. Ilisidi is old — what happens when she dies?

“What can we do to ensure that those bonds persist long after Ilisidi and Machigi are long gone?” Gediri chose the collective “we” also, an echo to her earlier words. *She truly does want what is best not just for Machigi but for the Marid, despite her Edi origin.* And so he let his *we* reflect that. “Now that the Marid finally looks to be having actual peace for the first time in hundreds of years, what can we do to build a strong foundation for the future? It is not to say that there is no solution that precludes you from being a part of his life, nandi.”

“Oh? How would that happen, nand’ Gediri?”

“You do not need a contract to remain in his company — you could still support him without being the consort of the Marid.”

“I see.” Her voice was flat and cold.

“Nandi, one begs you not to take offense. I am Machigi’s advisor. It is why I exist. I must offer as many options as I can find, as many opportunities for adjustment, compromise, and adaptation, so that both you and he can be fully informed when it comes time to decide which course of action to pursue.”

“Do you think that this is an option he will consider?”

He made a rueful little sound. “Likely not, nandi. Not at first. No, he will not like it. But is it not everyone’s duty — yours and mine and his — to look not just at this particular moment in time, but all the moments that follow?”

Rao seemed to have no answer. She fell silent, looking deeply thoughtful as she walked. Finally she said, “you have given me much to think about, nand’ Gediri. One shall release you to your work; surely you have much to do today. One is grateful for your time.”

*She has put the armor of her formality back on...but she did not deny the idea.* Gediri gave her a bow as she bowed her own farewell, and watched as she left the garden, her guard following.

## Chapter 31 - Education

One one of the day's short breaks in his schedule, when the sun was just beginning to cast its late evening rays towards the bay, Machigi found Rao in the map room, studying the large map of the Marid that stretched the whole length of one wall. The afternoon light slanted in through the windows and illuminated the chart work better than any lamp could.

She was so intent, he chose not to interrupt her. He simply watched as she, brows furrowed, followed the coastlines with her eyes and fingertips. It was an antique map, annotated in the Old Alphabet, and he wondered if she could read it. *I would not be surprised if she could.*

She must have sensed him watching her, for she turned and looked at him. "I have only ever seen this land from the sea, dena-ma," she said to him. "Those parts are familiar, but the rest..." she passed a hand over the interior. "It remains a mystery. I want to know it all. I have been reading the histories in my little library this past week and have learned much, but it is this map that will tie it all together."

He stepped up beside her. "You know where we are," he said, a question.

She nodded. "Yes, here in Tanaja," her finger found the capital unerringly.

He gestured to indicate the lands to the west and south of the city. "Tanji district, the immediate environs of the city — the rest is the Taisigin Marid." He chopped his hand along the western edge of the map as if to cut it and sweep everything west and northward. "Our shared game preserve," he said. Then he pointed the the string of islands in the center of the vast bay that was the Marid Sea. "The islands."

"The Sungeni Isles," she said. She narrowed her eyes and leaned in. "It says 'Haprinjo' — is that the capital?"

*Ah, she can read the Old Alphabet.* "Yes," he told her. "In the Taisigin dialect. The Ragi knows it as Lusiden. Telani of the Lusi clan sits there as lord now. The Lusi holds close to the Taisigi, as the isles have done since the days of the Great Wave. Directly southeast across the Sea — here — is Mordani, the capital of the Dausigin Marid. Their man'chi holds firm through their lord, Minjito. Here, to the north, Koperna. Heart of the Senjin Marid. Bregani sits there as lord, a good ally. But here, daja-ma, here was the source of the plot to kill me, that sank my ship and put me in the sea for you to find."

"Perhaps I should thank him, then," Rao murmured.

He chuckled darkly. "Lord Bregani knew nothing of it. The ones who did, however, are beyond thanking now." He continued his tour of the map. "Now here, across the bay, is Amarja, the capital city of the Dojisigin Marid. It is an important region — it is where the Marid's best copper mines are located. We were once a major supplier of copper to the rest of the continent. That was a long time ago, however — that industry has been in disarray for years, due to the, ah, troubles there. Copper mostly moves through the shadow markets now, and is something I mean to bring back to its former prominence."

"And the Dojisigi fed off that shadow market," Rao asked.

"Yes," he said. "The Marid has a reputation for less than legal activity, I know it. I will not deny that some of that reputation is duly earned, when we perceive ourselves to be at a disadvantage to the rest of the continent, for whom the laws were written and



whom they were designed to benefit. But the Dojisigi built most of the foundation that reputation themselves, and not because they were seeking fairness — the clan is rapacious and relentless. They long been a source of plots against the aiji in Shejidan and, after the troubles, against me, though they were not a part of the most recent. Amenji of Caratho clan is administering the region now, in partnership with myself and Lord Bregani. It will be difficult to find someone reliable to take that particular lordship.”

“Nand’ Gediri said the Dojisigi was a base for the Shadow Guild. And that they were driven out, likely to Ashidama Bay.”

He nodded. “Yes. And I will be following them wherever they go. I cannot provide you a peaceful life, Rao-ma.”

“I did not ask for one, Chigi-ma,” Rao said. “I want you, all of you, in whatever way I may have you.” Then she let out a soft sigh. “But what you have ahead of you — it will require strong alliances. I cannot say that nand’ Gediri is not correct in seeking another consort for you — I know that everyone would be much more pleased if you married someone from the Marid. From the East, even. Anyone else, really.”

“Whence comes this doubt? My Fisher is fearless.”

“In my boat on the broad ocean, I am the aiji, subject only to the the wind and the stars and the waves. But the Sea of the Marid is your place, not mine. I yearn to be a part of it, because it is you, dena-ma. But the waves here are so high and cold and I confess at times, I fear they will overtop me.”

“You think I would set you aside for another.”

“The contract is not simply between myself and you, Chigi-ji,” she said. “It is between myself *and the Marid*. Therein lies the problem, does it not? You are the Marid, and the Marid is you. I cannot say that I have won you without knowing that I have won the Marid also.”

He was silent, regarding her thoughtfully but it was not her that he was seeing, but rather the road ahead. “You see it also,” she said. “The difficult path. How much do your people trust you? How much are they going to believe that this thing between us is a real thing that can bring them value? Failing that, how hard will they strive to save you from me?”

He can feel his jaw tighten. “I will *make* them believe it.”

“Ah, dena-ma,” she said softly. “All you can *make* them do is fear to tell you their true minds. And if that happens, you are lost.” She laced and relaxed her fingers before her and by this he knew how very anxious she was. He was reminded, again, of how alone she was, cast out from her family. “I cannot distract you, your council, and your people from the larger issues that threaten your safety, your people’s safety, the security of the Marid, at a time when you must be united and determined and strong. I do not want to be the cause of disunity, especially not now. It cannot be as it was in my sailboat.”

“No, it will be *better*,” he said. “Rao-ma, do not regret saying yes. Not for even a moment.”

She let out a soft breath. “I do not, nor will I ever. But how much should my own desires count, in the final tally of the wisdom of this? If the Marid comes to see the Edi as more than mere ship-wreckers, if your people should come to respect the tribes, well and good, but then what benefit do I bring? They will rightly point out that I am

outcast, and the Grandmothers will refuse to treat with you because of me. And even that may never even come into play either way, with the Marid looking to the East now.”

Machigi gritted his teeth: everything she was saying was almost exactly the same thing Gediri had argued earlier. “What has Gediri said to you?” He asked.

She must have seen something in the bunching of the muscles of his jaw or some danger in his eyes, for she said, gently, “I beg of you, do not be angry at any of your people on my behalf, and especially not nand’ Gediri. It was not only your aishid that kept you alive in this place. They all hold you in very great regard, that much is plain, and it is out of that regard for you that they seek what is best for you, especially because of the coming storm.”

“You are what is best for me, Rao-ma. Setting you aside for the good of the Marid would be like cutting off my arm for the good of the Marid. If I cannot make them understand that, I am not fit to be aiji.” He swallowed, steadied himself. “Have you changed your mind?”

She touched his hand. “No, no, thrice no, dena-ma. I am only mindful that your people expect me to bring something useful to this, *their* marriage to *me*.” She took a breath, perhaps steadying herself in turn. And then she asked, “Have you given thought to nand’ Gediri’s proposal?”

“Which one?”

“That I remain here with you without contract, leaving you free to make a marriage alliance elsewhere.”

He could not keep the scowl off his face, not with her. “It is not worthy of you.”

“You are kind. But his point about resources is well made, dena-ma. Perhaps it would be better were you to marry someone who could bring the Marid a stronger political advantage, as such marriages are meant to do.”

“Would you tolerate that, Rao-ma? That some other woman lay claim to me, and bear my children?”

He could see the deep unhappiness in her face. “If it brought better value to you and the Marid, I would consider it. Perhaps even tolerate it. But I would not be joyous.”

He smiled. “Rao-ma, I would not tolerate it. And it would be foolish even from a political bent: if the Grandmothers were to come to their senses and realize that there is advantage to them in this, it would in no ways improve matters if they thought I kept you merely for pleasure. They have acted foolishly and yet I would not insult them so. Nor you.” He placed his hands on her shoulders so as to turn her to face him fully.

“Rao-ma,” he said. “Look at me. Give my people time. When they look at you now, they are only seeing history, and a one-sided history at that. In time, the real you will supplant that pre-supposition, and they will understand that what makes you fitting for this has nothing to do with titles — those can be given or taken away just as easily as—” the snap of his fingers echoed in the room like a gunshot. “What makes you fitting is you, all of you, your mind and your skill and your determination. They will see it, in time, if you allow it.”

He wished he could say that he had convinced her. *She is too intelligent to underestimate the resistance here. But that falls to me.*

“Remember that I have given Gediri and the rest until the autumn Festival,” he said. “I expect them to expend effort to get to know you. Please tell me if they do not.”

“And if we reach the deadline without success, Chigi-ji? What then?”

“The deadline is a courtesy for *them* to come to understanding. It in no ways changes my intention. On that day, we will marry.”

She closed her eyes and leaned into his hands for a moment. Then she stepped back and turned to the map and once again, setting light fingertips on the inked lines of the coast. “The sea connects our people,” she murmured, moving her hand farther offshore, tracing it westward. “I think I can find a way to help them understand that there is a worthy connection between you and me and the Marid — if I follow the sea.”

...

It was early evening when the last of the day’s meetings had finished and the ministers all took their leave. Machigi retreated back to the map room. *Perhaps Rao is still there*, he thought. But she was not.

He stood at the room’s windows and looked out. The sky was taking on clouds with dark bellies, little summer squalls in scattered packets, and red shafts of sunset light broke through and dappled the harbor, the boats, the city with an ever-shifting pattern of light and shadow.

The staff were preparing supper. Though the kitchens were not particularly near, some configuration of the palace’s doors allowed the scent of the seasonal meat offering to waft into the map room as it cooked: dekau’in, a plains staple from this time of year, well-favored by the house in his childhood.

Then, down in the city, a bell rang the time change. Other bells picked it up, and for a moment — between the sound of the bells and the smell of the cooking and the rippling light across the landscape below — he suddenly found himself deep in a memory, standing beside his father in this very spot, a young boy trying to understand what it was that Ardami, the lord of all of clan Taisigi, was doing, feeling, facing.

His father had spoken to him, trying to convey some sense of statecraft. Asked him a question. “Lords, of the smallest sept to the aiji himself,” his father had said. “They all must surround themselves with the keenest tools and take especial care to keep those tools sharp. What do you think is the most important tool that we lords have at our disposal, son of mine?” Machigi remembered the boy he had been, not truly understanding what it was his father was asking, being confused, having no response. Ships? Good staff? Strong alliances? These were all important things, especially in the ever restless, often fatal Marid — but was Father saying that one was more important than the rest? He remembered feeling helpless in the face of that question, and could not recall whether his father had ever provided a solution.

But now he was a man, fully grown, standing in the boy’s place beside the memory of his father. He was a man who had experienced much in a short amount of time since his father’s assassination and who could, now, finally provide an answer. *The answer is in me, Honored Father*, he said silently to his father’s memory. *The answer is me.*

The clouds closed ranks, casting the city into evening shadow. The bells stopped their ringing and somewhere, some servant closed a door, cutting off the scent of supper. He blinked and his father was gone.

*But the answer remains, Father. The Marid remains. I remain.*



## Chapter 32 - Acquaintance

The evening was hushed, here in the sheltered bedroom of the seaward suite. Rao sat quietly while Jara, her junior-most chambermaid, combed out her hair in preparation for sleep. She had survived a little more than a week in the house of the Taisigi, but the staff of this suite were still something of a mystery. Rao had tried to tease out something about the girl and her life as Jara was teasing the tangles out of her locks, but she was proving to be very shy. So far, Rao had only determined her age (19), her clan (Temani), and her district (Tanji, a local therefore, but inland, in the district's northern extent).

She decided not to push. Perhaps, like a shy animal, Jara would approach *her* if she sat very still, and let the girl along while she worked. And so she sat very, very still, trying not to think of herself as a hunter.

Over her nightgown, Rao was wearing one of her purloined robes —

— *I did not steal it*, she reminded herself. *It was mine to begin with* —

— from home —

— *No. No longer home. I must make the Marid my home* —

— and she could feel from the way Jara was combing her hair that she was surreptitiously trying to look at the robe's neckline, which was richly decorated. But it was subtle because the decoration woven directly into the cloth in texture instead of color, and perhaps not so easy to see. So Rao tilted her head so that the long fall of her hair would hang away from the back of her neck and the maid would have a better angle from which to see it. Sure enough, Jara took the bait. "The decoration of the robe is unusual, daja-ma." Jara said. "Very pretty, though."

"It is message weaving," Rao turned in her seat a little so that she could look Jara in the face and she saw the maid's eyes go wide, and was pleased to see that they were the wide eyes of interest, not of unease. She smiled and said, "My hair is sufficiently combed, I think. Please, pull up a chair and sit and I will show you, nadi."

Jara brought over an extra chair and very shyly took a seat at Rao's side. Rao loosened the robe, holding the hem out in her hands so that the girl could see it better. "Here is a conventional geometric pattern but look, do you see? The patterns seem random along this edge here. It is not random: the weavers have encoded a message by converting characters into numbers using the standard number order of the Syllabary," she explained. "Do you see that the weaving thread appears to lie at different heights, sometimes higher than the others? You may touch it if you like, sometimes it's easier to feel the difference as a bumpiness."

Jara looked closely and reached out, running tentative fingers over the cloth. She nodded. "Yes, nandi, I do feel it."

"The vertical threads — the warp, are in pairs, one thin and one thick. The weavers choose to advance one or the other to the position over the weaving thread — the weft — the thicker warp thread makes a bump. So a bump and no-bump are two possible digits. And then they can run a second thread, this one silken for contrast, on top of the weft. It could, in theory, give us an additional two more digits, but traditionally they will only add it when the warp is thick, for better definition — and also to keep the number of possibilities fortuitous."

“You convert the characters’ numbers into this base three,” the maid said in a tone of wonder. “And use it to encode the message into the weaving.”

Jara’s imagination had clearly caught fire and this made Rao smile again. “Yes, just so. And although this message is encoded in a straightforward fashion, sometimes people will use the Old Alphabet or even apply a cryptographic process to hide the meaning.” She thought to explain that the Edi had passed messages among themselves in a similar manner during the Troubles, when the west coast had been invaded by the pretender-aiji Murini’s forces. *As Murini had been supported by the Marid, best I not mention it.* “There are more possibilities if you use different colors, of course, but this gown was meant for the court in Shejidan and so is a bit more understated than what the Edi usually do.”

“What does it say, nandi?” Jara asked, fascinated.

“It is an excerpt from a poem, asking the Mother of the Sea for a calm passage. Understand that we are very new to the courtly way of doing things and they can be quite different from our own. It seemed felicitous to wear a reminder to be patient with all the learning we would have to do.”

“You seemed to have learned very well, nandi,” Jara offered shyly.

Rao dipped her head. “I am grateful that you think so, Jara-ji,” she dared to offer the intimate form, and the young woman did not look displeased. “I would ask this very large favor of you: if I should do or say anything that seems rude, thoughtless, or unkabiu, that you would not hesitate to bring it to my attention. I am still learning, you see, and am determined to do honor to this house, your lord, and you.”

“Nandi,” Jara bowed. She straightened up and offered, tentatively, “Forgive one for saying so, nandi, but you are not at all what one expected.”

Rao smiled. “You expected an unlettered brigand.”

The young woman could not quite contain her embarrassment. “One...”

“It is well, Jara-ji,” Rao said. “I quite understand. The history between our people has not been good. One hopes that with the admittance of the tribes to the ashidi’tat, with their own recognized lands and lords, a better future is possible. I suspect that the older people, more closer to that bad history, may be less willing to see this possibility. But perhaps you and I may keep our minds a little more open, no? I believe your lord has had that vision.”

Jara bowed again. “Yes, nandi. One sees that the aiji sees it in you. And one also begins to see. Thank you, nandi.”

Rao returned her bow, heartened.

## Chapter 33 - Inquiry

Most of Machigi's days were consumed by meeting with his small council. Rao knew that in roughly a month's time, he would be hosting one of the year's lesser petitioning periods — nothing like the entire week given to such affairs during Festivities, just a day or two, and was working to whittle down the council's roster of concerns to ensure he could wholly focus on his citizens' complains.

Sometimes he disappeared from the palace entirely. "I have personal alliances with certain persons in the region, ones with useful enterprises, but whose work requires a certain *discretion* when it comes to their benefit to the state," he had told her, a delightful mischief dancing in his eyes. "And such meetings are best conducted incognito." *Interesting*. But in general, the majority of his time was eaten up by straightforward governance conducted in the audience room of one kind or another.

Thus, he took breakfast early. Rao had always been an earlier riser, herself, so it was very pleasant to sit down with him in the palace's main dining hall while the sky was still dark and spend what little time he could spare with him, before it was time to return to her suite. Today, when she returned to her quarters, she was surprised to find Tamo waiting for her in her sitting room, a message cylinder in her hands. It was the first time in during her nine days in Tanaja — *so far, and I am still here* — that she had actually received any kind of formal message. *An important milestone, perhaps, that someone else here recognizes that I exist?*

The letter was contained with a very elegant yet serviceable pewter cylinder decorated with scrollwork engraving, all properly sealed with wax and a seal-imprint she did not recognize: within a circle of taihiin flowers, a trident with five tines.

"Tamo-nadi," she said, holding up the seal for the servant's inspection. "What is this seal — do you know it?"

"Yes, nandi," Tamo replied. "It is the seal of the aiji's small council."

*Oh*. With not a little trepidation, Rao broke the seal and extracted the message inside, written in an elegant hand in a deep blue ink.

*Aishihai'mar Council of the Aiji, to Rao-daja, salutations  
You are cordially invited to meet with the aishihai'mar council in the audience room, at two hours before noon.  
Signed, Gediri, First Minister*

"Hm," she said, thoughtful. "It seems I am invited to meet the council this morning," she said to Tamo. "Please notify Rajeno-nadi."

"Yes, nandi," Tamo said and, with a bow, departed towards the security suite and — after that, Rao knew — to the bedroom to prepare the proper attire.

At the proper time and, thanks to the staff, in very proper Taisigi attire, Rao put the proper expression on her face and headed out of the suite. The dress was much closer in style to that which nobility wore in Shejidan: a fitted, high-necked bodice with lace at the neck, sleeves inset deeply into the back so as to urge the shoulders to an upright posture, a thankfully brief trickle of lace around the cuffs. She remembered from her last season in the capital that large, multi-layered, expansive skirts had been coming into vogue there and was very pleased to find that this was *not* the case here in

Tanaja: pleasingly, the skirt was a simple a-line that allowed for movement, which meant that she would not have to wade into the audience room through an ever-present flood of cloth, and she was also grateful that her feet were shod not in foot-pinching narrow leather shoes but in soft embroidered slippers. Over all of this she wore a light, indoor coat of grays and muted blues, a neutral effect, she thought, with embroidered cuffs and hems, with understated pewter hook-and-eye fasteners which she left undone. Tamo had braided her hair and affixed a dark green ribbon, suggesting but not exactly matching the Taisigi colors, as an acknowledgement of her still-temporary status as a guest here. Rao was not entirely happy about this selection, but she understood.

As she left the suite, the senior-most of her security fell in beside her. The brother of the pair, Dvari, loomed — he seemed to Rao to be made entirely of *pure loom*, and in this she was not thinking of weaving.

“Good morning, Rajeno-nadi, Dvari-nadi,” Rao said to them politely.

“Nandi, good morning,” Rajeno replied with a short nod. Her eyes were lively and a smile played around the corners of her mouth. Her brother, on the other hand, only added to the conversation with some odd little sound, perhaps a grunt. But he nodded politely nonetheless.

Rao was fascinated. *Does he speak? He is so big!* “I am ready when you are, nadiin,” she said. It seemed proper to use a more familiar mode with them, her personal security. “And I am glad you are here. I understand there may be *politics* this morning.”

Dvari gave another grunt, but Rajeno’s eyes sparkled. “We are well-trained for *politics* here in the Marid, nandi,” she said solemnly, and Rao had to very sternly stifle a desire to giggle. *Machigi chose well for me.*

The staff had set up the grand marble-inlaid table in the audience hall for formal governance. The Ministers, their clerks seated behind and to one side, were arrayed around the sides of the tables. Machigi had his own place at the head of the table, with his own clerk. As she entered, Rao could see the packets and envelopes neatly arrayed in front of each place — the work of the day, she presumed. Each place had a glass tumbler of water, mold-blown in some texturized pattern that caused it to sparkle in the light. At the other end of the table, opposing Machigi, there was a chair, but without the assemblage of documents, just the tumbler. She knew in an instant that this was where she was to be seated, and it felt uncomfortably like she was about to face a tribunal. *Well, I suppose I am, at that.*

As she entered, Machigi rose, which necessitated the rising of all of his minsters: five persons wearing slightly less than full court finery: working clothes, from the noble perspective, reflecting the heraldry of their clans. Thanks to her relative confinement within the walls of her most excellent library — which contained several armorial catalogs of the clans and their devices and colors — she was able to recognize them.

She saw that Gediri, in the colors of the Taisigi, was at Machigi’s immediate right hand, and it was Gediri who made the introductions:

- Kaordi, Minister of Information. He was dressed in a very restrained coat and shirt with minimal lace, in the brown and gold of the Sesani clan of the northwestern Taisigin Marid, a people of farmers and hunters on and around the great game preserve there. *The Taisigi had once had a Minister of War in this one’s place*, Rao remembered from her reading. *Machigi understands that intelligence is the surest path to victory in war*



*or peace.* She remembered that the Sesani were the most land-focused of the Taisigin Marid, a nomadic people who were noted riders of mechieti, much like the Taibeni of the Padi Valley. *Does Machigi know how to ride?* She wondered. Then she realized that her thoughts had drifted and brought herself back to focus on Gediri as he continued —

- Saodi, Minister of Trade and Commerce. This was a woman in her late middle age, also dressed in an exceptionally fine and yet understated coat over an elegant dress, in the black, blue, and dark gray of her clan, the Lusi. *She admirably represented Machigi in Shejidan,* she reminded herself. *And now serves as the replacement for the prior traitor-occupant of the chair.*

- Maisuno, Minister of Agriculture, a middle-aged lady in something closer to current Shejidan style, with brighter colors and much more lace. The inland Caratho clan's golds and greens had always been brighter than the clans closer to the coast and so were they here, in the display of Maisuno's clothing.

- Laudri, Public Works. The man was dressed in gold-threaded brocades accenting the broader blues and antique golds of his clan, Mordani, from the capital of the Dausigin Marid. His expression was one of intense focus. *Here is the man who is bearing the brunt of most of the Marid's prosperity, having to balance expansion and development with tradition.* His face and hands did not convey the same sense of age as did the expanse of gray in his hair. *The work has prematurely aged him.*

She bowed as politely and smoothly as she could bring her body to bear in this formal gown, understanding the importance of this meeting and these people.

"Nandiin," she said. "One is gratified to meet you here." She scanned the table, offering an additional nod to each and every one of them as she met them eye-to-eye, and then she looked at Machigi and offered him a slightly deeper bow. "Nand' aiji," she said, watching a flicker run through the expressions of his small council, as she gave to him a proper and respectful greeting — but it was not "aiji-ma". *Nor can it be, unless I seek to lie. And I do not think I may lie to these people. They grew up eating and drinking lies with every meal and will know a lie for what it is.*

"Rao-daja, welcome," Machigi said solemnly, calmly, smoothly over that ripple of reaction. But there was something in the lines around his eyes, and once he saw that the eyes of his ministers had followed his gaze and settled on her face and that she was the only one actually looking at him, he *winked* at her.

*Mother of Oceans!* She willed her face to stillness. She would not break here in front of him or them, she would not, she would *not!*

The moment passed and Machigi sat, freeing them all to take their seats in a susurrus of rustling cloth. The staff seized the moment, swooping in to refill tumblers that needed it, and to fill Rao's tumbler entirely. Protocol cautioned her to behave as if the staff were invisible, so she refrained from thanking the server as she normally would have, not wanting to shock him or the ministers and their staff. *They are all of them waiting for me to do just such a thing, the country bumpkin they expect.*

So, instead, she simply folded her hands on the tabletop in front of her, the stone inlay cool under her fingers, and waited.

"Rao-daja," said Gediri. "Welcome. We desire to ask you questions, so as better to understand the aiji's desires in regard to your marriage." Rao saw his quick glance to Machigi, who returned the glance with a level gaze.

"Of course, nand' Gediri," she said. As he used a straightforward mode of addressing her, she decided that instead of being more formal — *and thereby placing myself as their subordinate* — she would use the same mode, as an equal. *I belong here. Understand this, nandiin.* "I strongly desire that the council understand me as well as you can, and welcome your questions."

"Very well," he replied, looking a little nonplussed. "Please begin by telling the council who you are."

"Nandiin. I am the daughter of Eljiso, daughter of Aischo, Grandmother of the Edi."

"But you have been disowned."

"Yes, nandiin. And exiled. However, that only changes the future, not the past."

"Of the past, yes," said Lord Laudri. "You have been to Shejidan?"

"Yes, nandiin," Rao said. "I have been part of the Edi delegation to the tashrid on several occasions. I also served for a season as aide to Lord Haidiri so that I might learn governance."

"How did you first meet the aiji?" Lord Kaordi asked.

She looked at Machigi and he gave her a tiny nod. "I rescued him at sea," she said. "Finding him clinging to flotsam, I brought him aboard my sailboat and thence to the shore."

"You were alone?"

"Yes, nandi. Until I brought the aiji aboard."

"Did you know who he was?"

"No. I knew from the way he spoke and behaved and from the quality of his clothing that he was noble born, but I did not know he was the aiji."

"Why were you in Marid waters?"

"I was sailing the Southern Ocean, nandi. I did not enter Marid's waters until I brought the aiji ashore."

"Why were you so far from your own shore?"

"There are times when I value an adventure alone, and it is a journey I make every year, nandi, when the kelikiin flock between the Southern Island and the mainland."

"Alone. You value being alone," the Minister of Agriculture said.

*He fears that I am hadjaijid.* "I do not value *always* being alone; I understand the importance of people. But there are times when, yes, I look for solitude, and an opportunity to test myself against the sea."

"To whom do you give your man'chi?" Lord Maisuno asked.

"To no one, nandi. I feel a broader association with my people, and remained dutiful to my Grandmother, as was tena to do."

"Tena? What is that?" Lord Kaordi said, sounding suspicious.

"An Edi word, nandi: the way things should be. Harmony; a fitting together; working toward collective purpose."

"Does anyone give you their man'chi?" Lord Maisuno asked.

"Of my tribe, I had it from several, my own aishid and associations."

"Your aishid? Do you mean your bodyguard?"

"Yes, but also fellow crafters. We Edi have societies for men and women and those who are neither, so I had associations therein also."

“And now?”

“I do not know, nandi. Lord Aischo separated us. Was it enough to break man’chi? I will not know until I have reason to return, and I doubt she will welcome me there now.”

“Would they be able to convince the Grandmother to take you back?”

“I doubt it. I would not go even if they could. My place is no longer there.”

“Will your mother still inherit?” Lord Laudri wanted to know.

“I cannot speak to the future, but it was only I Grandmother disowned,” she said.

“Will your mother accept you, once the Grandmother is gone?”

“I do not know.” She shifted slightly and felt her eyes narrow a bit. Was he suggesting that this could be arranged? This is the Marid. I would not discount the possibility. They seek to smooth my path away from this place. “Nandi, it is not my wish to return to the Edi. If I fail here, I will go elsewhere.”

“What will you do?” Asked Lord Siodi.

“I carve. I would look to a master to ‘prentice me into the woodcarvers’ guild. Or I would go somewhere that would take me on as crew — Cabo, perhaps.”

Machigi said, in a low, dark voice that made the small council shiver to attention, “That will not happen, nandiin.”

There was a pause as Machigi’s small council dipped their heads to the head of the table, cleared their throats, took small sips of water. Rao took the moment to take a sip of water herself.

Lord Siodi shared a glance with Lord Maisuno. “Nandi,” the Minister of Trade said. “Can you give your man’chi to the aiji?”

Here Rao hesitated. She did not want to name a’hrani here; she knew they would understand it as well as the Edi did, *which is to say, not at all*. But she knew that she must be honest. “I feel no man’chi to the aiji,” she said. “I was born to be aiji to my own people. I feel instead an alliance.”

“Could it not simply be a *personal* attachment? Physical attraction?”

Machigi raised an eyebrow and leaned back in his chair, watching her, shifting to rest his chin on his fist.

“No,” Rao said. “Well, yes, but not *simply*.” *Surely it has not escaped your notice that your aiji is a very handsome man?* “Nandiin, this association I feel with him is something more. I have seen how he believes, how he feels, how he acts. He is...” *a pirate, like me. No, I cannot say that.* “The *how* of who he is what convinced me that the Marid is more than I had been raised to believe. That there is a lost link —” *do not say a’hrani, be careful* “— between not only him and myself, but between my people and you. It is the quality of his character that drives me to find out what that is. He would not be doing what he is doing if it were not worthwhile — you would not be here, counseling him, if you did not feel that it were worthwhile, would you?” *Unless you are simply grasping the saddle of the mechieti-aiji in order that you might be carried along in his wake, which of course you would not admit to me.* She shifted her attention from them to the man at the head of the table. “You are so compelling, nand’ aiji, I must be a part of it. Of all of it.” Machigi’s expression softened and for a heartbeat, it was just the two of them with this table of state between them.

“Is that not man’chi, Rao-daja, if you are compelled?” Lord Siodi asked, breaking the moment.

Rao shook her head. "It is not the same, nand' Siodi. If you were to put us to crisis, we would both go different ways. But what I feel is similar. I wish I had the words. I can only assure you that your goals and his and mine dovetail, nandiin."

"That remains to be seen," said Lord Kaordi, sounding deeply skeptical.

"That is enough for now," Machigi said firmly. "There will be ample time to ask Rao-daja questions in the coming months." *She is not going anywhere*, he was telling them. "Let us recess for a short time before returning to business."

Bows all around the table, murmurs of "aiji-ma." Machigi and the ministers rose and stepped back from the table, leaving their clerks free to reset the arrays of documents on the table and the staff to whisk away the tumblers, replacing them with cups from a tea service so that, later, the ministers might be re-fortified for their work.

The assembly broke apart. Siodi, Laudri, and Maisuno drifted away from the table, finding a spot off to one side, and murmured to one another. Gediri and Kaordi, however, remained at the table with Machigi and engaged in a low conversation each other and their aiji.

The household staff circulated among them with small comestibles and glasses of juice and water. Rao shook her head slightly at the proffered refreshments — she rose and crossed the room to join her security, posted at their proper position against the wall.

"Well, nandiin, was that a tame encounter, by Marid standards?" She asked them.

"Very tame, nandi," Rajeno said. "They do not know what to make of you yet. Give them time. You will know that you have arrived when they get lively."

"Lively," Rao echoed, a question.

"Much more...expressive," Rajeno clarified. "A great deal louder." Dvari grunted in agreement.

*I very much doubt it would ever be as "lively" as the Edi*, Rao thought. "Do you know what to make of me, Rajeno-nadi?" she dared to ask, and glanced at Rajeno's brother, whose eyes did not stop roving over the room as she and his sister spoke.

"No, nandi," Rajeno said, refreshingly blunt. "But fortunately, we do not have to, except when it comes to security matters."

"What do you recommend, when it comes to security matters?"

"If anything should ever happen, nandi, get behind Dvari."

Rao raised an eyebrow, unsure as to whether Rajeno was serious or joking — *why not both?* — and she tilted her head back so that she might look up into Dvari's eyes. *Or, rather, up his nostrils*. He broke off his monitoring long enough to meet her gaze and give her a short nod. *There is no lack of intelligence in those eyes*, she thought. *He is just...solidly himself. A good word for him: solid.*

The pair of them abruptly straightened up — in Dvari's case, up and up and up — and by this, Rao knew that Machigi was approaching. She turned and was very glad to see that she was correct, so extremely relieved that he would join her. She bowed. He offered her a courtly bow of his own in return. "Well done, Rao-daja," he said. It seemed that he was still in formal mode; of course, she was exquisitely aware of all of the people who are seemingly in their own conversations but who she knew are listening very closely to what passed between her and their lord.

"One hopes it will help, nand' aiji," she said, matching that mode. *But I must figure out a way to repay you for that wink.*

Machigi turned for the windows and, after a quick nod to Rajeno and Dvari, she matched him, walking at his side until they had reached his favorite spot for looking out over the harbor. “Now we wait,” he said to her, very softly. “And see who rises to the occasion.”

Machigi and his guest stood by the windows overlooking the bay, bathed in the dappled light of a cloudy mid-morning. Gediri made his way to them, curious as to which — if any — of the other ministers would approach besides himself.

Only one, it seemed: nand’ Siodi. The former representative to the Isles joined them at the windows and offered a bow. “Aiji-ma, Rao-daja, nand’ Gediri,” she said smoothly. “Rao-daja, you said that you had been to Shejidan. Were any works from the Marid on display in the Bujavid when you were there?”

“Oh yes,” the Edi woman replied. “One vividly remembers the installation in the Bujavid last year — the exhibition of island porcelains, with those from the Sungeni Isles centermost. Is one correct that this was your hand in play, nandi? I know of your service to the Marid as the aiji’s trade representative to Shejidan.”

Gediri watched the soft smile bloom on Siodi’s lips. “Ah, yes, you have it in one, nandi. One was involved in the selection, transportation, and display of those pieces. One is very glad you enjoyed them. Did you see much of the city when you were in Shejidan, nandi?”

Rao dipped her head. “Some. One had the opportunity to see machimi at the Theatre of the Ashidi’tat, and had an excursion to the gardens of Kosa Madi.”

“It was springtime, was it not?”

“Yes” Rao replied. “The whole Earth seemed to be in bloom. It was lovely.”

“One is surprised we did not cross paths,” Siodi said. “For one was there at the same time, for the sake of the exhibition.”

Gediri’s clerk, eyeing the shifting of the light through the windows to mark the time, rang a silver handbell. The staff collected up all of the small dishes and glasses from the council’s refreshment and the ministers themselves returned to the table while their assistants fussily reconfigured the already-reconfigured files and papers at each of their places. Gediri found his place and watched, curiously, as he led her to the head of the table to stand beside him.

Machigi dipped his head fractionally and said, “We are grateful for your cooperation, Rao-daja. The council may begin work. We will escort the lady to her quarters and will return shortly.”

*She is likely glad to be done with us for now,* Gediri thought as he bowed in response to Machigi’s direction.

Rao offered the council a deep bow of her own. “One knows the council has important work to continue, and one is gratified you have given the gift of your time,” she said. “One hopes to work more closely with you in the future.” And with that, she departed at the aiji’s side. It was a testament to the Ministers’ self-control that their murmuring did not start until after they had stepped through the doors to the palace’s private quarters.

Siodi’s place at the table was next to him. “Nand’ Siodi, you have something in common with the Edi lady, it seemed,” Gediri said to her as he shuffled through his dossiers.

“Hmm, yes, nand’ Gediri,” Siodi replied, pursing her lips thoughtfully. “She is interesting. I suspect that there is more to this woman than where she comes from.”

“But is it enough, nandi, to justify her taking the place as consort?”

“I do not know, nandi. Tradition holds that a consort’s primary duty is to bring political utility, I know. But...”

Gediri raised an eyebrow.

“I sense something in her,” Siodi continued. “Something that would, perhaps, be of benefit to both Machigi the man, and Machigi the aiji.” She paused, as if mentally examining an unfamiliar object from several sides. “She knows the court at Shejidan. She has connections there, people who know her. These would, of course, refuse to admit her now, since her clan has cast her out. But were she the consort of the Marid, that would be another basket of fish entirely, would it not?”

“To what end, nandi?” Gediri said. “She is from a backward tribe which has only recently been turned around and pointed in the right direction — by the Lord of Malguri.”

“That is an ally with deep consequence,” Siodi pointed out. “And the young woman in no ways comes across as barbaric.”

“No,” Gediri admitted. “She has mastered courtly grace.”

“Her bearing shows that she has been bred and raised for rulership, in fact,” Siodi said.

Gediri felt his heart flutter in alarm, and made an effort to keep his expression neutral. “Do you mean she could attempt to usurp him?”

Siodi shook her head very briefly. “In no way, nandi. Know you so little about the history of the Southern Island? None of their rulers were ever autocrats, nand’ Gediri. They understood the value of consensus. Nor were they conquerors.”

*Nor were they ship-wreckers.* “She is not from the Southern Island,” Gediri pointed out. “That culture is a thousand years in its grave.”

“True,” said Siodi. “But the Edi have always claimed it as ancestor to their own.”

“They lie, most like. They’re little more than savages.”

“Hm,” Siodi looked thoughtful. “I suspect they are a little *more* than savages, if this woman is not some extraordinary example of their kind. We may have use of them, should Hurshina Shipping prove to be more of a problem in the future, or if the company falls under the influence of the rebel assassins.”

Gediri nodded. “What you say is wise, nand’ Siodi, and likely very true. However, I do not believe that accepting Rao as consort would advance any kind of alliance with the Edi at this point.”

“Hm,” Siodi said again. “Likely true. Yet the aiji has asked us to find worth in her.”

“How?”

Siodi let out a soft sigh. “I have no idea, nandi. It will be up to her to show us, if she can.” She frowned and sounded doubtful, and the band constricting Gediri’s chest loosened a little.

## Chapter 34 - Resistance

Later that evening, Jara returned to help her prepare for bed. The young woman seemed subdued — she would not meet Rao's eyes and Rao could not help but notice it, especially when an attempt to strike up a conversation, about Jara's opportunities for free time and what she did when she had that time, fell absolutely flat.

"What is wrong, Jara-ji?" Rao asked, uneasy. "Has something happened?"

"No, nandi," Jara said, eyes downcast. "One is — one is only — one wishes to be proper, nandi."

Well, she did not want to push and make an already awkward situation worse. "Very well," she said gently. "I understand."

As soon as Jara was gone, Rao retrieved a robe from her dressing room and wrapped it about herself over her nightgown. She went to the sitting room and surprised Anjero at work there, dusting. The servant covered her surprise with an immediate bow. "Nandi," she said. "How may one serve?"

"I regret to interrupt, Anjero-nadi," Rao replied. "But please find Basaro-nadi and ask her to see me here."

"Nandi," Anjero said formally. She bowed again and left to do as she had been bid.

Rao turned the chair by the writing desk about to face the room, herself, and took a seat, facing the security door. It was not long at all before the majordomo arrived, slipping into the room through that door and offering her a deep and very correct bow. "How may one serve, nandi?"

"Basaro-nadi," Rao said. "One observes a certain renewed formality among the staff."

"It is as it must be, nandi," Basaro replied. "To uphold the honor of the house, the staff must be perfectly kabiui in their relations with guests. One may not tolerate a lapse in this, especially with young staff only beginning their service."

"You have trained all the staff exceptionally well, nadi," Rao said, to which the major d' offered a bow. "One never noted any fault at any point. One wishes to get to know them, and you, and you, me." *I wish for association, but I doubt that is what you wish.*

"It is a kabiui household, nandi," Basaro said doggedly. "One has been advised by staff to assist you, understanding you to be learning, yourself. If staff fails for a moment to model the correct behavior, it will do a disservice to you, which one in no way wishes."

"One is familiar with kabiumaro," Rao said patiently. *She still sees me as an untutored barbarian who needs to be trained.* It was exasperating but she tried to find some amusement in it, because otherwise she would start screaming. "One knows that you may not have a complete understanding of the ways of the Edi, and that we have an unhappy history between us, and that despite the new peace brought about by the diplomacy of the aiji, that you still find us strange. But we are part of the ashidi'tat now, nandi, and one has been trained in courtly protocol. One will take care, and has already asked the staff to advise if one missteps in ways that are unique to the Marid. One earnestly wishes to learn your ways, nadi — this is inhibited when the communication between us is so strictly limited."

"One wishes no inhibition, nandi," Basaro said. "One only wishes to honor a guest of the house with all the proper forms."

*Guest of the house.* "Surely one is more than simply a guest," Rao observed.

"It is not for me to say, nandi," Basaro said. "It will be as the aiji wills. One only wishes for his success."

"You need not be politic with *me*, nadi," Rao said, trying to tamp down her impatience. She took a breath and centered herself. "We both of us wish for the same thing," she said gently. "Surely there is a middle way, in which he may have what he wishes—" *and he wishes me* "—while also serving the Marid?"

Basaro did not answer, regarding her impassively. Thinking, mayhap.

"It is why one wishes for association with the staff, nadi," Rao said. "The aiji wishes me to learn, and wishes his people to learn from me. Such a separation does not serve his will."

"One hesitates to encourage a close association, nandi," Basaro said, clearly trying to be delicate. "One means no disrespect, but one also wishes to spare the staff distress should there be a departure."

"You do not think I will remain," Rao said, dropping all pretense to cordiality. "You think the aiji will send me away."

"Is it outside of the realm of possibility, nandi?" Basaro asked, cool and level.

"No, it is not," Rao had to admit. "But you should know, nadi, that he has given his people a deadline." She let that sink in, because with Machigi, the term could be literal. "And he will know if you or anyone else prevents a genuine attempt at understanding with me. I will not challenge you overly regarding the management of the household, Basaro-nadi. I have every confidence in nand' Nevathi's selection of you for this duty. But," she added firmly. "I will not long tolerate being treated as if I were contagious. The aiji has tasked *me* in this also, nadi, and I shall allow no one to interfere with his orders. Trust that I will inform you if the staff become overly familiar with me." It was as much an order as it was a dismissal, for Rao had had enough. *Will I ever be able to bend this woman to me?* She despaired of it — Basaro seemed to be made of stone.

"One understands, nandi," Basaro said, grave and perfect in her courtly grace. She offered a precisely correct bow and departed silently, leaving Rao alone.



## Chapter 35 - Setback

It was her tenth day in Tanaja. Rao, herself, was not particularly superstitious about numbers, although numerically felicitous things did give her a sense of harmonious pleasure. *And despite my attempts to be modern, that today numbers the unlucky tenth fills me with unease.* So, as a reminder that the world's numbers were always fortuitous, she went for a walk in the garden and let its beauty reassure her.

It was a warm morning, lightly overcast, with the ever-present sea breeze ruffling the flowers and vines. It smelled of salt and the interface of land and water and it made her think, for a moment, of home. It also brought with it some scents of the city — wisps of smoke, sometimes faintly acrid and organic smells she associated with industry — but they were clean scents, to her mind. Tamo had told her, somewhat delicately, the facilities for processing night soil had historically been sited in accordance with kabiū notions, in places that also happened to generally be up-wind and more easily accessible to farmers. *“Kabiū” and “practical” line up very well,* she thought. *Here in the Marid as anywhere else on the continent.*

She arrived at the fountain and sat for a moment on its rim, leaning over to look through the water at the fossils in the basin's lining. The breeze whispered across the surface and set up ripples, distorting her view of the ancient creatures' stony bones in waves.

A likewise distorted reflection appeared over her shoulder. *Nand' Siodi.*

She turned and rose and offered the Trade minister's true self a bow, genuinely pleased. “Good morning, nand' Siodi. What brings you to the garden?”

“You, as it happens, nandi,” the woman replied, smiling, and offered a bow of her own. “Good morning, Rao-daja.” Her expression shifted, then, to an unsettling seriousness. “I hoped to speak with you about a difficult matter.”

Rao raised an eyebrow, feeling a spike of alarm surge through her. *Has something happened to Machigi?* “A difficult matter, nandi?” She managed to keep her voice even.

“The Minister of Affairs asked me to speak with you,” Siodi said. Rao relaxed, but only slightly — she could see from the other woman's face that she was bearing no good news. “The council met last night regarding your and the aiji's proposed marriage.”

*Oh.* For a moment, Rao found herself in Najida, standing in front of her Grandmother again. “It is not *proposed*, nandi,” she said.

Siodi dipped her head to acknowledge the point. “I understand. But the aiji did order us to deliberate about it. I felt it would be best to relate our decision to you.”

*A decision after only ten days?* “Which is?” Rao asked, though she knew the answer.

“I regret to inform you that the Council shall remain opposed,” Siodi said. She held up her hands briefly as she took a deep breath. “This marriage will not benefit the Marid as a whole,” she said. “The Edi remain antagonistic — if anything, even more so than before because of the circumstances of your arrival here. You bring no alliance, no resources, no prospect of trade, no communal defense, no settlement of feud — in fact, it is likely that you have added a new feud where there was none before.”

*She is not wrong. And yet...*

“Please understand, Rao-daja,” Siodi continued. “It is not that any of us are opposed to you *as a person*. I myself feel that you are an intelligent, insightful, interesting person — as for the rest of the council, well, you have surprised them.”

“Well,” Rao said, trying not to let bitterness overwhelm her, and not being entirely successful. “Could it have been that difficult, given how little you think of my people?”

“I feel that you may be changing my mind in that regard at least, nandi,” Siodi said gently. “If you are not an overly unusual example of the people of your clan, well, there is much there we need to learn, because you are impressive. I can well see why the aiji feels an attachment to you, and that is why I feel that I owe you honesty. But I cannot allow my personal feelings to sway the larger issues at hand: the council must keep in mind the good of the Marid in all its deliberations. Personal attachment is simply not relevant when compared to what the Marid faces, and what Machigi needs to do as its aiji. Alliances are more important now than they have ever been before. He needs a consort that brings him benefit beyond the personal. *The Marid* needs a consort that brings something that benefits *the state*.”

“I know this,” Rao said. “Which is why I asked for time. And Gediri-nandi agreed. There are still a little more than two months before the Festivity. This decision is premature, nandi. The council is not giving me the opportunity to give you an answer.”

“Yes,” Siodi said, still gentle. “I would argue for more time, myself, and I will tell you that I personally am not completely convinced in either direction. But I must warn you that the council’s decision is likely to hold firm. As accomplished a person as you are, Rao-daja, you are still only a person, one unfortunately unassociated, and the Marid needs more than that.”

It was like being punched in the stomach — Rao could not help but feel a deep sense of betrayal in the First Counselor’s choice of this particular emissary. *I had thought I would find in her, of all of Machigi’s ministers, an ally. Instead, she does his dirty work.* It was surprising how much it *hurt* — it bordered on the physical. “Has nand’ Gediri told Machigi-aiji this?” She asked bluntly, stopping to face the other woman. “Have you? Do you think the aiji will be best pleased when you announce that you have made up your minds in only ten days?”

Siodi came to a stop also and bowed her head slightly. “No, he has not. Nor have I. We were rather hoping that you and the council could present a compromise to him together. I believe you hold his and the Marid’s best interests at the highest — is this not so?”

“Of course it is,” she said, feeling her heart sink. “You are going to revisit nand’ Gediri’s idea of my remaining uncontracted,” she said.

“It is a solution. A useful solution.”

“Would the council accept a short-term contract as a compromise?” Not that she would be happy with *that*, either, and suspected that Machigi would be less so.

“We discussed it,” Siodi said. “Unhappily, such a contract would carry the danger of being extended.” *By this she means that people might become accustomed to me.*

“We of the council wish that there be no possibility of future legal entanglement. I beg you, Rao-daja, to consider remaining — for his peace and yours — only without a contract, for the state’s sake.”

“It is not a solution he will accept. You have known him far longer than I have — you represented him in Shejidan, you know how he thinks — nand’ Siodi: you *know* this.”

“Perhaps the more pertinent question is whether *you* will accept it?”

Rao felt her jaw tighten. “If it were necessary, and *if he wanted it*, I would consider it. But as I said to him myself, I would not welcome it. Nor will I propose it,” she eyed Siodi unhappily. “I know that is what *Gediri* wants, but it is not what *Machigi* wants, and it is not what *I* want, and if I cease being who I am and pretend to be *something else* for the good of the state, then I lose my integrity. Can you truly say that you or he or the state would benefit from that in the long run?”

“You would not be the first person to absorb an unpleasant truth or to commit to an unplanned role in the name of success,” Siodi said. “No one here would think your integrity at fault. They would know you for wise flexibility.”

“I am not ready to be *that* assimilated into the ways of the Marid,” she said.

“I recommend that you find a way to be ready before the Festivity, nandi,” Siodi said. “Otherwise you will drive a wedge between the aiji and his council, at a time when he will need us the most.”

“It will not be *my* wedge, nandi,” Rao said firmly. “But the council’s.”

Siodi looked a little sad, mayhap. And yet she remained firm. “I regret it extremely, Rao-daja, but the source of the wedge will not matter. Only its existence.”

*Unhappily, nandi, you have a point.*

The minister gave her another polite bow and departed, leaving Rao to sink back down and contemplate the fountain. It burred quietly at her, but if it was trying to tell her anything, she could not understand the words.

The breeze from the bay ruffled the water’s surface again, putting her to mind the surface of the ocean, *where life is so much less complicated*. There, only a person’s skill with line and sheet and knowledge of the currents mattered. *There are always far more dangerous currents ashore, and Grandmother has taken away my sea anchor*. For a moment, she thought to damn her Grandmother to the demons of the oceans’ lightless deeps. *But it would be infelicitous and pointless besides. What she did was free me. It is up to me to find a way to turn it to my advantage.*

But she did not know how.

## Chapter 36 - Exploration

It was breakfast time on her fortunate eleventh day in the capital of the Marid. *Fortunate in that I have survived this long without being cast out — or worse — and yet I seem to have made no progress in winning over this place to me.* She was still angry about the council, though she was resolved not to speak of it to Machigi, at least not for the present. *I will give them a chance to tell him themselves, or I will know them for cowards.*

This early in the morning, the palace, the legislature, the city — they were all functioning as if they had become caught in a time before electric lights had made it possible to turn night into day: as if asleep, they were hushed and dark and quiet, and for once, one might be tempted to think that such peace as this was the Marid's natural state. It was not, of course. *But perhaps it will be, one day.*

The two of them all but disappeared into the vast space of the state dining hall. In the dark, it was just them, excepting when the staff moved in to present or remove dishes or refill cups, and Rao felt a little sorry for them, having to cross that seemingly endless floor to reach them. But it did give her and Machigi a certain privacy and, while it was still dark, it was almost cozy. It was only the two of them, daringly infelicitous. Were she anyone other than who she was, Machigi would have brought in one of his or her aishid to make a proper and fortunate third. But he had a point to make: the two of them were to be a unity. He wanted the household to see it, to understand it, to *feel* it. So they had done this every day since the day he had brought her here and it was one of the only times that she felt that he was truly hers.

The view from the hall was eastward across the city, bay, and sea, like those in the map room and the seaward suite. They would share a light repast and watch as the Earth turn towards the sun — on clear mornings, the sky shifted from the black of night, taking on the broad and inverted rainbow of dawn: vivid and rich and deep red shading the horizon, the colors shifting up through the spectrum until they reached the cobalt vault above.

On this particular morning, which was clear, the dawn spectrum was halfway washed out by the ever-approaching sun when he tilted his head and said, as he usually did, "How will you spend the day?"

Most days, she walked the garden. Upon reflection, she realized that it should have filled her with horror, walking there and knowing what it was that had made it so green, but then she thought of what she knew of the Shadow Guild — that they would kidnap family, even children, of people and then force those people through fear and despair to be their agents — and she could only feel a fierce satisfaction at what he had done. And the garden was beautiful. Walking there was, therefore, oddly reassuring on several levels.

Afterwards she would often retire to her sitting room to read. The seaward suite's library was well-stocked with histories of all of the clans of the Marid, and often she would grill him for information over supper. She had so much to learn, to match him in this place.

But today, she felt perhaps it would be a little different, because she was in no mood to encounter any of Machigi's small council — *Gediri's second-hand messengers* — this morning. She was ashamed to admit it to herself, but thinking of them and their

*decision* made her think of knives. *To speak of knives, though...there is an outlet for these feelings.* “I think I may open up the box you gave me, Chigi-ji.” She flexed her hands and wiggled her fingers. “I feel an urge to do some carving. Something small.”

He looked pleased. “I will enjoy seeing what you make. You are extraordinarily skilled.”

“I suppose,” she said, thoughtful. “But is it *useful*? Before we know it, it will be the autumn. I cannot imagine that a few hand-made carvings will make much more than a dent in anyone’s opinion of me.”

“Perhaps not. But even a little dent can become a breach. I have in mind another meeting, but with more than ministers,” he said. “In time, I will introduce you to all of the lords of the Marid, but for now, those of my clan are closer to hand and will be able to attend without complications. We will start with those, and then invite lords from farther afield later.”

“I should like to meet non-nobles also,” Rao suggested. “Tradespeople. Craftspeople. Surely there are exhibitions at the guild halls? A museum, perhaps? Someplace that has exhibits while nand’ Gediri works on arranging displays in the government hall?”

“Ah,” he shook his head. “Our guild offices are still small, and we have only recently begun to develop even the larger cities. Even the rail link to Koperna is new. There are no state museums yet.”

“Yet,” she smile. “In time. It would bring more people to visit, especially once you have finished improving the rails.”

“Hm, outsiders. With the attendant security concerns and requirements. Hotels. Wider roads. Change in the city that few would welcome.”

“Opportunity,” Rao countered. “It need not come all at once. There may be a way to accommodate tourists without too much change at first, and to manage that change in the long run. As long as they are the adventurous types.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Adventurous?”

“It is just a thought. An inkling of an idea. I am not even sure exactly how it would work, but if I could speak with these people, I think they would develop a plan for you themselves. Eventually. I would need to meet them first, and it remains to be seen if they would even listen to me.”

“I will arrange it, then, Rao-ma. They will listen to you if I am standing at your side. It may take some doing to convince them, and get them to do something that convinces the lords, which is an entirely different battle.”

The sun had peeked out above the horizon and it painted his face with light. Which meant that it was time for them to part, and even though they were in full view of the staff, he touched his fingers lightly to hers. “This is what I want,” he said. “For you to participate in my life in your own right.”

“In even the, ah, *useful enterprises* that require *discretion*, dena-ma?” She asked with a smile.

He looked to be thinking seriously about it. “Yes, I think,” he said finally. “I believe that between the both of us, we could play such things to our mutual advantage.”

He shot her a rakish grin and departed, and she watched him go as the servants dove in to clear the table. *Mother of Skies*, she thought. *He has such abiding faith that*

*I will be a help to him, and not a hindrance. I must keep chipping away at this walls that separate me from being a part of this place. But there are so many of them.*

She made a much abbreviated walk through the garden this morning, really just passing through a corner of it before returning within the palace proper to her suite. She was thinking about the problem she had in swinging her staff in her direction, particularly with Basaro and her obstinate obsession with formality. Her detour through the garden made her think of again of its terrible recent *endowment*. It was certainly one approach to bringing people into alignment. *But it is not my way. I cannot simply execute Intent on people here because they do not find favor in me. I must find another way.*

*But what do I have? I have my mind, which is mine and mine alone, and which no other may touch. But nor may I touch theirs. What good does that do me, to have a mind? Well, it is the wellspring of my words. And the motivating power of my hands. And both of them may serve as emissaries into the minds of others.*

As Ojeka and Boragi returned to the security suite, she found herself in the sitting room, pulling the box of carving tools from its place on the shelf. She had not touched it since Machigi had presented it to her, but now she carried it to her writing desk and pulled out the knives and a likely block of wood. She eyed it and the image of Gediri's face came to her unbidden — almost square in form and thick, like this wood. The block in her hand was finely grained, and would suit her needs. *As the counselor will not*, she caught herself thinking, and then heaved a sigh. *This petty, vengeful thinking serves no purpose but to upset you*, she chided herself.

Tamo appeared and offered a bow. "Would you care for some tea, nandi?" She asked.

"Yes, please, nadi," Rao said. One day, she hoped, it would be "Tamo-ji" — alas, not yet. "One thinks to do some craftwork, and so begs you to simply let the cup go cold and not worry about refreshing it. But what would be very helpful, nadi, would be a cloth to put down on the desk. To capture flakes of wood," she added, seeing the maid's momentary flash of confusion.

"Of course, nandi," Tamo said, and did as she was bid, bringing back not only a plain cloth to spread over the desk, but another one to serve as an apron across her lap. "One is grateful," Rao said a bit ashamedly, that she had forgotten to think of how to protect these fine clothes the house had given her, and wonder of wonders, got a little smile in reply and, "please do not mention it, nandi. One is glad to help." Tamo set down the requested cup of tea and, with another bow, let her be.

She had lost track of the time. She was vaguely aware of the coming and going of Tamo and, occasionally Eskari, to check on her. She had a hazy memory of perhaps one of them — she was not sure which — asking her about plans for lunch, which she was fairly certain she had declined. So perhaps it was early afternoon? *It is like dreaming sometimes*, she thought. *And then you come to, and find you are in a place you had not been before.* She felt as if she had come fully awake after that dream of making, and in her hands was her completed carving: a two-sided comb, with teeth on both sides, coarsely-spaced on one side and finely on the other. That also suggested early afternoon

— it was a very familiar pattern, and she was a swift worker, so that seemed to be the right amount of time to have passed in the making of it.

She had retrieved a soft cloth and a tin from the box and was patiently rubbing in the comb's oil finish when Tamo reappeared and announced, "the aiji is here, nandi." And then, before Rao had a chance to set aside her things and meet him properly in the receiving room, Machigi entered.

He paused, taking in the desk and its neat pile of shavings, her apron-like attire, the still full and completely cool cup of tea, the open tin of oil, the work in her hands, and smiled. "I am glad to see you at work, Rao-ma," he said. "It is a side of you the house needs to see."

Tamo brought over a chair for him. He laid his hand across the back of his chair and said to her, "thank you, nadi. No tea is necessary." This was a dismissal, and Tamo bowed and withdrew to leave them alone.

He settled down, leaning forward to look at what it was she was doing. "A comb," she told him. She had covered it with her customary delicate and tight knot work, meant to give fingers purchase in the right places.

"May I?" He held out a hand and she handed it over to him for his inspection. He examined it carefully, tilting it just so, and she knew he was seeing how she had set the grain of the wood at the correct angle in relation to its teeth, for maximum strength against the strain of being pulled through hair. It pleased her to know that he would know to look for such details.

"I was thinking to give it to one of the staff," she told him as he looked it over. "Perhaps to Jara. Not to buy her favor, mind you, but I think that out of all the staff, she and I are the closest. She has told me that she is new to the city, so we have that in common, and of course, I am certainly closer in age to her than any of the others."

He chuckled. "You noticed that, of course."

"Yes," she said. "I think Navathi-nadi believes I require supervision."

This pulled another chuckle out of him, which pleased her — she greatly favored that half-smile of his when he laughed like that. "You are undoubtedly correct. No one had the least idea what to expect of you. But I have heard no complaints from the staff, and I think you are correct in your choice of targets." He handed back the comb. "Tema tells me that it is the younger of the staff that seem the most impressed by you. The message weaving — extraordinary! Such a fascinating idea...." She could tell he was thinking about the other use of that technique, as a form of wartime communications. *Perhaps that is another way I might prove my worth to the Marid*, she thought, though it troubled her to think of giving away specific techniques that her people used in their own warcraft, however superseded it may have been by the Guild's modern technology.

"This is a good idea," Machigi said, gesturing toward her work. "Small gifts that show your skill and represent your people's crafts." He looked thoughtful. "I think you should refrain from giving it to Jara, though. I have in mind a target that may be even more tactically useful. Besides, you have been in the palace the entire time so far. I think it is time for you to visit the town."

"The town?" It was a wonderful idea, and it lifted her heart, but it also renewed her anxiety. *Out there? In all that?* As far as large towns went, she had only been to Shejidan, and there, had largely remained in the Bujavid, except for carefully chaperoned visits to public venues. But she knew she had to go. "Yes, I would like that

very much. The view from the palace only hints at it. I need to see it, to know and feel it, with my own eyes, my own hands, my own feet.”

Her determination seemed to settle some lingering question in his mind. “Very well. There is a master artisan in the town by the name of Haorai, well renowned for work in pottery and porcelain. Most of the modern place settings in the palace are eir work, and I know em well — my parents set me with em and eir spouse for a week in my youth —”

“— so, last year, nand’ aiji?” Rao murmured.

He laughed. “How wise you are, my crone. At any rate, my parents sent me so that I might gain appreciation for artistry. I think you will find a kindred soul in that house. Since you have, as of yet, little close to kindred here in mine,” he added wistfully.

“Will you come with me?” Rao asked.

“I have meetings which I cannot delay,” he said. “But I will send Frochano to supplement your security. She knows the way well, and Rajeno and Dvari are natives of the town besides. It will be safe, and I think it will be good for you to be out of my shadow, deja-ma, and shine on your own.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “Yes, that is part of the campaign, is it not, warlord of mine?”

“Indeed — I must see you on your way for your next battle.” He grinned at her, eyes twinkling with a rascal’s delight. “I have every confidence that you will be victorious.” And then he was gone to make the arrangements.

Rao sat for a few moments, contemplating. She keenly felt his absence in the room, as if his presence had filled it more than the physical space contained — making it bigger than its walls, in some way — and now that he was gone, the void he left was likewise larger than the room itself, and she keenly felt the lack of him. *A’hrani*, she thought.

She abruptly felt the need to move, to refill the space with a presence of her own. She applied herself to tidying up the remaining wood chips, unwilling to leave a mess, even though staff would have cleaned it up without question — *I am still determined to win over Basaro*, she supposed. Then, with that done, she completed the comb’s oil finish while she waited for Machigi’s security to escort her on this, her first outing. She concentrated on her work, trying not to let her excitement at the prospect of finally seeing the town at first hand let her rush the job. Once complete, she retreated to the accommodation to wash her hands, then returned to the sitting room to pack the tools and supplies in their box. She placed the box back on its shelf, chivvied the wood scraps to the waste basket under the desk, and neatly folded the cloths for the laundry. She even finished the tea, at which point Tamo reappeared as if she had been magically summoned by the empty state of the cup.

The maidservant had in her hands a garment, an outdoor coat that Rao had not seen before, in hues of dark gray and green. *Then again, I have never left the palace grounds, and so never needed such a coat.* “Frochano-nadi is here, nandi,” Tamo helped her on with the coat and then whisked away the tea cup and the folded cloths. The room was restored its original state, as if Rao had never done any work there, but that was the way of any proper household. *I have my memories of the making, here in this place Machigi has made for me.*



Rao went out to the receiving room and met Machigi's guard, careful to tamp down her excitement, to still her features.

"Nandi," Frochano greeted her in that guild-solemn way of hers. "We are ready to depart, if you are ready."

"I am ready, Frochano-nadi." Rao tucked the comb into her coat sleeve and set out with her, joined in the outer hall by members of her own guard: Ojeka and Boragi, the junior-most, were ready to go. *This is likely important training for them.* Rajeno, it seemed, would remain to keep watch over the suite while they were gone, leaving Dvari as senior security and native town guide. It seemed an odd choice — the far more loquacious sister would have been more apt, Rao thought, and she was curious as to whether they would get any sightseeing narrative out of her reticent brother beyond the occasional grunt.

Stepping out of the palace, she discovered that it was late afternoon. They used a curiously narrow car, complete with staff driver, to descend from the palace into Tanaja town proper. As they descended, it became apparent to Rao the reason for the vehicle's odd shape: the streets, broad and straight and open when they were in and around the governmental heights, became progressively narrower and more winding the closer they got to the waterfront. She concentrated very hard, attempting to memorize the path they were taking, but it was tremendously difficult — eventually, the overhanging floors of the buildings practically touched above the streets and transformed them into tunnels, and Rao lost her sense of place.

The car was entirely stymied by the porcelain quarter, as this collection of neighborhoods was called: a veritable warren of walkways wide enough only for the wheelbarrows the potters used to transport clay. The party stopped in a tiny square that was barely wide enough so that the car could turn around, and there they abandoned both car and driver and took to their feet. It was so very narrow here that it necessitated them walking in what Rao knew as gully-style: her, the principal, in between two pairs of security, all in a single line.

There was an acrid scent in the air. She wrinkled her nose. "That smell — am I smelling kilns, Frochano-nadi?" She asked.

"Yes, nandi," Frochano said. "At the heart of this neighborhood, there is a collective of kilns. All the potters share them in common and built their houses around them. In theory, if there is an explosion in any of them, it will be contained to the center —" by her expression, Rao could see that she very much doubted this — which is the arrangement earlier Taisigi lords required after this neighborhood had burned down, oh, how many times Dvari-nadi?"

"Five," Dvari said gruffly, a rare burst of eloquence.

"Ah," said Rao. "A fortuitous number," she added dryly.

Frochano laughed. "Indeed, nandi. The precinct has been conflagration-free ever since."

As they walked the last few yards to the potter's house, Rao could hear a squabbling of high-pitched noises, something like the honking of naji'chitiin, the wi'itkitiin-like winged creatures that flocked in and around lakes and the seas of her home. Only these cries were higher pitched and quieter — the only thing that came to mind was that it sounded like what naji'chitiin would sound like, if they had their own nobility and were now at court politely but urgently attempting to get their aiji's

attention. It seemed to her as if the sounds were coming behind a high wall attached to the house they were approaching, over which she could not see.

Frochano knocked lightly on the door and it was opened by a person in work clothes, slightly taller than Rao and wearing an apron tied over an overcoat that was all over pockets and covered with smears of dried clay and glaze. Rao could see all manner of little tools sticking out of the pockets; she recognized them as tools used to sculpt clay. *The potter*. Ey appeared to be at the later years of middle-age, or possibly in the early years of old age — it was hard to tell.

Frochano made introductions. “Haorai-tera, this is Rao-daja, the aiji’s intended.” Well, Rao thought, suppressing a smile. *He is actually my intended.*

“Ah!” Haorai exclaimed with every possible sign of delight and favoring her with a deep bow. “You honor us, nandi. One is most grateful for your visit. Please, please, come in.” Ey made way and Rao could see a little ways inside and could immediately tell she was about to enter a workshop worthy of the name.

Rao stepped inside and was met by another person and another bow, a woman of a similar age to the potter. “Elsaro-tera,” said Frochano, still in introduction mode. “A master worker in paper and book-making.”

Now that she was fully inside, Rao could offer a bow to both of them in return, which she did. The space was crammed with bins and tools and shelves and porcelains set out to dry and potters’ wheels and more tools and molds and glazed scraps of porcelain and basins for glazing and pots and jars and it was all redolent with the smell of clay and other scents that hinted of the glazes’ chemical nature. A workshop indeed, and utterly glorious — she knew Haorai for a master simply by this place alone, Machigi’s description notwithstanding.

“Please, *teri*, one is no lord,” Rao said to the two masters as she bowed. *Not any more*. “Simply Rao will do, until one has earned the right to more familiar titles.”

“Oh?” Haorai tilted *eir* head.

“Exiled, *deji-ma*,” Elsaro murmured to her spouse. She bowed again, apologetically. “One regrets that one’s spouse spends all *eir* time in the workshop, and pays no attention to the news. One regrets your situation deeply, but —”

“— it does not matter,” Haorai broke in. “*They* do not make you a lord. *The aiji* makes you a lord, nandi,” *ey* said, bowed again, and that was that. “Please, do come sit and be comfortable, while we talk.”

Rao allowed herself to be led to a stool to be seated. Her security withdrew to efficient places unseen, except for Frochano, who posted herself solidly the door, in one of the very few places from which she could observe the whole of the room. Or at least most of it — it truly was very delightfully cluttered.

Elsaro offered tea is a mismatched tea set, cobbled together from cups that were obviously separate attempts at glazes and glaze effects. “One apologizes for their haphazard appearance, nandi,” she said, but Rao found the set charming and also fascinating.

They became aware of a renewed and, though energetic, still tremendously gentle squabble in the yard. “May one ask what that noise is, *ter’* Elsano?” Rao asked.

“Naji’chitiin,” Elsaro said. “They are mine. Come, nandi, one will show you if you like.” They set down their teacups and Elsaro led her to the window, opening the shutters to allow Rao to look out. There, in the yard, was an aishid of five small winged

creatures. Four were waddling about on their stumpy two legs and one was gliding gracefully across a water trough Elsaro had set up for them. Like the naji'chitiin of the west coast, these animals had long, snaky necks — “One’s tiny mechieti, and the yard is the backdrop to all their drama,” Elsaro said.

Rao had never seen mechieti in life, only the shadow puppets in the machimi she attended in Shejidan. She wondered what it would be like to ride these little waddling creatures. *It would be soft, assuredly.* For they were all over a fine, oily down that insulated them from the cold water. Unlike those from her homeland, however, the down of these naji'chitiin were an iridescent black. “It is kabiu to keep them since one keeps them only for eggs,” Elsaro explained.

“We have naji'chitiin also, among the Edi, but they are mostly gray and brown,” Rao said as she returned to her stool. “Such a striking black, these of yours.”

“Oh yes,” Elsaro said. “They are unique to the Taisigin Marid. As for the keeping of them: Haorai and myself long ago agreed to a trade — one would support eir messy occupation if ey would support this hobby of mine. They give more eggs than we can eat, which one finds is very useful with the neighbors — sharing such a benefice is very good for keeping the neighborhood association cozy, especially food that is kabiu in all seasons.”

“Do you train them to catch fish, tera?” Rao asked.

“Oh, no, nandi,” Elsaro replied. “One has heard that some of them can do that, but these eat only sea plants. No, my aishid here is only good for eggs and complaints,” she said with a certain fondness, and Rao laughed. She realized that felt herself truly at peace for the first time since saying “yes” to Machigi. It had only been eleven days but it had felt like a thousand years, and being here stripped away all that extra accumulated time.

Rao returned to her stool and her tea cup. Before Elsaro could refill it, she turned the tea cup over in her hands and examined it. It was classic in shape, like all of the teacups, and like all of the teacups, bore some variation of the color blue. Hers was a two-shade, twice-fired affair, with a dark blue as a base color and a semi-translucent cobalt layered on top of it. It was beautiful — all of the glazed cups were beautiful.

Haorai saw her comparing the cups. “Ah, Rao-daja, you have discovered my quest. I am trying to revive the Sungeni Blue.” Ey had slipped into a most informal mode of address, that “I” instead of “one”, but it did not in any ways feel disrespectful. Rather, it felt welcoming. *Or perhaps absent-minded, which is welcoming in its own way. If only the council were so forgetful of my origins.*

“Sungeni Blue, ter’ Haorai?” Rao asked. Elsaro poured some more tea and murmured, “One hopes you do not have a deadline to return to the palace, nandi? Here it comes...”

And, sure enough, Haorai began to wax rhapsodic about the Sungeni Blue. “An historic glaze, nandi,” ey said. “Unique to this region, from the very heart of the Marid sea, from the Sungeni Isles. Each island had its own artistic specialty, but this one, oh! this glaze, nandi — there was nothing like it in all the world.” Ey went to a small cupboard set into a niche in the wall, fronted with antique glazed glass panes, and opened the leaves.

Rao knew it for a man’tari, a memory niche. Among the Edi, who also built such niches into their homes, a man’tari would house a small grandmother stone — to bring a

family security, harmony, and success. Here, it seemed, Haorai had placed eir most revered treasures. Sure enough, ey returned with a broken fragment of porcelain and reverently offered it to her with both hands. “There were different techniques to pull different over- or undertones out of the glaze,” Ey explained. “One can often tell the period by which shade has the predominant tone or iridescence. The Saie period, for example, preferred a luminous aqua, while the Ujae favored a color closer to cobalt, like the deep sea under clear skies at noon. It is why the glaze is sometimes called ‘Soul of the Waters’ — the artisans captured the variability of the ocean, you see, and brought out what they wanted by technique alone. The color shifts more with changes in light than it really ought to. It is a magical effect which I have not yet to be able to duplicate.”

Rao set aside her teacup and, with great care, accepted the piece. “Come, nandi, come into the light and see,” Haorai said, leading her back to the window, its shutters still open to admit both the day and the sound of the naji’chitiin. Rao, cradling the fragment in her palms, dipped her hands into a shaft of early evening sunlight.

It was like nothing she has ever seen and — alas — made the beautiful work of the master potter’s test cups seem like cheap imitation. It was as if all the fortunate Mothers of the world had convened a meeting and said, “let us make blue,” and this was what they made: this blue, every blue, all the blues in an infinite array, blue’s true nature, to serve as the soul of every blue in the world. She lost all sense of where the glaze ended and the actual porcelain began and realized that she was holding her breath. “Extraordinary,” she whispered.

“If you ask the aiji, he will have his stewards show you a complete work in this glaze. Pieces of the Sungeni Blue are priceless treasures of the clan and of the Marid as a whole.”

“I well understand how this is so, tera, even in this tiny fragment,” Rao offered Haorai the informal mode of address in return, and the lines around eir eyes crinkled with delight. “What a treasure!” She added. “How is it that it is no longer made?”

“The Great Wave,” Haorai’s delight shifted into sadness. “The island which provided the plants that went into the glaze — kirkui, they were called — was submerged, all the plants lost, all the potters drowned.” Ey stepped to one side and pointed to a framed engraving, protected from daylight by being placed on the wall next to the window, a place always in shadow. Rao let her eyes adjust and saw that it was a naturalist’s engraving of a kirkua plant: roots, leaves, blooms, all carefully labeled, and a illustration of a large number of kirkui growing in their preferred marshy habitat. “The kirkua is extinct,” Haorai continued as she considered the engraving. “So I try, in my pitiful way, to try to recreate the colors through some other means, with other compounds and other techniques. So far, the chemistry has escaped me.”

“What a terrible loss,” Rao said gently, returning her attention to the potter’s sad expression. “I fervently hope that you are able to restore it, tera.” She returned the piece to its owner, who replaced it in the man’tari with evident reverence. “The Great Wave devastated the coastline of Mospheira also — so many lives lost, even the grandmother stones were completely washed away.”

At the mention of her people, Haorai turned, eir eyes becoming bright, eir expression full of hope. “Do the Edi make pottery?”

“Yes, tera,” Rao replied. “But nothing like what I see here. In my experience — and my experience only, let me emphasize — our glaze-work is plain, utilitarian. The

clan focuses its creative energy on sculpture and textiles. But I may simply have not seen it," she said at Haorai's crestfallen look.

"Ah, but you were the First Granddaughter, were you not?" Haorai said, and Rao nodded. "See," ey said to eir spouse. "I *do* manage to catch something from the news now and then." Ey returned eir attention to Rao, expression taking on a wistful sadness. "I suspect that if you have not seen it, it is likely not to be found there. Alas, I shall have to find other paths to tread in my quest."

Frochano made a subtle signal, by which Rao knew it was time to leave. "I fear it is time for me to return to the palace," she said, rising. "I would be truly honored and pleased, *teri*, if you would accept this piece of mine." With that, she took the comb from her sleeve and handed it over, and she was touched by the way that Haorai genuinely lit up. Ey pulled a pair of spectacles out of one of eir many pockets and looked at it, turning it around and around in eir hands, while Elsano leaned in for a closer look also with a matching expression of delight. "It seems too inadequate a gift in return," Rao added. "For your welcoming me into your home, showing me your extraordinary work, and educating me about this place."

"Ah, but *you* educate *us*, Rao-daja," Haorai said without looking up from eir examination of the comb. "This decoration is exceptional. It is Edi, no? The aiji calls you 'nandi' aright. If you were able to sculpt clay as well as this wood, well, I think we could make a good porcelain artist out of you!" The potter looked up and perhaps ey saw confusion on her face, because ey beamed and said, "I am quite serious, nandi. Please ask the aiji to let you come again, if he doesn't think it improper."

"I think that he does not, nadi," says Rao. "Or he would have not sent me in the first place."

"Excellent, excellent!" Haori exclaimed. "As for this, if I applied this style to porcelain, why, what a sensation it would make! Plates. Cups. Decorative banding. Oh, I must look at glazes, perhaps the red. No, no, the blue-green. Or perhaps the earth-gold..." Ey wandered off deeper into the workshop, comb in hand, and began to examine glaze samples, little chips of colored porcelain that made a merry tinkling music as ey rummaged through them.

Rao watched, wide-eyed and utterly charmed, and then Elsano approached her with a box in her hands. It was crafted of stiff paper of a design of swirling blues, grays, and delicate threads of silver. The box was open and Rao could see that the teacup she had used was inside, nestled in what appeared to be felt. The felt was an iridescent black, setting off the blues of the cup beautifully, and she knew that it had to have been made from the down of Elsano's Taisigi naji'chitiin.

Elsano swiftly closed up the box, securing it with a blue ribbon, and presented it to her. "Nandi, you flatter us. Please accept this gift in return. It would do us *such* honor, to have this cup in your household," she interjected smoothly as Rao tried to muster up an objection. "And it is entirely our honor that the aiji himself would recommend us to you as a place to visit," she offered a deep bow. "Please think of us when you have chance to use this cup, Rao-daja. I truly hope you will visit us again, though I fear that my spouse may put you to work if you do."

There, Elsano was also speaking informally. It *did* feel like acceptance, and Rao covered an instinct to giggle with delight — relief? — with a deep bow of her own. *They do not care*, she thought, amazed, the precious box in her hands. *They do not care*

*where I come from, who I am, or who I am not.* That someone in the Taisigin Marid would *not care* about two hundred years of mutual enmity, or despise her for her exile! *Such is the power of art.* “I would be so gratified to visit, ter’ Elsano, and would be honored to be put to such work, if only to contribute to your and your spouse’s work in any way,” she said, and she meant it.

## Chapter 37 - Diversion

When she returned to the palace, it was a bit later than their usual supper time, but he had delayed his own repast to wait for her. As usual, they supped in the state dining room, but Machigi had anticipated what she had seen in the potter's house and had ordered his staff to bring them their tea in an historic set in the Sungeni Blue, one that he usually saved for meetings with other heads of state. He knew of Haorai's fragment, and was pleased he could show her the glaze on a complete set: the cups, the saucers and, best of all, the extraordinary pot itself, all in a luminous, multilayered, translucent aqua.

Clearly she knew the import of it and he savored her expression, her awe and delight and, best of all, astonishment. She seemed unwilling to touch the service at all at first, but eventually relented and cradled the cup with intense care. Staff hovered anxiously until he gave them a narrow-eyed gaze, at which point they subsided to their proper posts along the wall.

"They worry you will break it," he murmured. "I hope you will not take offense. It is the state set."

"It is beautiful," she breathed. "I will in no ways break it. I am terrified even to drink from it."

"You will have to, if you want a closer look at the glaze," he said.

She smiled. "Indeed, dena-ma." And she took steady sips. When the cup was drained, she examined it, letting the glorious color glimmer in the light. "I truly must thank you for granting me the honor of this service," she said. "The Saie Period, is it not?"

"Yes," he said, impressed. "How did you know?"

"I received an education today," she set the cup down oh so gently on its saucer. She looked at him and smiled, and even better than the wonder that had filled her expression, he could see that she appeared genuinely happy. "I am so grateful, dena-ma," she said. "Haorai and Elsano are wonderful people. Such accomplished artisans! And you were right, they did not care at all about where I come from. And this glaze —" she touched a gentle fingertip to rim of her cup. "'Soul of the Waters', Haorai-tera named it. That the Marid would have such a thing and cherish it — even if it is lost, Chigi-ma, it is such a sign of hope, because I tell you true, the Edi would revere this just as much. The sea connects us, the Marid and the Edi. That we have only used it for conflict is a shame. But that does not lessen the connection. It is astonishing."

"I am very happy, daja-ma, to have astonished *you* for once. You did not rescue me at sea, Edi pirate of mine, you *waylaid* me. Since that moment, I have felt continuously astonished."

Her expression became mischievous. "Well, you *have* astonished me. Who would think that this —" she gestured gently with the cup — "could be produced in such a nest of vipers?" She tried — and failed — to suppress a smile.

"I for one was surprised to see such amazing textiles in the hands of bandits," he informed her in the same tone. "And to learn that you *made* them, as opposed to *stealing* them."

She chuckled. "Is underestimating enemies is a habit of yours, aiji of the Marid? Perhaps you should take care to kidnap more of us — to improve your intelligence." She

gave a little sigh. "An improvement of intelligence would be helpful. Not yours," she said quickly. "In that I only jest. It is just...I am growing tired of people assuming I am a barbarian. Especially coming from people my own kin have historically held to be unlettered savages."

"Well. I hope that you have not lost *all* your barbarity, daja-ma," Machigi said over the rim of his teacup, favoring her with his most innocent expression. "Save a little, for me."

She looked thoughtful. "I believe that may entirely be possible, nand' aiji. If you promise, once and a while, to be savage with me in return."

"Ha!" The only thing that kept him from slapping his knee was the priceless porcelain in his hands. He set it down and leaned forward. "You are the most maddening woman I have ever met. I must see you tonight."

Rao raised an eyebrow. "Have we not scandalized the staff enough just now, dena-ma?"

"Likely not. Such a thing, occasionally accomplished, would not count as a scandal at all, here in the south."

"Ah, yes, your piratical heritage," she said with a smile.

"As if you could claim otherwise yourself," he countered.

"I could, but just as if *you* were to claim otherwise, it would be a lie, dena-ma."

"Oh?" He raised an eyebrow.

"We are not so reserved, we of the tribes. Pleasure is pleasure. We know how to avoid entanglements, jealousy, and progeny."

"Hm, it explains much," he said, thinking of the boat. "Do I have any rivals to fear, back in the Korisulan Association?"

She laughed lightly. "None whatsoever. It has been years. Not that I could go back there now, of course, but I have no reason to. My future is here, with you."

"As well it should be," he said. *Your rivals, deja-ma, are the whole Marid, but they will learn their place.* "As for the future, I am thinking primarily of the *very near future.*"

She smiled. "As well you should." Then she tilted her head, thoughtful. "Are you certain you do not want to adopt a Shejidan formality for us, until the autumn Festivity? We could layer the bedclothes like country folk."

"The Marid will not mirror the rest of the continent," he said firmly. "We will retain those of our traditions that we value. If not the actual *traditions*," — meaning, of course, the piracy — "then at least the character of them. Do *you* wish to layer the bedclothes?" He asked. "Because you should know that I do so favor a *challenge.*"

"I will do as your people do, but with a character of my own, because I also value tradition," she said. Then she leaned forward and murmured in a low and smoky voice. "I shall set a light in my bedroom and do my best to lure you onto the rocks."

With that, she rose and bowed. "Until tonight, dena-ma."

He watched her leave. *I look forward to being wrecked.*

Rao returned to her quarters in high spirits and was met at the door by her majordomo. "Basaro-nadi," she said. "The aiji will be visiting later. Please kindly notify the staff to be ready. I will take a short bath before he arrives."



“Yes, nandi,” Basaro replied, as formal as ever, with a bow. As her security preceded her and peeled off into their own suite, Rao made her way to her bedroom.

Oddly, Jara was not there. Neither were the two other body servants. She pulled the call-rope and Tamo entered the room. “Nandi?” The elderly senior servant asked, bowing.

“Tamo-nadi, would you please draw me a bath? I know you must be busy — would you kindly send Jara in to attend to me when you may?”

“Yes, Rao-daja,” Tamo said, offering another bow, and went through the door leading to the accommodation and bath. After a minute or two, Rao could hear the water begin to flow out of the tap and then a little jingle of the servant's bell in the bath, at which point she could hear the door from the bath to the servants' quarter closing. She went into the bath and found it empty of servants, but the towels and soaps were all neatly laid out. *Curious. Perhaps they are all withdrawing to allow Machigi and me our privacy.* Now that was a pleasant thought. She smiled to herself as she thought of what the pair of them might do with that grant of privacy, and considered the soaps. In time, the bath filled, and she closed the taps herself.

She retrieved a bathrobe from the wardrobe and shifted into it, carefully laying out her clothing on the bed for the eventual return of the chambermaids. At a noise from direction of the outer doorway, she turned and saw Basaro there.

*Oh, good.* “Basaro-nadi,” she said. “Where is Jara? Where are Eskari and Kasta? I had to interrupt Tamo to draw—”

She stopped abruptly as Basaro pulled a knife from her sleeve. “You will not marry him,” Basaro said in a cold voice and then, with no further words, advanced.

## Chapter 38 - Compromise

Machigi was standing at the chart table in the map room holding a sheaf of notes. It was his *intention* to review the agenda for the following day, so that he could with good will set it aside to fully focus on the rest of the evening. He was, however, finding the prospect of that evening to be...*distracting*, and found himself accomplishing little more than simply shuffling papers in his hands.

His distraction evaporated when Frochano entered at a good clip. Rapid movement in any noble house was highly unusual and disturbing. Machigi immediately dropped the pages and turned to face her and she compounded the uneasy situation by flashing a hand sign to her partner. Tema surged to his feet.

"Rajeno and Dvari are in our suite, aiji-ma, Tema-nadi" Frochano informed them. "They warn of an imminent threat to your person, aiji-ma, and say that communication is compromised, or they would not have come in person." Which also explained why she had come here in person herself, rather than simply notifying Tema through his earpiece.

"But they are *Rao's* senior security," Machigi said. "Why would *they* be warning you about a threat to *me*?"

Just then, Jara arrived through the door at a run, out of breath and disheveled, and jerked to a stop just as Frochano threw out an arm to block her. "Please, nadiin, please, Kasta-nadi and — and Eskari-nadi, they — they send me," she said, addressing the security in a breathless stammer. "There — there is trouble! Rao-daja—" She saw Machigi, and froze, eyes wide in the face of the aiji's sudden, furious alarm.

"What is it, girl?" Machigi demanded. "What do you say?"

"Rao-daja is in danger, aiji-ma!" Jara blurted out.

"Go fetch nand' Juien," Machigi ordered. He bolted from the map room without waiting for an acknowledgement, Tema and Frochano close at his heels. Servants scattered out of their way.

"Where are her staff?" He demanded as they fairly flew through the audience room and into the hallway under the stairs. "Where are her *security*?"

"Ojeka and Boragi do not answer, aiji-ma," said Tema. They entered the seaward suite and the sitting room was deserted — no staff, no Rao. Likewise the dining room. Then they were in the back hallway and Frochano paused to open the door to the security suite, which was oddly closed. "They are down!" She said.

Machigi was already forging ahead and heard Frochano's cry from behind him — he only had eyes and ears for the door at the end of the hall, the one to the bedroom. He heard a commotion there, in the room beyond that door — no cries, no shouts: just the sound of an intense struggle, and a crash, and then a thump of something falling. *A body.*

He hit the door so hard that it banged loudly off of the wall — and found Rao, dressed only in a bathrobe, with a bloody knife in her left hand and a crumpled form at her feet. There was a long deep cut across the back of her right hand that disappeared under the sleeve of her robe. The sleeve was red with her blood and stuck to her forearm and more blood poured out from underneath it.

"It is well, dena-ma," Rao said to him, utterly calm. "She is down." She looked past him and he knew she was seeing his aishid, and was seeing them understand that

their principal was in between themselves and a weapon, where he should by no means ever be.

It was not a large knife, but it was so, so very red.

There had been a table on that side of her bed but it was now up against the wall, some distance from where it had originally been placed — *the crash*, he thought. “Nadiin,” she remained very still and addressed his security. “May one put this knife down, on that table there?”

“Yes, Rao-daja,” Tema replied. “Please do, with one’s gratitude.”

She carefully and slowly set down the knife. As soon as her hand was free of it, Machigi went to her and grasped her forearm with both of his hands, applying pressure to staunch the wound. “Come and sit,” he led her to a chair. There was only the one chair in the vicinity, so he sat her down and knelt at her side so that he could continue to apply pressure to her arm. It was appalling to him that it was her blood — *her blood, hers!* — that was welling up around his palm and fingers, the smell of it overwhelming the scent of the rooms flowers, and he found himself suffused with fury.

Meanwhile, Frochano checked the body. “Dead, Tema-ji,” she said to her partner. She eased the body up just a little and peered underneath. Then she let it back down and said, with perhaps some grim satisfaction, “a clean thrust into the heart.”

“Who is it?” Machigi grated.

“It is Basaro,” Rao said softly. *The majordomo. She had been vetted*, he raged silently. *She had been cleared.* “She...objected...to our marriage.”

“Guild, Tema-ji?” Machigi asked his senior guard.

“No, aiji-ma,” Tema said. “And no word of a Filing. An independent action, most like. But we will investigate.” He nodded to Frochano and she touched her earpiece, murmuring short phrases in their codespeak. Machigi knew that she ordering other security to secure the rest of the servants in place until everything and everyone could be checked, and man’chi assured. *But we were assured of that already, or so we thought!* This would be an illegal action, but it was not unknown for people subject to mental illness or having a crisis of man’chi, to take what should have been Guild business into their own hands. And besides, that kind of law was new to the land. There were still plenty of people who followed the old ways. Likely it was one of those, but Machigi would remain angry until he knew, and likely for a long time after. *I will make them accept her!*

Juien arrived, bag of supplies in hand. He paused on the threshold to regard the body on the floor but then, seeing Tema’s fractional shake of the head, went directly to Rao to minister to her.

“Do you feel anything, nandi?” The physician asked her, taking over the job of the application of pressure from the aiji and gently probing around the damage with his long fingers. “Any odd feeling of heat, or cold, or prickling?”

She shook her head, eyes wide. “I feel no poison, nand’ Juien. Just the cut.”

“A clean cut at that, nandi,” he said. “There will be no impairment, one thinks — it has missed the major ligaments. But it will require stitches.”

Rao nodded. “One is grateful, nandi,” she said, patiently sitting still for him. “What of Ojeka and Boragi?” She asked, looking to Frochano at the door.

Frochano put a hand to her ear again murmured a question, received an answer. “Unconscious, but breathing freely, nandi,” she reported. “Steady pulse, strong. We suspect they were drugged. Kochi is monitoring them.”

“I will attend to them when I am done here, nadi,” Juien said to her.

“What happened?” Machigi asked Rao. He had removed his top-most hand to let the physician do his work, but he did not let go of her. Instead, he simply shifted his hand so that her palm could rest on his, bloody as it was. Juien began to clean the wound — the cut was at its most deep in her forearm and gratefully was little more than a skipping score across the back of her hand: as Juien had said, she was not maimed.

“I was getting ready for a bath when she came at me with the knife,” she told him. “I disarmed her, but even with her knife in my hands, she rushed forward and grappled me, trying to take it back. So I slipped her grasp and struck her with it.”

*Ignorant woman*, Machigi glanced at the body on the floor. *You did not see Rao dancing in her sailboat, as I did.*

“How did you know to come to me, dena-ma?” Rao asked.

It was an excellent question. “The staff got wind of it. They sent Jara to tell Tema, and I was there.”

A little line appeared between her eyes, but it was not because Juien had begun to lace up the cut in her arm, drawing up the skin as neatly as a tailor mending a seam.

“The staff,” she said, looking at the body on the floor. “The staff intervened.”

“Yes,” he said.

In a few more minutes, Juien finished his needlework. The physician cleaned off the blood, applied medication to his neat line of stitches, and firmly wrapped up Rao’s arm in clean gauze. “You will need to rest, nandi,” he said to her. “I will give you some medicine to ease the pain so that you may sleep.” And with that, he gathered up his bag and ducked out to attend to her security.

Machigi still had her hand nestled in his and her palm felt cold. “You will sleep with me tonight, Rao-ma. I will not have you alone.”

He only wanted her to be safe, but she said, gently, “I know this is unsettling, dena-ma. But let me stay in my quarters. I am confident in the staff that remains. They told you,” she pointed out when he opened his mouth to object. “They protected me. I have every confidence that they will protect me tonight.” She leaned forward, catching him in the intensity of her gaze. “I will rest easy. In the sitting room.” There was no staying in this bedroom; it would be a day or more for staff to clean up in here after Tema had finished his examination. “Please, Chigi-ji, let them know that you trust them also.” *That you forgive them*, she was saying.

He wasn’t sure that he did, but she was right. He needed to recognize that they had acted on her behalf. *Unfortunate gods be damned*. “Very well,” he said.

After Machigi had gone, the remaining staff quickly set up the sitting room for her. Dvari and Rajeno had brought a cot from their rooms and set it up against the bookshelves; and Eskari and Kasta looked to be adding so many pillows and blankets that Rao thought there would be little room left over for *her*. But she appreciated it. She sat at her desk, sipping tea, while they got it all arranged. Rajeno had departed to see to the junior security — in the security suite being examined by nand’ Juien — but Dvari remained, posted by the door and seeming to be part of the wall itself while the

servants worked. His face was as stony and uninformative as ever, but Rao sensed a certain tenseness in him — a deep frustration and, perhaps, unease.

*He must be upset. Basaro tricked him into leaving — she dangled Machigi before him as bait. She used his man'chi against him. And she poisoned the junior security under his watch.* She had very little idea of how such things would be perceived by the Guild, and it worried her.

Eskari and Kasta finished with the cot and bowed, leaving Jara as her evening attendant. As Jara refreshed her tea, Rao looked up at Dvari.

“One hopes, Dvari-nadi, that the Guild will use this as an educational moment — one would not like to see you censured and certainly not replaced.” He was dour and he was taciturn and he loomed, yes, but he had made her feel protected during her time here. “I would strenuously argue against anyone seeking to replace the current arrangement. No, that is not strong enough. I would in no ways allow it,” she said firmly.

He said nothing for a long while. Then he surprised her by crossing the room and kneeling at her side. He looked as if he wanted to say something to her but he remained silent, the muscles of his jaw working as he furiously and quietly fought some internal battle with language itself. He was clenching his fists so tightly and his arms and shoulders were so bunched that Rao could hear the leather of his Guild jacket creaking in protest at the strain.

Rao said, gently, “Your man'chi is to the aiji, as it should be. You in no ways failed me, Dvari-nadi, if that is what is troubling you. You went to your lord when you believed he was in danger, which is exactly what you should have done, and what I always want you to do. That is what truly matters.”

“No, daja-ma,” he grated. “*You matter.*”

And then he got up and was gone, leaving her to sit, blinking, her jaw dropped in sheer astonishment.

She became aware of Jara, standing off to the side with the teapot in her hands, and who had watched it all with wide eyes. *I must have much of the same expression on my face*, Rao thought as she closed her mouth. Jara saw her looking at her and composed herself with a little bow, mindful not to spill tea. “Will you be needing anything else, daja-ma?” She asked quietly.

Rao composed herself as well, rolling her shoulders to straighten up her posture. Something clicked in her mind. She turned in her seat to face the maid. “Yes, Jara-ji, I will,” she said firmly. “Put away the tea, please, and attend to me for a while.”

## Chapter 39 - Recrimination

*How could this have happened?*

“We have removed the senior household staff from the seaward suite and are holding them for questioning,” Tema said. “The juniors have been cleared.”

“They were already cleared!” Machigi said forcefully. “So was the majordomo! How, then, can you assure me that Rao is *safe*?”

“Dvari is with Rao-daja, aiji-ma,” Rajeno said in a steady voice. “My brother will protect her. I swear it. And I will stand by him when I return to the suite.”

“Tell me what happened,” Machigi said.

Rajeno stood at attention for her debrief. “Basaro-nadi came to us, saying the staff had informed her of an imminent threat to your person, aiji-ma. She said that the communication was compromised and begged us to advise your security immediately. She seemed to be genuinely distressed. We set Ojeka and Boragi on watch and went to central to make the report, to ensure your aishid secured your safety, so that we could assemble the staff for interviews.”

Tema nodded. “We have assembled the staff” — *the surviving staff* — “and restricted them to quarters for the time being, aiji-ma.”

It had been full dark for some time. The household staff had lit the lamps — electric, in this age, where they had been oil-lit in days of yore — but they did little to beat away the darkness. *It is fitting*, Machigi thought, boiling with a dark rage to match the shadows filling the room. “Go attend to Rao-daja,” he said to Rajeno. “Ensure this was not a single attack. Should there be any others, protect her.”

“Aiji-ma,” Rajeno bowed. She departed and passed the physician on his way in, who stepped aside and allowed her to continue on her assigned duty.

Juien gave a short bow. “All is settled, aiji-ma. I have seen to the lady’s junior security.”

“What happened to them, nand’ Juien?” Machigi asked.

The physician’s brows were knit. “They were drugged, aiji-ma — tea, I think. They will survive, but it was a close thing.” He shifted to address Tema. “I will examine the tea and give you a report soonest, Tema-nadi. As for Ojeka and Boragi — they should rest for two days. I will examine them and clear them for duty after.”

Tema nodded. “Yes,” he said.

With that, Juien departed. Machigi turned his attention back to his senior security. “Where is this woman’s husband?” *I assured Rao that she would be safe, and now I am a liar.*

“We have detained him, aiji-ma. He is being questioned now. He claims to have been unaware of the events and appears to be in shock over his wife’s death.”

“So his wife claimed that there was an emergency — if *she* was convincing, then perhaps her husband an equally accomplished actor.”

For a moment, Tema’s mask slipped. He looked unhappy — and also angry, for that this could have happened on his watch was a blow to his personal competence. “Just so, aiji-ma,” he said. “*But we will know.*”

“Could they have been placed in the household, ten years ago? Or did the Shadow Guild take their family and threatened them?”

“It is possible, aiji-ma, and we will inquire with the Toma clan,” Tema said. “However, I suspect that if that were the case, they would have struck against *you*, or they would have kidnapped Rao to use her against you. But kill her? This does not have the feel of Shadow Guild work, especially given that there is, ah, considerable resistance to her relationship with you. Insofar as people here consider her marriage to you problematic, I would think the Shadow Guild would support it. I do not think they would seek to eliminate her.”

“Unless they plan for me to marry another, and she upsets that plan.”

“It is possible, aiji-ma,” Tema allowed. “But I believe that they lost their capacity for long-range planning when they lost their master in the Guild’s Assignments office. Everything they have done since Shishogi’s death has been reactionary and short-term. We will not discount that they might have a new, far-seeing puppet-master. But this feels closer to home.”

“Are you suggesting that one of the council put the woman up to this?”

“It is possible, aiji-ma. Or one of the lords. But...”

“What is it?” Machigi snapped.

“It has all the hallmarks of independent action,” Tema said. “The rest of Rao-daja’s staff appears to be greatly upset at the attempt on her life — she has been, in fact, winning association among them, from what security has been reporting. But we will interview all of the staff. We will know who this woman and her husband have met, and how deep the association they had with the other staff went.”

“You will inform me immediately as soon as you have information,” Machigi said. “I will know how this happened. *The staff had been vetted, nadiin*,” he ground out the words through clenched jaws. “How much *clearer* do I need to be? Because —” and at this point he sucked in all his rage and became absolutely cold and still and calm “— I am willing to be *very, very clear*.”

Tema went still in return; Machigi thought that if the room were not so dark, he might look wan. “Aiji-ma,” he said. And he departed, leaving Frochano to guard the aiji in case this turned out to be a diversion after all. *But I doubt it. It was that woman, a woman who wanted an outsider dead.*

Later, he got his answer: there had been no collusion that security was able to find, though they were still open to the possibility. But for now, it had every appearance of an individual act. Besano had simply decided that she would now allow Rao to marry him — this woman had taken it upon herself to countermand his decision, but had seriously underestimated her target.

He realized that he was in *that state*, where his mind would run around in furious little circles, a beast chained to a post. It was something that had trapped his father, from time to time, and was himself determined not to fall prey to it. So he forced himself to sit down, to breathe, to relax — he took a few moments to simply feel the carved wood of the chair and the coolness of the air and the thickness of the carpet beneath his feet and he counted, backwards, until his frantic heartbeat slowed. A calm detachment replaced the hammering of his heart and the yammering of his mind.

*It is still the same problem: because she is Edi, and disowned, he thought. And because she is an aiji and cannot give me her man’chi. They do not understand it, they do not understand a’hrani, because they have man’chi to give, and cannot understand what it is like to live without that instinct. And they are not taking the time to know*

*her beyond where she comes from.* It was frustrating. But, in his place of detachment, he could step out of himself and think from another person's perspective.

*Rao is correct — it will take time,* he thought. *It will take time for them to learn to see that what she feels, what I feel, however different, is as true and powerful as what they feel.* But in the case of Rao's majordomo, the woman was not willing to take that time. He realized that the world, and how it was, had been firmly settled in Basaro's mind. No manner of demonstration would have shaken her understanding. And what was worse, she had done what she had done out of belief that her man'chi to him drove her to this, to protect him and the clan from tragedy brought into the house by an outsider.

The classic shift in the machimi was that of unknown man'chi, the man'chi that no one knew was present until the crisis dragged it into the light. But this was something else, a lesser-known cousin. *Man'chi anara,* he thought. The man'chi that was well-defined and clear, but expressed itself unpredictably at the moment least expected.

*How will I keep Rao safe?* He had promised her that he would demonstrate trust in her staff, and he meant to keep that promise, so he would not stay the night with her, or pull her into his own suite, as much as he wanted to. *I am no Taisigi upstart, not any more,* he thought. *I am aiji now. I am in power.*

But the thought brought him no relief. He longed for his disreputable youth, when he had been free to run with his dubious associates and engage in questionable activities that his father had been able to ignore so long as he was not forced to establish veracity or ask questions, and Machigi had always been careful to ensure that was so. Instead, at the infelicitous age of twenty-four, he felt old and trapped — trapped in the world of civility, the world of legality, a world bathed in accountability, where an aiji needs must allow his security and staff to do their work, and himself wait in safety for information. *It does not feel like power at all.*



## Chapter 40 - Dissolution

Morning finally arrived. He hoped that she had slept, for he had not. He had spent the night in the chair in the map room, glowering at the wall, caught up in a maelstrom of rage and frustration and, yes, anxiety, a storm that boiled up within him whenever he let his self-control slip — so it was a night of sine waves, passing from the apex of calm, rational waiting to the nadir of frustrated fury.

And then it was approaching time for breakfast, so he returned to his quarters to bathe and dress in clean attire, suffering the attention of the staff who were faithful to him, but — *one of their number tried to kill Rao*. Perhaps they sensed his emotions, as much as he attempted to control his expression of it, for they were all extremely quiet and proper, and intruded on his thoughts very little.

When he was done, he made his way into the dining room. Like the map room had been last night, the large space was dark, its lamps providing minimal illumination. Staff had set up a fresh bouquet and a trio of candles at the center of the table, and reflections of the flickering light shimmered in the glassware. He took his place and waited.

But she was overdue to table. Machigi glanced around the room and noted that Tema was present, as usual, but that in addition to the room's regular staff, Rao's junior-most chambermaid was standing just within the door — not the natural order of things at all. He felt a chill settle into the pit of his stomach. "Where is Rao-daja?"

Jara was clearly terrified. She approached him as if she were approaching her doom, a scroll of paper in her hands, and only managed to speak in barely more than a whisper, "Aiji-ma, Rao-daja bade me give you this." She handed over the scroll with shaking hands and stepped back out of range the moment his attention was on it instead of her.

It was such a simple thing, just a roll of paper without cylinder, sealed with a dab of uncolored wax which — he noted — was unbroken. He knew, then, that the message's presence meant Rao's absence. It was an absolute certainty that she was gone — he felt the lack of her in his bones.

*Unbroken. Neither staff nor security pried. They know about this, and they did not advise me.* He went utterly still at the betrayal — as much as it showed that they had found common cause with Rao, which is what he had wanted, it still felt like a betrayal.

He stared at Jara. The young woman was a reed in a harsh wind, trembling where she stood. It was all she could do not to fall over. *She knows. She knows! The staff had to have helped her. All of them. Rao could not have left the palace without their help.*

He wanted to rage, then, to leap up and tear the palace apart, but he knew it would do no good — he could see it, the staff colluding to allow Rao to leave: an exchange of clothing, a door held open, maybe even an escort down into the city. Someone local, and he even knew who that would have been — he could see so clearly in his mind: a huge brooding hulk of a man all in black, escorting a slighter figure in servant's attire. Keeping an eye on her. Taking her where she wanted to go.

He came back to this moment and felt something in his hands. *The letter.* He broke the seal, unrolled the scroll. Her writing was clean and serviceable, unlike his own hand, which he knew to be cramped. He began to read.

*You-ma, dearest treasure to me of all the treasures of the world, please forgive me. I knew that if I spoke of this to you, you would have tried to forbid it, and you would have moved the heavens and the earth and the seas to stop me.*

*I beg you not to be angry with the staff. I asked that they provide this moment for me and they did, both in support of me and in deep regard for you. You have worked so hard to help me find acceptance here and in them I have found it — do not blame them because I turned it around to my advantage. The fault is wholly mine. But I have so little acceptance in the Marid beyond yours, theirs, Haorai's and Elsano's. If I were to satisfy myself with that, I would spend the most of my days here in this palace, and be of no true account to you or your people.*

*It is the rest who do not welcome me — they cannot see past what I am, even if (or indeed because) I am not that any longer, by fiat of the Grandmother. I despair that there is enough time to convince them. But they do welcome skill and cleverness and — because of what you have brought them — prosperity. They reject me as your consort because they think my dowry is too small, not worthy of their lord and aiji, or of them. And they are not wrong. So I will return in the autumn with a dower that is worthy of the Marid, or I will not return at all.*

*I beg you again to please be kind to the staff, as they were kind to me.*

His fingers trembled. He wanted nothing more than to ball up the paper and hurl it across the room in his fury. But with Rao gone, only the necklace under his shirt and this letter remained of things she had crafted with her own hands. If she did not return, they were the only things he would have left that she had made. In that moment, they became unbearably precious things to him — *atiendi* things.

He carefully crossed to his chart table and gently set the letter down. Then he turned his burning gaze on the servant. “Jara,” he said steadily. “Go find Nevathi and send him to me.”

“Aiji-ma,” Jara bowed and fled.

He touched his fingers to the letter and looked at Tema, standing at his post on the wall. “She is gone, Tema-ji.” Tema blinked, surprised, and touched his earpiece, murmuring.

*How green is my garden going to become before they finally understand that I cannot be turned aside from this path?* But the plea in her letter had touched him; he believed what she had said, that they had done it out of regard for him. Even the servant who had tried to kill her. The garden would have to make do with what it already had — he would refrain from enriching it further, for her.

Nevathi arrived and bowed. “Aiji-ma.”

“Nadi. Tell me what you know about this,” Machigi said quietly.

“I received word, aiji-ma, after the fact. It was something she requested, aiji-ma, and she convinced the staff that it was in service to you.”

“Did she invoke my name?”

“No, aiji-ma, she did no such thing. She simply told them she had something she needed to do for you, something important, something that only she could do and that it could not wait. If she invoked anything, aiji-ma, it was that she needed their help in collective service to the *aijinate*.”

Machigi let out a breath at that. As she had said herself in her letter, she had won some slice of regard — if not outright man'chi — from her staff, and she had wasted no time putting it to use. *Collective service*. Such a powerful phrase. And she herself believed that this is what it was, whatever she was setting out to do, he could feel it is his heart. In the face of that belief, her staff could not have turned away from her. *And I thought I was the warlord here.*

“Aiji-ma, I have sent out search parties,” Tema said. “We are searching the palace. I have also sent a team to the porcelain quarter — perhaps she has gone to Haorai-tera.”

“No,” said Machigi. “She will not be there. Redirect your team to the waterfront. You will find that a boat is missing, some sailboat or small yacht.”

“Did she tell you so in her letter, aiji-ma?” Tema asked.

“No, Tema-ji. I simply know her.”

Tema got the word out to his teams and, via his communications system, got them reoriented to the waterfront. Machigi walked over to the windows and looked out over the city, the bay of Tanaja and beyond, the wider Marid sea. Perhaps some part of him hoped to see a small boat out there on the waves and know that she was in it. But the lowering clouds cast a gloom that limited visibility and he saw nothing that might be her. *But she is out there*, he thought. *She is following the sea. Trying to find the connection. But it is here, Fisher-ma. It is me.*

It was not long before Tema had a report: “As you said, aiji-ma. A fisher has reported that his boat was stolen.”

“Tell Gediri to compensate him from my personal account, Tema-ji,” Machigi said. Tema bowed and withdrew.

The view beyond the glass brought the aiji no further comfort or clarity. He sat back down, called for tea, and seethed.

**V**  
**BAJIO KABISU**

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## Chapter 41 - From the Paidhi's Notes

*...the Marid is characterized by a low level of education in comparison to the ashidi'tat, with no centralized organization or standards for curriculum, and no universal literacy. Most of the common people are engaged in the production of goods for daily life (textiles, clothing, tools, foodstuffs), with emphasis centered on fishing and farming. These trades carry on through the generations of families. Some families, however, are dedicated to particularly skilled artistic expression, especially in the production of porcelains which — as expected — have broken through the traditional barriers to trade between the aishihai'mar and the aishidi'tat, being held in extremely high regard for quality, beauty, and artistry by collectors to the north. Now that this barrier has been broken, however, the Scholar's Guild and other Guilds of the aishidi'tat are opening offices in the Marid, and I only expect a broader benefit to its people, though I expect that the actual form and flavor of education will be something different, something more traditional — something more closely aligned with the East.*

*Most most trade and craft families remain within a relatively close proximity to their homes for their entire lives. The exception to this is, of course, the sailors, who range out to sea, and the Sesani clan, which by comparison to the sedentary clans of the rest of the Marid, lead a semi-nomadic lifestyle on the broad plains of the northwestern Tanja district and into Sarini district. While most inhabitants of the Marid are accomplished sea-farers, the Sesani and the Caratho, inland clans, maintain mechieti. The Sesani, in fact, are in many ways similar to the Taibeni — perhaps there is an opportunity for mutual understanding there? — although their lands are more grass and less forest.*

*In times past, the Assassins and Transport Guilds have operated largely independently of their mother guilds in the aishidi'tat, with a strong emphasis on keeping members local and maintaining man'chi not only to Guild, but to clan. Lord Machigi has embraced the model of the East — breaking the man'chi to clan, but retaining local personnel for their specific knowledge of their home regions — which, with the recent acceptance of that mode by the Guild in Shejidan, has opened up the Marid to closer association with headquarters. As for Transport, the aishihai'mar Guild was entirely focused on shipping, given that the continental rail loop only touched the region in its northeast corner. But with the extension of the rail from Kopurna to Tanaja, this, too, is bringing change — and broader association with Transport's home Guild in the North.*

*On shipping: the sea to the south of the Marid is subject to terrible storms, given that the ocean is largely uninterrupted around the full extent of the planet between the mainland and the great island to the south, home of the lost Southern Island culture. The sailors of the Marid, however, are skilled enough to make the crossing, and sadly, it cannot be said that they are not actively engaged in the illegal looting and sale of artifacts from the ancient sites on the island. I can only hope that now, as Lord Geigi's personnel aboard the station are providing quality weather predictions to the legitimate Marid fleet, Lord Machigi will begin to suppress that trade and make the island a place of historical and scientific study. I must write to Tabini-aiji to broker a proposal to Machigi for a joint effort to preserve those sites...*

*— Bren Cameron, Translator. Personal notebook.*

## Chapter 42 - Petition

The audience hall, open to the public as on any other petition day, had long been restored to its usual display of antiquities and furniture. The blade of the Taisigi was long since back in storage — even he felt that putting it on display as a museum piece would be excessively aggressive at the moment. *As much as I would like to be excessively aggressive, especially today.*

He had declared that this day — the day after the last day of the week's petitions — was to have been his wedding day, and he was not one to back down. So, in lieu of an actual wedding, he suffered to listen to petitions for one extra day. Gediri had been appalled by this but Machigi said, dangerously, "I will not hide on this of all days."

*And if she comes, I will marry her in front of all of you.*

He sat in his chair on his dais, glowering, running his thumb idly over the hole left by the blade on a day that certainly had not as *peaceful* as this, but that had been infinitely *more useful*. There was a small table at his right side on which sat a tumbler of water, but he ignored it. Gediri, as his Minister of Affairs, sat beyond, behind a portable trestle desk and on a small folding stool. Gediri's desk and chair were of a style that suggested a rough military camp — but only suggested, as the set was wrought elegantly of glass-inlaid bluewood and green silk and was in no ways rough.

The hall was not overly full — most of the people who had come with genuine petitions had gotten their hearings done in the customary days allotted to them, so the people who were here now were the hopeless procrastinators, the fearful, or — and he rather suspected that this made up the bulk of those now present — the morbidly curious.

And there were not a small number of ladies from all over the Marid, ranging in age from barely in their majority to middle-aged, and in status from the Toma sept's youngest daughter to the as-yet-unmarried lord of Caratho clan in the Senjin Marid. They all of them thought him to be in a state of something like bereavement and were hoping that he would turn to one of them for solace. Gediri had, in fact, advanced each of them as a substitute for Rao at one time or another over the past month or so, urging him to invite them to the palace to at least *meet* them, to which he had snarled, "Very well, invite them — to my *wedding*."

So it really was his own fault that they were here.

They stood at the back of the hall in their own section and were all of them in gowns of every shade of blue and green to honor his clan. With frothy white lace at neck and wrists and turning to and fro to mutter to each other or their attendants, they were nothing so much as a veritable churning sea of hopeful ambition. *Each wave is waiting for me to notice her and invite her to lap at my feet.*

Instead, he heard petitions.

"A petition from the Tanaja Smithing Association," his herald read from a scroll in a deep voice that filled the room. "Prithani, of the house Aechaji, master smith."

Machigi nodded and the petitioner stepped up and gave him a deep bow. He was a man in his early middle age, his neatly-bound hair full of gray, but with the wide shoulders and thick arms resulting from a lifetime spent over an anvil. "Aiji-ma," the man said, with another bow to accompany the title. "The branches of the Shejidan Artisans' guild are approaching artists and master makers in Tanaja, seeking

association.” At a tilt of the aiji’s head, Prithani forged onward. “But they are not approaching *our* association except to point us to the Metalworks’ Guild. As *industrial workers*.” He could not keep the disdain from his voice. “It is an insult to our master metal smiths, aiji-ma. We, too, are artisans — we do more than simply weld and shape and fit.”

*Curious.* “They have no metal artisans, ter’ Prithani?”

“Of the Artisans’ loose band of associations, their only artists in metal are confined to making jewelry. They do not maintain the handwork traditions; all of their metalware beyond jewelry is given over to *mass-manufacturing*.” No one in the room needed any help in understanding what Master Prithani thought of *that*. “Neither the Shejidan bauble-makers nor their parts-crafters have interest in our work.”

*And I do not think that our Transportation Guild will be willing to give up their industrial metalworkers, now that we are shifting over to the building of fully-metal ships. The Metalworkers will have thin pickings here and the Artisans are fools.*

Machigi leaned back and rested his chin on his fist as he thought. “It was your house that made the weapons for the lords of our clan, was it not, tera?”

“Yes, aiji-ma.”

“Do you still craft the traditional patterns?” Machigi wanted to know.

“Yes, aiji-ma,” Prithani said proudly. “Watermoss, Rainfall, Shore-of-the-Sea, Belt of Storms, Wing of the Naji’chitiin — these are only a few. In all the world, aiji-ma, there are no works to match what our house and our associates can produce, in steel or any other metal.”

“Hm.” *I doubt you have seen what there is in all the world, tera, but I will not discount your skill, nor see the Marid slighted.* “We shall take up your complaint, master smith. There is opportunity here for metalwork, as there was for porcelain when we reached out to the East.” He nodded in the direction of the scribes and clerks. “Add this to the small council’s agenda, nadiin. Assign it to Trade and Commerce for action.” *This is a challenge well-suited to Siodi.* As the clerks’ table was overcome by a fluttering of ledger pages and flurry of quills and Gediri made his own notes in his own ledger, he returned his attention to the smith. “Ter’ Prithani, will you stand before the council when summoned, to speak for your associates?”

Prithani gave him a deep bow. “I will, aiji-ma.”

“Very well.” And that was that.

The master smith withdrew and was replaced by a cluster of five sailors. They were in their market-best clothing and anxiously clutched a bevy of hats in their hands before them — straw, felt, one made of leather — as they bowed before him.

“Ithari Neighborhood Association of Fishers and Dredgers, of Tanaja,” announced the herald. “Petitioning the court for assistance in business dealings with outsiders.”

The sailors nudged one of their group forward, a nondescript woman whose hair was bound in an old sailors’ style: a single thick, tight braid from the center of her forehead to the nape of her neck. It was hers that was the leather hat, clutched in her pale-knuckled hands. “Aiji-ma,” she said, her voice strong despite her apparent nervousness. “I am called Sijo, a fisher.” *Alas, not the Fisher I wish to see,* Machigi thought, rueful for a just moment, but the sailors’ faces plainly showed such a collective distress that they easily recaptured his full attention.

“Aiji-ma, ‘tis them Physicians,” Sijo said. “Outsiders, like. They want us to sign papers, t’ associate with them t’ make more land out of the bay for a hospital. Aiji-ma, we all agree that a hospital, t’would be a good thing —” general nodding amongst the group accompanied this statement “— but none of us know what the writing says. If they move the shoreline, do we move, aiji-ma? Where do we go? ‘Tis not for us, papers and forms and writing. Please, will your people help us, aiji-ma — they say they read the words t’ us true, but we beg a proper *Marid* advocate, and for your council to know what ‘tis going on at Tanaja shore.”

Machigi stilled the frown that wanted to form on his face. He knew of the hospital project — as a *proposal*, that was the most advanced status that it had within the understanding of his small council. But that the Physicians’ Guild was now attempting to *act*, by directly approaching those who worked their livelihoods from the shore, using instruments of agreement they knew one party could not fully understand? *At best, this is ignorance of our culture, traditions, and capabilities. But at worst, it is a cavalier attitude I cannot permit to take root here. The Marid will accept these new Guilds’ presence on our terms, or not at all.*

“Indeed, Sijo-nadi,” he said to the sailor. “This is of a piece with the issues that the smiths are facing.” *The problem*, he thought. *Is that so few of us know how to read, and this problem will not be completely solved until these people’s children’s children have reached their majority. In the meantime, the people need to feel confident in their information, and they are wary of outsiders.*

He turned his head and spoke quietly. “Nand’ Gediri, call all the new Guilds to send representatives to Tanaja for a meeting with the small council, in two weeks’ time. Send to the lords of the Marid to submit a tally of all of their clerks and scribes — everyone who can read.”

Sijo was still standing at the forefront of the clot of sailors, watching him with wide eyes. Her hat would likely require extensive blocking to regain its shape, after this. “Sijo-nadi,” Machigi said to her. “We will address this. In return, we ask you to spread the word to the other associations to turn away Guild representatives — send them to *us*. In time, we will send you advocates. Until then, we must stand as a collective, if —”

He became aware of a growing commotion from the entrance to the hall. Tema — *when did Tema slip out?* — was escorting a party through the small crowd of waiting applicants. The noise was coming from those petitioners, expressions of surprise and confusion displeasure at being displaced, water pushed away from a drop of oil. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Gediri stiffen in shock.



## Chapter 43 - Occasion

She was dressed in a traditional Marid dress of ancient design: a simple long gown dyed a deep green, its keyhole neck and cuffs decorated with geometric embroidery worked in golden thread, belted at her waist with a long tablet-woven belt in blue, green and gold. She had overlaid several of her Edi robes in the layered style of her clan and left the robes open so that they lay over the Marid dress like a cloak. Her stola was pinned above the base of her neck with a simple fibula decorated with pale green beads, its end formed into a short, narrow fan at the back of her head, the rest of the cloth flowing over her hair and down her back as golden as a shimmering sunset at sea. Long, slender drops of pale blue sea-glass dangled and glittered on either side of her throat, hanging from gold wires shaped to fit behind her ears and secured by the weight of small spirals where her cheekbones met her temples. All in all, her attire was archaic and simple and elegant, a surprisingly striking effect that set her as far from the ornate, modern brocades and lace and silks of the ladies of the wooing sea as she could possibly have been. *And she makes them look as overwrought as they in fact are.*

Instead of the large contingent of advocates that was traditional for a party to a marriage, she had only two: Haorai and Elsano, very formally attired. Haorai had in his hands a little wood-carved box which Machigi recognized as Rao's handiwork. At Rao's other side, Elsano was carrying a scroll in one hand and in the other, a water flask — in the shape of the flasks traditionally shaped out of gourds, but made from a porcelain of the palest green, so fine and delicate that he could see the shadow of the water inside it, sloshing around as she walked. The trio paused before stepping into the short line at the table where the clerks accepted the petitioners' scrolls.

It was his prerogative to advance applicants to the head of that line. "We shall hear her." No one had any doubt whatsoever as to whom he meant. Sijo and her sailors, understanding their petition to be done, returned to the audience, leaving the floor before the dais free. The space remained empty.

"Aiji-ma," the head clerk said with a bow. She turned to Rao. "Nandi, if you please—"

Elsano bowed and offered Rao the scroll. Rao bowed in reply and accepted it. She advanced to the table and formally presented it to the clerk. The clerk made as if to begin the laborious procedure of entering the scroll into the official records and then, at a subtle shifting of the aiji's *very* focused gaze, the woman went a little pale and handed it directly to the herald instead.

The herald unrolled the scroll and began to read. "From...Rao—" he was having trouble with the complete lack of titles. "From...from the Korisulan Association, ah, ah, a petition, ah—"

Machigi turned in his seat and *stared*. The herald twitched, speared by the aiji's *attention*, took a deep breath, and reapplied himself to the text. "A petition to the aiji of the Marid for — for his hand..." The herald read, eyes growing wider with every word. "It — it is a request for permanent and exclusive marriage. To *you*, aiji-ma!"

Utter pandemonium broke out in the audience hall. All the people turned their neighbors and commenced asking some variation of "is that even *possible*?" and "*permanent* marriage?" and "*exclusive*?" as they realized the extent of her petition.

*She is claiming me*, he thought, delighted. He glanced to his side and saw that Gediri had gone rather pale. *She rejects your proposals entirely, old ally — she will have me all to herself.*

Machigi could not resist a look in the direction of his erstwhile suitors and saw several faces there unable to contain their outrage, even here in this highest court in the Marid. He was darkly amused. *They are not so much dismayed, as angry with themselves for not having thought of it first.* Beyond them, lined up very unobtrusively against the wall, were the surviving staff of the seaward suite. He knew they had to have helped her with her clothing. *They are come to watch the results of their handiwork. Well done. Let them watch.*

He so savagely wanted to laugh out loud. But instead, he kept his face utterly still and impassive while he waited for the astonished chatter in the hall to die down.

He stood up and took a step forward, onto the broad first step below his chair. “Read it,” he ordered. He gestured to her and her advocates to approach and, as the herald read, they made their way across the carpeted floor. Gediri had also stood; Machigi glanced at him and noted a look of resignation on the man’s face. *He finally accepts*, he thought. *One day he may even understand.*

The herald took a deep breath and shifted to the main portion of the document. Having mangled the rubric, he seemed determined to make it through the rest of it in proper style. “An agreement,” he announced. “Between Machigi, aiji of the aishihai’mar and Rao from the Korisulan Association, subject to nullification only by consensus of both parties, free from undue influence or duress, in any case other than the willful violation of the following terms.”

Rao and her party reached the dais and climbed to him. He turned so that they could line up on the step facing him, the masters behind her and side by side to make a triangle of their small party with her as its apex.

Machigi had no advocates of his own. But then he felt Tema and Frochano settle in behind him. It was a far tinier arrangement than any truly formal event such as this would ever have been, but then he thought back to Ilisidi and her minimal retinue at the conference at Najida and knew it for the statement of power that it was.

The herald had paused as if to say, *are you sure about this, aiji-ma?* Machigi narrowed his eyes and the man promptly moved on to the next section of the document.

“A marriage, permanent and exclusive, providing for mutual protection, support, and aid in the rearing of any children that may be produced.”

She held out her hand and Machigi took it, brushing his thumb across the skin on the back of her hand as he had in her boat. “Permanent and exclusive,” he murmured to her under the voice of the herald. “A bold request.”

“Have *you* ever done anything halfway, You-ma?” She murmured in response. Her face was solemn but her eyes twinkled. “I can do no less than meet you where you are.”

“Rao from the Korisulan Association makes and will make no claim to resources or rulership of the Marid beyond what she now possesses and what is granted to her in accordance with the law of the land through due legal process,” the herald read. *If the legislature elects her regent for the children*, Machigi understood it to mean. *If something were to happen to me. Which is still all too likely.*

“On children produced from the union of the parties, item the first: should the union result in no offspring, the parties may by mutual consent arrange for the adoption of an heir.

“Item the second: the eldest living child will remain as heir to the Taisigi, in the aiji’s household, until the age of majority, unless both parties agree to the naming of a different heir.

“Item the third: in the case of nullification, the education and residence of other children having not yet their seventeenth year of life will be as negotiated by the parties prior to the establishment of nullification. Children having reached seventeen years will choose in which household they will reside after nullification.”

“How many children do you want?” Machigi whispered.

“Enough to secure the line,” she whispered back. “A felicitous brood, I should think — if you favor doing a different sort of gardening, dena-ma.”

“I favor it,” he smiled and added, with a barely-suppressed grin, “I shall enjoy the work.” Her eyebrow twitched and she gave him a look that made him long for the end of the day.

“Item the fourth: should any child become the eldest through the death of the elder sibling, that child will become heir to Taisigi and return to the care of the aiji or, in the absence of the aiji, the aiji-regent.”

She gave his hand a squeeze and her expression was so fierce, she did not need to say anything for her thoughts to be clear. He returned the squeeze. *No, daja-ma. I will not allow it to happen either.*

“Item the fifth: upon the death of both parents, any children not having reached their majority shall become wards of the aiji-regent, barring any specific amendments made for them otherwise.

“Let it be known that Machigi, aiji of the aishihai’mar and Rao from the Korisulan Association pledge to bind themselves in accordance with these terms.”

“I pledge, of my own will, desire, and accord, to honor and uphold this agreement,” Rao said solemnly, her voice clear and strong. She lifted his hand, touching his knuckles lightly to her forehead. “I swear it, before you and your people,” she said, and pressed his fingers against her chest, just below her collarbones.

“As do I pledge, of my own will, desire and accord,” he replied, touching her fingers to his forehead and chest in return. “To honor and uphold this agreement.” He gave her fingers another gentle squeeze. “I swear it, before you and *our* people.” He smiled at her and then, to his surprise, she *winked* at him. *Brazen woman!* He had to choke down a laugh. *My brazen woman.*

Then, still hand in hand, they turned and faced the assembly. Gediri raised his voice from his place behind them. “The agreement is made,” the foremost counselor intoned. “All present be witness that there now stand before you, espoused, Machigi of the Taisigi and Rao from the Korisulan Association —” *Edi, but for her Grandmother* “— aiji and aiji-consort, two persons bound together into fortunate unity.”

All that was left was to sign and seal and witness the document. Machigi glanced over and saw that his clerical staff had abandoned their table, readying the document, the pens, the wax jacks, the ribbons, his seal, all neatly laid out for this final legal step. “Daja-ma?” He said softly, gesturing in that direction.

But she held up a hand. “I told you that I would not return here without a dowry fit for your people, dena-ma. And so I offer it to them, through you.” She made a sign with her hand and ter’ Haorai placed the box on the aiji’s side table. Ey opened the box and took out a beautiful little gold brocade pillow, and then ey dipped into the box and brought out a cup, which ey placed on the pillow. Then, carefully lifting up the assemblage, ey presented it to Rao. Machigi was vaguely aware of this, his focus entirely on Rao, watching how her motion placed her momentarily in profile, her face edged with light, her hair shifting fetchingly over her shoulder, the drops beneath her ears shimmering.

Rao cradled the cup in both of her hands, picking it up so that ter’ Elsano could pour water into it from her porcelain flask. It made a musical sound, clear in the audience room’s hush. Rao drank from the cup, sipping half of the water, and then offered the cup and the remainder of its contents to him.

He accepted it, still lost in the sight of her face — *she is here, at last, here with me, here forever* — her expression was earnest and gentle and...mischievous? She glanced down at the cup and he could not help but follow the direction of her eyes. *A lovely cup, Master Haorai’s work, a—* And then he truly *saw* it and almost dropped it in his shock.

It was porcelain and it was delicate and it was blue, but “blue” was a wholly insufficient word to describe the color — now cobalt, now aquamarine, now midnight. It was an impossible stygian blue that hid within its depths an ethereal, shimmering iridescence that changed in response to breath or thought. It was the blue of the glaze that was lost to the Sungeni and only remained in those historic pieces that were so rare that they were considered state jewels, even the very few that were legally sold to collectors in other parts of the world. Every single one of those pieces — every cup, every saucer, every vase, every plate, every pot — was as well known to the assembly as the names of their own children, because that was how rare and precious and famous they were, that bear the lost Sungeni Blue glaze.

And because of that, he knew that *this* cup was none of those: it was entirely new. It bore a bas-relief on it, and he recognized it as the same design as on the pendant she had given when she had put him ashore — two kelikiin, intertwined, converting their unfortunate duality into a fortunate unity.

It felt *exactly* like being struck by a bolt of lightning — he felt the skin of his body prickling, the hairs at the nape of his neck rising against the collar of his shirt, his eyes widened of their own accord, his knees went watery, the breath was stopped in his body by the realization of it. For he saw it all in a flash: she, the Edi sailor, had stolen the boat and had gone out, had found the kirkua plant that was known — was *known, it was known!* — to be extinct. She had found it, and had brought it back to Haorai, who had made a glaze from it. Rao had sculpted the decoration with her own hands, and the potter had applied it to the cup, and had glazed and fired it. She could have taken the plant and the knowledge of what could be done with it back to the Edi and have been joyously welcomed back with open arms for bringing them a victory that would have made them wealthy beyond their imagination, and yet she was *here*. He knew that this was her dowry: this glaze reborn in its rightful place.

*The Blue of the Sungeni is no longer lost. She has brought it home.*

It took every ounce of his strength to keep himself from crying out at the glory and triumph and wonder of it. It was not that he was afraid to show strong emotion in public — not in the least, as those enriching the garden would attest, had they been here to do so — but he knew he would presently need to say something, which was a challenge when one's throat was closed. He reached into himself for his usual source of power: his sheer determination, and it steadied him.

He drained the cup. Then he turned to the assembly and walked down the steps right into the center of the audience room and held the cup up into the light with only his thumbs and forefingers, so that they all could see its glimmering magnificence and truly understand what it was they were seeing.

He could see the realization dawning on their faces, the collective gasps, and then the total silence in the room. The crowd of hopeful suitors was motionless, staring. *You have nothing to offer in comparison, and you know it.* He continued holding up the cup for a full minute more, letting it well and truly sink in.

And then he spoke. "This is Rao-daja's dowry!" He announced. He kept his face impassive, but — *You tried to reject her. You tried to drive her away — you wanted to kill her!* — his voice quivered with rage. "Look at this. LOOK AT IT! Does anyone in this room doubt that she is worthy of me, or of you?" He demanded.

He waited a full minute more for a reply, but received nothing but silence.

Machigi returned to the dais and held the cup out to Gediri. "Are we worthy of *her*, Diriji?" He asked his counselor quietly. The man, his expression dazed, received the cup in his hands with the care he would have shown to one of his infant grandchildren, and stared at it. *No, not even you can deny this thing.*

Finally, Gediri looked up, looking into the faces of both his aiji and the woman he had fought so hard to resist. "Bajio kabisu," Machigi said: overcoming the odds, turning a setback into triumph. *Which she absolutely has done.* "Will you bear witness to our marriage, old associate of mine?" Machigi asked him, gently.

"Yes, aiji-ma," Gediri replied in a quiet voice. He looked to Rao. "Forgive me, daja-ma, I..." he trailed off, quite overcome.

"Yes, nand' Gediri," Rao said, the absolute *yes*. "I would be grateful to be your ally from this day forward, nandi, if you will accept me." She paused. "But you must accept me."

Gediri swallowed. "Yes, daja-ma," he said, and it, too, was the absolute *yes*.

...

The staff were clearing away the supplies and carrying off the now-complete marriage agreement, signed and witnessed and sealed, to be copied and posted and published so that everyone, *including and especially the small council*, knew that it was finally and truly and completely *done*. Machigi let out the breath he had not realized he had been holding. Then he leaned over to Rao and spoke to her softly. "Did you burn yourself?" He asked, nodding toward her hand. Being disowned, she had no seal of her own, so when it had come time to stamp the wax-and-ribbon on the marriage agreement to authenticate her signature, she had simply pressed her thumb directly into the hot golden wax that had been poured over ribbons of blue and brown to honor her origin. *Let her Grandmother bark at it, if she dares.* Then she had calmly held her

thumb in place until the wax had cooled and set, to the soft murmured astonishment of their audience. *There, now you too can be astonished by her*, he had thought, pleased.

She chuckled and murmured in reply. "By no means. It is one of the benefits of working the lines at sea. My fingertips are armored with callouses." Her expression softened into a wistful little smile. "I suppose that my hands will soften now," she said. "But it is a small price to pay."

"We will go to sea again," he said. "Together."

They spent the rest of the afternoon signing cards, the Sungeni Blue cup in a place of honor between them nestled in its gold cushion. Haori had brought a fortunate ninety-nine small chips of porcelain in the restored glaze, which he had affixed to signature cards made of Elsano's thick, handmade paper, a paper that bore a subtle wavy pattern of pale blue and green. Each chip was of a slightly different cobalt shade of the Blue and was stamped with a taihi flower framed by a geometric pattern that looked subversively *Edi*. *The Grandmother would be furious*, Machigi thought, not without some satisfaction.

It was good that the hall had been relatively uncrowded, because of that limited number of cards — he had ordered Nevathi to ensure that no new persons were admitted, as he suspected that once the news spread of what had happened here, a large crowd would begin to make their way up to the governmental heights in hope of obtaining one of these most precious of souvenirs — not just the paper, or the signatures, but the fact that they bore those chips of the very first samples of the revived Blue. *These will prove very popular on the shadow market. Some of these people are going to come into new wealth soon*. It did not trouble him — despite all of the gains of the past two years, the region was still very poor, so he wished them the joy of it, even the ones who had only come in the first place to experience some pleasure at the discomfiture they had been sure sure he was going to face.

Signing the cards for the people necessitated that these persons — many of them relative strangers — would be very close to them. Tema entrusted Kochi to stand behind Machigi as protection and Dvari to guard Rao, assigning the rest of their security at various places inside and outside the hall to keep close watch on the visitors who were now settled into their orderly queue. Dvari was such a *solid presence* at Rao's back that — to Machigi's amusement — most of the people addressing her actually did so from at least a pace back from the table's edge.

But there was really no danger at all. *If Gediri is subdued, so is the Marid*, Machigi thought, and so they were, all the visitors to this hall. They were all of them awed by the cup and the events and, he thought, by her — *Edi she may be, but she showed them that she is as bold and brazen and fearless as any true Maridi*.

Of his erstwhile suitors...as the marriage had begun to unfold, most of them had withdrawn — whether in anger or disappointment, or both, he did not know — and Nevathi would not readmit them, so they missed their opportunity to receive a card. *Gediri will owe them quite the apology, I think*. A few, chiefly the youngest and the oldest, had remained — to their credit, they did not favor Rao with resentful looks or words. They were gracious, in fact, and Rao accepted their congratulations graciously in return.

A small number of their well-wishers asked Rao about the source of the Blue. Some of them were people he knew to be associates of Haori and he well knew their

interest was academic. But one of the others was a person known to him as what he would dryly classify as “an opportunist” — in an unfortunate dual state of being potentially useful and a potential threat at the same time. As for the rest, they were strangers. He carefully noted those who had done the asking and saw that Gediri was doing the same. *These will bear watching.* But in all cases Rao demurred. “It is a very good story, nadi, nandi,” she said, or a variation thereof, each time. “But best we wait until the state has secured the source.” *She already knows, and is watching them also.*

Finally, it was over, all of the witnesses clutching — so gently! — their priceless cards and filing out of the audience room. They had only disappointed a very small handful, and those were people who had arrived after the wedding.

“It is well,” she whispered to him as the staff closed the doors and the clerks and heralds busied themselves, packing up all of the equipment and paperwork. “It will be some time before ter’ Haori can make more.”

“Will you need to go out to harvest more kirkui?” *How far would you have to go?*

She gave him the barest shake of her head. “Too risky, I think,” she said. *Very far.* “Better to reestablish it here. Haori- and Elsano-teri hope to cultivate them and restore them to the Marid, so I brought back as many live as I could, as many as I could pack up in the baskets I had.”

“That you stole, pirate-ma” he murmured, smiling. “I had to compensate the owner out of my own funds.”

“I shall return the boat with my gratitude,” she said. Then she raised an eyebrow. “Was it an unreasonable bride-price, You-ma?” she asked.

“Never,” he replied. “It was entirely too small, in fact, so you shall have the whole Marid besides.”

She looked satisfied at that.

The two of them rose and stepped away from the table — the clerks rushed in to clear out the last of the supplies — to bid farewell to Haori and Elsano. “It is extraordinary work, teri,” Machigi said to them. To the vast surprise of the master artisans, he offered them both a deep bow. “We shall never forget what you have done for the Marid.”

They returned the bow, clearly moved. “It has been our honor and privilege to work with the consort, aiji-ma,” said Haori. “She has helped me fulfill a life-long quest. And now the next quest begins.”

“Oh, ter’ Haori?” Machigi asked.

“Yes, aiji-ma,” ey replied happily, eyes crinkling as ey beamed. “It will take the rest of my life, and the lives of the apprentices whom I am sure will soon be breaking down my door, to coax all of the colors of the sea out of the glaze. There is *so much* to do!”

“Hmpf, apprentices,” Elsano murmured. “Always underfoot.” But she did not seem displeased. “My aishid will enjoy nibbling on them,” she added, earning a laugh from Rao.

With that, the artisans gave another bow and departed. Machigi smiled and offered his wife — *my wife!* — a gesture towards the private quarters. “Let me show you my — *our* — rooms, daja-ma.” She had been to his reception room once or twice during

her brief sojourn in the palace. But she had not had the opportunity to go any further, and he was glad to show her that which was now also hers.

They passed from his reception room through an ornate set of double doors and then back outside: into a private courtyard-garden, a square of walkways overhung with a roof covered in neat, overlapping rows of blue tile and held up by columns of pale stone. In the center, there was a fountain — a cousin to the magnificent fountain in the palace's main garden, ringed by a openwork stone bench and chuckling gently to itself. The corners of the courtyard were trellised with vines that had been trained to grow and twine together into an overhead bower, clusters of fragrant flowers hanging down. Rao tilted her head up to look; he watched her considering the patches of the sky above visible beyond in between the leaves and vines and fretwork. "There is monitoring, of course. It is as safe as any window," he told her. "Safer, now that your aishid will be supplementing mine."

He showed her a smaller sub-suite of rooms, offset from the main. "This is the consort's suite," he said. There were three large rooms there, and the sub-suite had its own accommodation and storage. "It has served as secondary storage until now, but I will ensure that space is cleared for you."

"If I may suggest it, husband of mine —" the phrase sent a thrill through him — "I only need an office. And, perhaps one day, when we are ready, space for a nursery." A *nursery!* Another thrill.

"And a workshop, with storage space," he smiled at her and her expression lit up. "Take the entire suite, wife of mine," he felt the fortunate third thrill shivering across his skin, just to say it to her out loud. "I suspect you will need all of it."

"Very well, husband," she said, smiling in return.

From thence, to the private sitting room, which the staff had set up as an intimate little dining hall. Like the seaward suite, it too had a fireplace, set with a small fire to chase the autumn's evening chill from the walls. They sat and shared tea and a platter of thinly-sliced, fresh raw fish — she was delighted by the reminder of their time at sea — followed by a dessert of wedges of tart, late-season sajoa fruit. While they ate, he watched her eagerly examine the furniture and decoration: unlike the seaward suite, his rooms ran to dark wood and fantastic carvings of sea creatures spanning and climbing the beams and the frames of the walls' many bookshelves. An ornate hand-forged ironwork chandelier hung from the ceiling's center beam by a stout chain, set with electric lights now instead of candles, but still retaining their crystal sleeves that cut the light at their rims and cast arcs of rainbows overhead. "Do you favor it?" He asked her.

She smiled. "I would favor a hovel, if you were in it," she said.

"As would I," he said. "But all things considered, I would prefer something more comfortable for us than a hovel."

Rao laughed. "Indeed." She looked up and around the room and its furnishings one more time before returning her attention to him. "I do favor it, very much so. It is impressive work, skilled and done with such care." She set aside the teacup and patted her lips with a napkin, then set the cloth down and folded her hands neatly in her lap. "However, you have been remiss in your tour, husband of mine," she noted, mock-stern.

He blinked. "Remiss?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You appear to have forgotten to show me the bedroom."



“Oh,” he said. “No, wife, I have not *forgotten*. I have been waiting these two months and more. But I thought it might be rather abrupt to simply ravish you right away, as much as I might have liked to do.”

“Perhaps I *wish* to be ravished, husband,” she replied archly. “For I have I *also* waited these two months and more.”

“Well, then.” He rose and gestured towards the inner doorway. “I live to serve.”

The consort’s suite had a dressing room — he thought that staff had had enough time to clear at least one of the wardrobes by now — that connected directly to the master suite’s bedroom. He suffered Rao to disappear there, to be attended by Jara, who had shifted over to prepare the space for its new function. *Her staff’s man’chi is to me, but it is to me through her, now.* It was a relief.

Tarsiti helped him with his own attire, being most careful not to crumple the lace or crease the brocade and to whisk everything away for cleaning and polishing, but once the clothing was secure, he sent the man away and got himself situated in silk bedrobe of the palest blue.

He was keyed up and impatient and yet also amused by how time seemed to slow to a crawl, a thick sap of moments barely trickling from one to the next — *deliciously frustrating* — until the door to the adjoining suite opened. Rao entered, wrapped in a pale green silk robe of her own, and carefully secured the door behind her.

She turned and looked up and smiled, her eyes lighting up at the sight of him. Then she took a step towards him and opened her robe, shrugging to allow it to slither off of her shoulders and down her back and into a heap the floor to be ignored — as was proper. Beneath it, she was wearing two of the inner layers of her Edi robes. They were made of bari’sata like her stola and, like her stola, shimmered now gold, now green. But the cloth of these robes was so, so, so very much much finer than that of the scarf, which he dazedly realized for all of its fluidity was relatively thick in comparison because, without taking her eyes from his face, and with a half-smile on her lips, she turned in the light and the fabric was suddenly almost completely transparent and he could see, through a gold-green haze —

— *all of her* —

“Extraordinary cloth, what is it?” Is what he *intended* to say, but he found himself only making inarticulate noises. This was not at all helped by the mischievous promise in the smile that now bloomed fully in her face as she approached. *She is enjoying this*, he thought, when he had regained the capacity to think. *Well, so am I.*

He took a deep breath and tried, through sheer application of will, to reallocate the flow of blood in his body. In this he was only partially successful, but successful enough to take her into his arms. The cloth was soft and cool felt like layers of water in his hands and it slid over her warm body under his palms, now opaque, now sheer, and — *oh, fortunate gods!* —

*deep breath*

Her hands were in his hair, fingertips tracing his ears, sending sparks of sensation through him —

He let out a strangled groan, bodily picked her up, and carried her to the bed. Once there, they slowly peeled off the other’s clothing, unwrapping each others’ gifts. As she slid his robe off of his shoulders, she uncovered the necklace she had made for him

in what seemed like a previous lifetime, and he smiled in response to her look of wonder. She touched the carved pendant gently and followed the cord up to his neck, fingertips light. “You still have it,” she said.

“I wear it always,” he said. He thought back to their time in her sailboat, about what they had learned about one another, and what he could do to render her as speechless as she seemed to be able to do so effortlessly to him — *by simply breathing*. She was sitting bare from the waist up in a pool of her silks and so he slipped his hands around her, behind her, to run his fingers up on either side of her spine. Her whole body shuddered under his touch; she tried to speak but could only gasp — *ha!* — and he was savagely delighted at his success. He leaned in and followed the curve of her neck with his lips. The arching of her spine pressed her body against him. “I treasure your shivers,” he whispered, wickedly softly, into her throat. She only managed “You—” before her attempt at speech dissolved into low, soft cry.

When he thought that perhaps she could bear no more, he stopped and leaned back against the bed’s headboard, feeling exceptionally pleased with himself. He was content — for the moment — to simply look at her, nestled at his side in a puddle of silken cloth. Her skin was flushed to a glorious darkness and textured by her excitement where it was bared to the cool air, which was — from her waist up — most of it.

He let his hands wander over her while she caught her breath. She countered his touches by exploring the contours of his chest with her fingers. Then she leaned forward, her unbound hair brushing over him in a soft flood. She gently touched the scar on his chin with an inquisitive expression.

“Ah yes, your prize,” he said. “When I was eight, an attempt was made on my life. The assassin came up behind me and tried to slit my throat. I ducked my head and the blade jumped up across my chin here.”

She turned her hand and caressed the mark with the backs of her fingers, her eyes wide.

“So you see,” he added, with a crooked smile. “I learned at an early age to keep my head down.” He sat up a little and turned his right arm over so that she could see a faded line that ran across his forearm just below his elbow. “Look, I got this when I fought off the attacker and ran away.”

Rao held out her arm next to his, with its fresh scar there from her encounter with the seaward suite’s majordomo. “One does not come away from a knife fight without a stripe,” she said, bemused.

“We match,” he observed.

“Yes,” she said with a smile. The smile faded and her brows knit. “Who was it, who tried to kill you?”

“A flunky of the lord of the Dojisigi.”

“Did your family retaliate?”

“Oh yes. My father attacked in return with all that he had. He extinguished the lord and all her line, except for a previously unknown illegitimate son of her brother’s. Two years later, in attempting to supplant the lord my father had placed there, that man failed in his attempt against us...except that he managed to kill my sister Tula.”

“Gediri told me about that,” Rao said. “I regret it so extremely.”

“Do not regret it, Rao-ma,” he said. “As terrible as it was, it was part of what made me what I am. Feuding, scheming, illegal assassinations — they are part and

parcel of what the Marid has been. I would bring an end to that — I would pull the Marid into a different, better future — and I would not be so determined if these things had not happened to my family, or had my family not fully participated in feud themselves. But...” He ran a finger down her forearm to mark her scar and smiled at her with a mischievous twitch of his eyebrows. “Because of it all, I am the last of the line of my father. I should like very much that you help ensure that it does not end with me. It need not be *now*,” he added quickly. “If you think it is too soon to think about our fortuitous brood — there is time for that later, I think. What would you like?”

“The future is uncertain,” Rao said. “The Marid has not reached that future yet, and there will always be conflict in the world.” She let out a thoughtful breath, and then raised an eyebrow as a thought occurred to her. “Will it please our detractors if we produce no offspring?” She tilted her head at him. “Will they think that it proves that you brought me here simply for pleasure, and that you will set me aside when it is time to think of succession?”

“Perhaps.” He thought about it. “Probably. Most likely.”

“Then let us get an heir as soon as possible,” she said, her eyes flashing fierce fire.

He couldn’t suppress a fierce grin of his own. “Gladly, daja-ma.” He opened his arms to her. “I *do* so favor a challenge.”

## Chapter 44 - Orientation

The restoration of the Blue had, as Machigi expected, caused a sensation through the whole of the Marid. The wedding cup was now on permanent display in the entrance hall and still drawing significant daily crowds, and to his amusement, the sharing of water as an element of a marriage had instantly been adopted across the aishihai'mar.

*"Is that an Edi practice?" He asked Rao.*

*"Yes," she said. "It seemed fitting, and we needed something to glaze."*

*He smiled. "It has fired the people's imagination. The whole of the Marid has taken it up."*

*"Then there is hope for me," she smiled in return.*

And to speak of hope, potters were clambering at Haorai's door to learn of the glaze, so much so that Machigi had had to order special Guild security over the entire neighborhood of potters and porcelain makers. It was an enormous expense, and he did not regret it. But —

"How long can this go on?" Gediri asked him, in a special meeting between the two of them and Trade for a third. "At some point, the glaze must either be made public, or we must commit to it being a state secret."

"The porcelain branch of the Artisans' Guild has petitioned me daily for access, aiji-ma," Siodi noted. "They wish it to remain secret, but *their* secret, to the point of demanding that Haorai-tera accept membership and provide them with the technique," Siodi noted. "I have also received several complaints from collectors. They are upset about the glaze, saying it devalues the rarity of the pre-Wave pieces in their collections."

"Would they have us poison the future to preserve the profits of the past?" Machigi asks. "If anything, modern work will only increase the value of their historical pieces. Siodi-sa, tell them that they should not bother you with such foolishness again. As for the release of the glaze, I am inclined to refer that decision to our own people. It is not for the Shejidan Guild to make claims on our artists. Tell them so at the representative meeting. They shall simply have to wait, and if they or any of the other new Guilds persist in attempting to circumvent you and establish their own rules over our people, I will throw them out of the Marid entire."

Siodi looked satisfied. "Yes, aiji-ma." And so she did when she chaired the meeting with the Guild representatives that the aiji had ordered his Minister of Affairs to convene in the moments prior to his extraordinary wedding. She had not been present for that, and regretted it.

Machigi sent his new wife to observe the meeting. It would not have done for he himself to be there — the presence of the aiji would have broadcast too clearly just how important the issue was to him, and thusly given the Guilds too much leverage. But that the aiji-consort was there, and the person who had been instrumental in reviving the historic glaze — that would do very well. For her part, Rao sat quietly at the farthest end of the conference table and simply listened.

"Understand, nand' Siodi, There is no convenient, appropriate land in Tanaja," Dejori, the representative from the Physicians' Guild said. "Siting a hospital outside of

the city would place an undue burden on the people, who would have to travel a significant distance to receive services. The hospital is meant for all and should be available to all, and reclaiming a plot from the bay is the most central and reasonable solution. But the longer that takes, the longer that the people will continue to be forced into understaffed, inadequate corner clinics.”

This was not a small insult leveled on Marid physicians. But Siodi, accustomed to the political rhetoric of Shejidan by her sojourn there, bore it with grace. “Your argument has merit, nadi. However, you simply cannot approach the people on the shoreline. Your Guild has been drawing up its agreements according to the laws of Shejidan. But such a thing will not be legal here. It is not how land stewardship works in the Marid. The government is willing to work with you, but it will take time.”

“How much time, though, nandi?” Dejori asked.

“As much time as it takes. One is not sure whether you appreciate how the *traditional nature* of the city translates into a lack of basic infrastructure of the kind your project needs. It will take much longer than simply raising land from the bay. This will be long-term plan, no matter how quickly you think your construction teams will work, and none of it will happen without concurrence from the state.”

She meant it as a warning, and Dejori was intelligent enough to understand it as such. He bowed his head. “The Physicians will look forward to working with your office further, nandi.”

*So. The Physicians are deferred...for now. Who is next?*

Mataro, a middle-aged woman of the Artisans’ Guild, leaned forward and claimed the opportunity to speak. She was dressed in good-quality, clean clothes of a practical cut, with the strong, classical features of the center of the aishidi’tat. Her clothing was marked by a loop of cord — a braid of two white strands and one gold — pinned to her left shoulder sleeve. The cord as a marker of her specialty within the Guild, which Siodi knew to be that of the porcelain makers. She was seated between two men of similar age, whom Siodi also took to be representatives of some branch or another of the Artisans, for the one of them was wearing a similar cord braided in brown and gold, while the other had no cord at all, but rather a thick chain of small, cleverly interlinked silver and copper links, looped around his shoulders.

Siodi had in fact dealt with the Mataro before — the woman was one of her office’s most persistent callers — but the two men with her were strangers. “This is Kaili and Bajeta.” Mataro indicated her compatriots. “They represent the woodcarvers’, and jewelers’ branches of the Artisans’ Guild.” It was no surprise to Siodi at all that the Artisans’ Guild had sent not just the one representative she knew, but *three* in all. *Actually, I am surprised that they did not send more.* Nor was she surprised that they would want markers to distinguish themselves from one another. *How can this Guild call itself a Guild? They should rather name themselves an Association.* “Well, met, nadiin,” Siodi said to them pleasantly.

Mataro merely repeated her impassioned arguments regarding the Sungeni Blue, trying to convey the urgency of the matter of ter’ Haorai’s membership in her branch of the Guild, of the disaster that would surely befall the Marid if ey were not immediately inducted, and of the importance that the council mandate em to membership if ey continued to resist. Siodi sighed to herself, having heard all of this before. “The aiji wills that the Marid approach the matter slowly, carefully, and above all *internally*, and

I cannot gainsay him,” she said — exactly the same as before, in the hopes that perhaps *this time it will finally find understanding in the woman’s mind. I doubt it. This woman has a singular desire.*

Perhaps it was that mention of the aiji, in combination with her singular desire, that lead Mataro to appeal directly to the aiji’s wife. “As one so central to the revival of the Blue, Rao-daja, surely you have an opinion?” *She thinks Rao can sway him, Siodi thought. And she probably could.*

“One is here only to observe, nadi,” Rao replied firmly. “As the aiji has designated the subject as a council matter, one defers to the Minister of Trade and Transport.”

Mataro leaned back in her chair. She had regained an impassive expression and so it was hard to tell whether she was unsettled or merely frustrated, but Siodi expected it might be a little of both.

Kaili the woodcarver cleared his throat, glancing briefly between Rao and Mataro. Then he spoke to Siodi in a slower, calmer voice. “I traveled here on the train from Shejidan, over the mountains, nandi. The architecture of Hasjuran —” up in the highest pass, a town known for being constructed largely of wood, and sumptuously carved at that — “was striking. But once I had reached the Marid proper, it seemed that most of what I saw from my window was stone and tile but for the fences and baffles along the track. What wood crafting is done here?”

Her Maridi upbringing made her somewhat suspicious of the Artisans’ collective change in tone. *Perhaps he is trying to distract me, to shift the situation so that it is I courting them,* Siodi thought. *And then Mataro will come in for the attack on the glaze from another angle.* But she decided to respond to his question in a straightforward fashion nonetheless. “Much,” she said to him. “One suspects you have only seen train stations and this compound, no? You should take a walk through Tanaja proper, nadi, and one will arrange with the majordomo of the palace to show you some of the historic state pieces in wood. There is as a thriving community of building, crafting, and decoration in wood in the Marid as there is anywhere else on the continent, and plenty of opportunity for your wood masters and ours, one believes, once we have a protocol in place for you to interact them them.”

She expected Mataro to return to the topic of the glaze then, but instead, her jeweler companion spoke up. “If we are discouraged from direct approach, nandi, then I should inform you that it has happened in the other direction. I was approached by a steel worker, myself.” Bajeta managed to sound concerned and offended at the same time.

“Oh, nadi?” Siodi said. “Who was it, if one may ask?”

“A man named Prithani,” Bajeta said.

Siodi felt her body straighten up both in reaction to the man’s tone and to his classification of one of the Taisigin Marid’s most eminent master smiths. *It is not that workers in steel need not be clever and experienced and highly skilled in their craft — but Ter’ Prithani, a ‘steel worker’? Such outrageous ignorance!* And she realized: *this man does not know that Ter’ Prithani personally petitioned the aiji about this very issue.* She may not have been there herself when it had happened, but Gediri had told her everything.

“He works in steel,” Bajeta repeated, continuing on. “Understand that such a thing is uncommon among the Guild’s jewelers, nandi. And he makes knives. We jewelers do not make *practical* items, as a general rule.”

*‘Knives.’ And he manages to make ‘practical’ sound vulgar. Clearly he has never seen any of the house of Aechaji’s work.* “You do not have specialists in the hand-crafting of, say, fine blades, nandi?”

“The Assassins manufacture their own equipment, nandi, and these days tend to prefer firearms.”

*Impudent creature.* “Oh, and do the cooks of the ashidi’tat not desire of high-quality tools for their craft?” She asked sweetly.

“High-quality as they may be, these are work tools, and are not specifically *artistic*,” Bajeta replied.

*Ter’ Prithani would artistically take you apart with one of his blades if he heard you say that, nandi.* Siodi wisely kept the thought to herself. *This man has no idea how prized hand-forged blades are among our own cooks.*

Ansegi of the Metalworkers’ Guild was a solid person, with facial features that spoke of the western coast around the great port of Cabo, was dressed in impeccably tailored clothing, with very little lace at the cuffs and collar. Perhaps sensing some of Siodi’s annoyance, ey leaned in and picked up Bajeta’s train of thought. “Nandi, I can speak on this,” ey said. “The Metalworkers manage the factories that produce such implements in the aishidi’tat. They are as high-quality as any hand-made — higher, even, since our equipment is standardized and precise and our workers highly-trained. Our household tools are renowned across the aishidi’tat, and we would welcome the membership of the Marid’s smiths in that and any other metal-crafting endeavors.”

“And yet there are two problems with this approach in the Marid, Ansegi-nadi,” Siodi said levelly. “One: the metalworkers of whom you speak are neither industrial, nor are they jewelers.” That was her own observation. “Two: the Marid’s *industrial* metalworkers are already a part of the Transportation Guild, who will be loathe to part with them.” And that was the aiji’s, as Gediri had recounted.

“But the Transportation Guild has always contracted with the Metalworkers for those services,” said Ansegi, sounding surprised.

“Not in the Marid, Ansegi-nadi.”

“But surely that should be the arrangement in the Marid also,” ey said.

“But Transportation was here first,” Siodi pointed out. She held up a hand to stop the speaker’s words. “You will need to speak with them, Ansegi-nadi,” she said. “As Minister of Trade and Transport, one will broker a meeting. One is sure there will be some compromise that allows for mutual support, but the council will expect you, as the junior Guild here, to follow Transportation’s lead.”

This did not appear to make Ansegi particularly happy and it showed on eyr face, but Siodi did not care. *Next!*

Of all of the representatives, Lauma of the Scholars was the least upset. That Guild had been, with the Messengers, the first on the ground after the aiji had opened up the Marid to the central Guilds. *They took the time to learn about the situation here,* Siodi thought. *As befitting a group committed to education. At least one of the Guilds did not assume that their way would naturally work here.* Lauma was a person of odd features — his grey hair said “elderly” but the lines on his face seemed to Siodi to be

more from the exercise of unfettered expression rather than of age, and by that she was not entirely sure she should trust him. “On behalf of the Scholars, nandi, one understands and will wait,” he said with a smile. “We, too, wish to proceed in a way that brings benefit to all, with a minimum of disruption.”

“The Messengers concur, nandi,” said Sichero of that Guild shortly, as serious as Lauma was smiling. Sichero was an utterly nondescript person, the kind that one was likely to forget immediately after seeing her. *Which makes her require twice the attention. And she agrees too easily.* However, the Messengers’ integration was the special concern of Kaordi, the Minister of Information, and Siodi was glad to let him have it.

*Well, Siodi thought, folding her hands together on the cool tabletop. You both say what I want to hear for now, so I will take you at your word. The Scholars know we so desperately need education here, and the Messengers knows that communication is the foundation for anything we wish to accomplish.* “Yes,” she told them. “You are both priority, nadiin.”

She then gave them all a deep bow. “The invitation that Machigi-aiji has extended you is certainly sincere, nadiin, only one requests that you bear in mind what a change it represents for the Marid. It is as significant for us as was the Treaty of the Landing, and we must work together to ensure that the state is not destabilized by changes made too swiftly, no matter how good their intentions.” Yes, she thought. *We must find a way to slow the influx. Something that functions like a paidhi, perhaps, to gentle the oncoming change.*

“We must ensure, that we avoid the same tragedy,” she concluded. “The council will have a clear answer as to how we will proceed with each of your Guilds’ initiatives shortly.” By their expressions, she could tell that they had taken the threat for what it was, and also understood that they were dismissed.

They returned her bow and, with only one curious glance or three in the direction of the still quiet aiji-consort, they departed.

No sooner were they well and truly gone than Gediri entered, slipping in from the map room, to receive Siodi’s report. *Even though I am sure he heard the whole thing.*

“They are accustomed to working with some speed in the ashidi’tat, and are impatient here in the aishihai’mar, Diri-sa,” she told him. “Nor are they used to being thwarted, I think. I feel that they will respect our requirements for now. But I fear that this will not hold. If we wait too long, they will become bolder — surely, their leadership in Shejidan will not be pleased with delays, and will pressure them to act.” She turned to Rao. “You have also been to Shejidan and have some experience with how they think, daja-ma, what do you think?”

Rao looked thoughtful. “I think that you are correct, nand’ Siodi. They will not wait for long, and it would not be good for the Marid to wait too long either. We need what the Guilds wish to bring, though we should have it on our terms.” She was using that collective *we*, and Siodi was struck by how right it felt. *I do believe her, truly.* “The weakness here is the Marid’s territorial tradition,” Rao added.

“Territorial?” Gediri asked.

“Yes, nandi,” Rao said. “Every region and clan and master is fiercely independent, is it not? Everything I have read and seen and learned is very clear on that point.”



“Yes,” said Gediri. “And we are all very possessive of our traditions, skills, and resources.”

“This is a strength, generally,” Rao nodded. “If one is harmed, the others still stand. But when faced with a concerted effort from outside, it becomes a weakness: instead of single castle, there are a myriad of little forts, each operating independently, and each easily overwhelmed.”

“You are recommending some kind of unity,” Siodi said.

“Indeed, nand’ Siodi. I feel that a unified response is what is needed here.”

“Impossible,” said Gediri. “The aiji wants the government to be the outsiders’ gatekeeper in this, but the people of the Marid will always seek their own way when it comes to growth, profit, and opportunity. It may work for a little while, but in time, it will fall apart.”

“The aiji’s proclamations order the Marid to defer Guild inquiries to the palace,” Siodi said thoughtfully. “But it is uncertain whether the region will heed the call in any unified way, or that they will even receive the proclamations before the Guilds are moved to act.” She spread her hands. “Linked computers and telephones are still fairly rare,” she said to Gediri, but she really meant it as a reminder to Rao. “People will have to receive the notices by hand, and many of them will have to find someone to read them to them.”

“And then they will want to argue,” Gediri said. “They will want clarification, and many of them will be looking for exceptions. The back-and-forth will take *months*,” he said with a grimace.

The aiji’s consort shifted a little in her seat. “Nand’ Gediri, you once told me about the second chamber in the legislature, that you thought to use it for conferences.”

“Yes,” he said.

“Perhaps we should hold one? For the art, craft, and trade masters? Would it be useful to have them all in one place?”

“Hm, yes,” Gediri said. “A basic notification to appear is simpler than a proclamation regarding business with outsiders. It would be easier to brief the masters, to explain to them, and to answer their questions, and let them argue, at the same time in the same place.”

“Better and more efficient,” Siodi agreed. “Especially if we offer some incentive.”

“A Festivity,” Gediri said. “To celebrate the return of the Blue. With transportation subsidized by the state.”

Siodi nodded with a smile. “An exhibition of regional masterpieces, with a prize awarded to the best.”

Gediri laughed, caught up in the idea. “That will stoke their passions, to be sure — they will not be able to resist it. And then we can capture them. But who will speak for the palace? They will be suspicious if it is one of the council.”

“Perhaps Haorai-tera?” Rao suggested. “Ey are somewhat famous at the moment, are ey not?”

“Yes,” Gediri said thoughtfully.

“We could make use of that fame while it is still at its apex,” Siodi noted. “I am sure ey understand the problem, and would be willing to help if asked. Can we obtain the rest of the council’s concurrence to do this, Diri-sa?”

Gediri nodded. “I think so. Kaordi will certainly have objections — it will be challenging from an intelligence standpoint. But if the aiji wishes it, the Assassins and Transport will provide support. They both understand the benefit of approaching Guild operations from a regional viewpoint. That will be enough to satisfy nand’ Kaordi, I think.”

“It leaves only to determine *when* it should occur,” Gediri said.

Siodi thought about it. “It should be swiftly done,” she said. “So as to have a solution for the Guilds. Say, a pair of months — that should be enough time for organization and notification, if we all work very diligently.”

“A Festivity,” Gediri said again. “To mark the start of the rainy season. To be followed by the mid-season legislative meeting, to finalize the recommendations of the tashrid.” He nodded, looking satisfied. “It could work. If the aiji wishes to declare it. But will the aiji wish it?” He and Siodi both looked at Rao.

She smiled. “I cannot speak for my husband, nandiin. But it is a clever idea, so I predict success.”

## Chapter 45 - Origination

The conference, which indeed Machigi was very pleased to sponsor, was only intended to last a week. But a great storm blew up and lashed at the city in fury, trapping the delegates in the confines of the legislature for a full extra week. The legislature was transformed into something like a camp, with the constructed-but-as-of-yet-unused office space for the second chamber converted over to temporary lodging. The assembled body continued to argue and lecture and rant, sometimes even drowning out the howling of the wind and rain outside. Rao was gone most of that time, but there were underground connections for the staff between the palace and the legislature, so she was able to return to their bed most evenings, when whatever it was they were arguing about did not keep her there throughout the night. She would not tell him what they were saying because it had not amounted to anything, she said. "But I will observe that in this, Maridi are not all that different from Edi after all."

"Are there enough clerks to handle the record-keeping?" He asked her, holding her close under the covers. The storm had brought a deep chill with it, and she was pleasantly warm.

"Oh yes," she said. "Palace staff have been working hard with the masters' assistants in that regard."

There was a sudden rattle of hail against the roof tiles, audible even within the sheltered confines of the bedroom. "It is dreadful outside," he said. "I fear for the gardens."

"They will survive. But speaking of gardening..." she said, and made him forget all about the weather.

...

Some two weeks after the conference, Nevathi brought Machigi word that the aiji-consort and Haorai, the master potter, were asking to meet with him. "See them to the map room," he said. He made his way there to find the two of them waiting for him, standing by a cozy table-and-chair arrangement in a corner by the windows. A rare break in the season's storms lit up the space with a probably transient sunlight, and staff had lit the overhead electrics to compensate for the likely return of storm-borne dimness.

They bowed to him and they all took their seats together. When his majordomo had told him that Rao had wanted to see him, he had hoped that she was going to tell him that their attempts to conceive an heir had met with success. But with Haorai's presence, and the fact that the master potter was holding a neatly-bound stack of paper, he knew it for something related to wider concerns. He allowed himself a silent, wistful sigh.

He assumed that Haorai was bringing him a report regarding the conference, but the potter's expression was so inoffensive and Rao's so self-contained that he immediately knew that they were Up to Something Unusual. He raised an eyebrow and, mischievously, called for tea, so that they would have to wait until a fortuitous cup or three before being able to reveal whatever it was to him.

After he felt that they had endured — and he had enjoyed — enough of a gentle and excruciating discussion of the weather, he finished his last cup — and it *was* the third — and set it down so they could finally get to business.

“A report, aiji-ma,” Haorai said, as he had expected. “Compiled from the conference. We —” ey used the collective *we* “— that is to say, the craft, trade and art masters, have recommendations as to how to proceed.” And ey offered him the stack.

Machigi received the report in his hands. It was machine-printed, but the pages were hand-bound down its spine in the classic Mie-period style of braided threading, all three ribs secured with clever knots to thick cover stock. The report had silken green-and-blue foot- and headbands, with plenty of ribbons sewn into the latter to serve as placeholders. And the edges of many of the report’s pages were flagged with heavy, multi-colored tabs to call out their importance, besides. It was, in fact, a masterpiece in and of itself, and he knew it for Elsano’s work thereby, probably working with one of the city’s very few printing presses. *A collective effort.*

*How is this possible?* The region’s masters were, as a matter of ancient and closely-hoarded tradition, insanely jealous of their individual processes, procedures, and techniques. *How in the ever-squabbling gods’ names did they manage to produce anything collectively?* Was it because the storm had trapped them in each other’s company?

*Storms...* He looked over at Rao. He suspected that his wife had had something to do with it — he had that that tingling sense that he was imminently about to be a lightning strike victim. This was generally how she made him feel — *to my eternal masochistic delight.*

“Hm,” he returned his attention to the report. He opened it and found, at its beginning, a summary. He could feel Rao’s and Haorai’s attention on him as he read. And what he read did, in fact, strike him as a thunderbolt, both surprising *and* entirely anticipated, all at the same time.

Haorai, seeing that he had reached the end of the summary, said, “Aiji-ma, the document goes into significant detail. And it is affirmed.” Machigi dutifully turned to the end of the report and saw that it was so: several pages’ worth of the masters’ marks stamped in ink in lieu of wax for practicality and, in many cases, doubling as signatures for those of them who did not know how to sign their names. *So many marks.* “Should you and the council accept these proposals, aiji-ma, you will have full support from those whom it would affect.”

Machigi closed the report and looked at Haorai. “This is extraordinary work, ter’ Haorai,” he said. *I lie — it is a miracle.* “I will review it in detail, and bring it to the small council in haste. If it works — if what you have detailed actually works...”

Haorai bowed. “It will work, aiji-ma,” ey said. “We are committed.”

Machigi nodded to one of the staff, hovering at the proper range, and handed over the report. “See that this is given to Nand’ Gediri forthwith, Emi-ji,” he ordered her. The proposal given and received, Haorai rose and bowed to both him and Rao. “Aiji-ma, daja-ma.” Ey departed, following the path of the staff member bearing her precious burden.

After the potter was gone, Machigi dismissed the remaining staff. Their security, understanding his wish for privacy, withdrew to stand at a distance at the wall.

He pulled his chair very close to Rao. “You brought the kirkui back from the Edi Archipelago,” he said.

She raised an eyebrow. “What makes you say that?”

“Come, come,” he said. “I know you know the waters off of the southern coast of the Marid, but it is logical to assume that you know the Archipelago just as well, if not better.”

“And the Southern Island,” she said. “For the Edi count that as ours also, in our tradition.” She relented a little. “You are correct, husband of mine. The plant grows on certain remote islands in the Archipelago, and has a very small range in marshes on the western part of the Southern Island. I obtained samples from both of those places.”

“And the samples are safe,” he said, a question.

“Oh yes. Ter’ Haorai and Elsano are working with Nejeri of the palace gardeners, who is sworn to secrecy. Rajeno is overseeing the security of the operation,” she added. “And she has assigned Dvari to it, so I have full confidence that everything will be safe until it is time to fully reestablish the kirkui in the Marid.”

“Where are they?”

“In the seaward suite, in planters,” she said with a smile. “It was Dvari’s idea, well ahead of the storm season. It turns out he has a way with the plants, even more so than Nejeri.” *She has assembled a cabal — a secret kirkui cabal — right under my nose.*

He chuckled. “Who knew that silent Dvari would be good with plants?”

“The Marid is full of mysteries,” she said solemnly, earning another chuckle from him.

“If all goes well, you will need to transplant them somewhere else,” he said.

“Where do you intent to establish them?”

“The Sungeni Isles,” Rao replied. “Ter’ Haorai wants to restore the production of the glaze to its traditional place. We shall have to bring nand’ Siodi into the project soon.”

“Yes,” he said. Something occurred to him then. “Your Grandmother will not be happy to know that we have revived the glaze from plants you obtained from lands she considers to be hers. Will she claim a debt owed to the Edi, if she were to learn of it?”

“She may try, but I owed the Marid an acceptable dowry,” Rao said. “All debts are paid. And because of what she did, she has no claim to the Marid through me.”

“And the conference, the report, the proposal — was this all your attempt to provide full legal protection to the glaze?”

“In part, yes,” she said. “But you must understand that the masters’ proposal was not my doing.”

“You had to have had some part in it,” he said. “They would have in no ways come up with this on their own, storm or no storm.”

“I asked questions, husband of mine, and they listened — because I am so new to them, because you married me, because of the Blue. That is all I did. *They* did the work.”

“That is *all* you did?” *I have a hard time believing it.*

“Yes. I asked them why they felt what they felt, and they discovered they all had common cause. I asked them what they wanted and why, and they discovered that they had common needs. Then I asked them how they could make the future they desired.

They discovered they had a common vision. And then they wrote that document.” She smiled, eyes twinkling. “Sometimes the best answers simply want for the right questions.”

“The right questions,” he said in wonder. He sat back, once again shocked at the simplicity of it. He had meant her to take the initiative, and that she certainly had done, but in such a subversively clever way. *She finessed them — into consensus!* “You are such a deliciously shocking person, Rao-ma,” he said, finally. “May you never cease being so.”

She dipped her head, looking perhaps a little smug. “I will do my best, You-ma,” she said.

He nodded to security and raised his voice a little. “Recall the staff, nadiin-ji,” he said. “We shall have more tea.” *I shall need a buffer to recover*, he thought, his mind still reeling from the masters’ proposal — he could see it all, it had fully-formed in his mind in a flash. He knew that he would presently be chasing down the report himself soon — most like, he and Gediri would read the entire thing together, pouring over those details.

When he had taken a few sips and had settled down — for now — he said, “It is an amazing revelation, daja-ma, but I must admit to a certain disappointment.”

She blinked, the tea cup paused halfway to her lips. “Disappointment? I thought you were pleased?”

“I was pleased with the proposal. But I had been hoping for news. Of a more personal nature.”

“Ah,” she said. “I see.” She slowly sipped at her tea and then, after a suspiciously excruciating silence, she finally spoke. “Well, perhaps I can please you there as well.” The light in her eyes danced, belying her carefully innocent expression, as watched him over the edge of her cup. “Yes,” she said, as she saw that he understood what she meant. She lowered the cup at the widening of his eyes and allowed herself a smile. “Nand’ Juien confirmed it this morning.”

Thunderstruck again! He only managed to get out a startled, “when —” before his words failed him.

“Late autumn, or thereabouts, if all goes well.”

*She is not innocent, she is wicked! And not alone in her wickedness either!* He leaned back and eyed Tema and Rajeno, posted on the wall, their own expressions arranged in what he now knew to be not innocence, but outright *machimi*.

“They know,” Rao said, confirming his suspicions. “They and the staff are aware of nand’ Juien’s visit.”

“They kept it secret from me,” he observed, not sure whether he should feel outraged.

“We—” the collective *we* “—wanted it to be a surprise.”

Counting her departure from the palace and her subsequent return, this was the *third* conspiracy between his wife and palace personnel. *And what a fortunate third.* “How often do you intend to inspire the staff to deceit, wife of mine?” He asked her, raising an eyebrow.

“As often as suits me, husband of mine,” she smiled. “In the future, though, I do not intend to deceive you on major matters or or ask the staff to do so on my behalf. I

will remain honest with you, as is tena. But this seemed to be a good exception to that policy. I should like to delight you, on occasions, with small revelations.”

“This is by no means a *small* revelation,” he pointed out.

“Perhaps not,” she said, smug again.

## Chapter 46 - Inauguration

The mid-winter assembly was not only a Festivity but was also one of the major meetings of the Marid tashrid, all the lords traveling to Tanaja to take their places in the legislature and work out laws, to provide reports of their own successes and concerns, and to request support — funding, usually — for their own plans, and then furiously bicker amongst themselves as to which items of all of this should be advanced to the small council's agenda.

Much of the time was spent arguing about candidates to take the lordship of Dojisigi. As far as Machigi was concerned, the only persons who *wanted* it thereby proved themselves mentally unstable, and there were not many of those. The tashrid at least managed to make a catalog of suitable persons, including some very distant relations in families in other parts of the continent — *they would have to be distant indeed to consider it* — but they had managed to find some names of which he himself was not already aware, which was an unexpected surprise. *Something useful has occurred.*

It was, in fact, not common at all for him to be present at these convenings: usually, he received all of this through the aforementioned small council agenda, working through a checklist of the tashrid's priorities with his ministers when not addressing their own concerns. So that he was actually here, sitting in a chair in the Hall of Lords with his chin on his fist and listening, threw some of the lords off-balance, encouraged others to boldness, and inspired most of them to shoot anxious glances in his direction.

Yes, he thought. *What am I up to?*

Renjero, a lord of the Samiusi sept of the Taisigi and closest of the coastal Marid to Ashidama Bay, moved to the speaker's rostrum. It was built of wood, a raised dais curved to face the assembly in the shape of a ship's bow, with a carved prow inlaid with iridescent shell and the bones of creatures of the sea. "Incursions by Hurshina Shipping continue into Teji district, nandiin — just this past month, the reeve of the port at Nemaji uncovered a plot to infiltrate the customs office. It is an outrage — an outrage I say!" Unlike the similar chamber in Shejidan, which had a podium, the Marid's rostrum allowed the speaker to move. And unlike the ashidi'tat protocol of calm and impassive speech, the tradition in the aishihai'mar tended to run to machimi — Renjero was more animated than any speaker in Shejidan would have been. And Renjero certainly was animated. *It keeps the assembly awake.* "Where there is one agent, surely there are nineteen more! One shall find them! One requests the solidarity of the lords — one requests that this hallowed Hall petition the council for the use of the navy. Let us take up their agents and return them to Jorida — by gunship!" Although there certainly was a reaction among the lords — with many a "hear hear!" and general piratical commotion — Machigi was not convinced that he would see it on the council's agenda any time soon. But it bothered him nonetheless.

*There may be some means to act in a somewhat less expansive way, he thought. Some way to better finesse the situation. Perhaps I should engage the paidhi as my personal representative and send him to Jorida. He has a way of cutting to the core of a matter — a kind of Assassin, that one, only he uses words instead of knives.*



Thinking of the paidhi served as a reminder to Machigi: *I still do not know the origin of the remote-control technology used in the attempt on my and the aiji-dowager's lives. Has the paidhi-aiji learned anything? I must write him.* It was, in the scheme of things he was worrying about, a small matter. *But things that seem small at the outset have a way of becoming oversized if left neglected too long.*

Lord Renjero's complaint was the last item of old business on the tashrid's agenda. The chamber's clerk rang the chamber's great brass bell and the deep tone shivered throughout the room, concluding that portion of the session and announcing the start of the next: new business.

As the last echoes of the bell's peal faded to silence, Machigi rose and made his way into the speaker's rostrum, instantly assuring him of the rapt and altogether *attentive* focus of the assemblage.

"A pronouncement," he announced. "We know that many of you have been opposed to the entry of the aishidi'tat's Guilds into the Marid, and we understand it — we understand that they are fundamentally different from those Guilds that have established, since their founding in the aishihai'mar, a distinctly *Maridi* way of working. You are uneasy about these newcomers. You are suspicious of their centralized operation, especially because that center is *there* instead of *here*. We hear you."

For the moment, he stood still at the point of the rostrum, his hands resting lightly on the prow, letting his very stillness, counterpoint to the previous speaker's activity, retain their attention.

"The events of the last two years have shaken even those Guilds' understanding of how the world may work. The Shejidan Assassins' Guild — the *legitimate* Guild — has shifted its way of operations to recognize the importance of local expertise. That Guild has honored this philosophy with the Marid, and we expect other Guilds who wish to operate here to honor that philosophy as well. We expect them — we *require* them — to do their work — *which we need, nandiin* — on *our* terms, with *our* insight, and with *our* people. They have brought new ways of thinking into the aishihai'mar, it is true, but so to have the people of the Marid have carried our skills and ways and thought into the hearts of all corners of the aishidi'tat. And we have much to offer, for which the rest of the continent is willing to pay, to our success and prosperity and increase.

"With the return of the Sungeni Blue, understand there is rampant speculation and fears that there will be a crash in the value of historic pieces. This is nonsense, we say!" He punched his fist into the rostrum's elaborate railing once, for emphasis. "The historic pieces will be *more* valuable for their age, we assure you!"

"But you and your artisans have *also* told us that you fear the glaze itself will be stolen and that *thereby* the new pieces will be made common and *this* is not nonsense — not for the Blue, and not for any other of the Marid's unique crafts, of which there are many.

"Therefore, because the aishihai'mar's singular traditions must be protected, and its artisans and master crafters supported and developed and given collective power, we hereby constitutes the Artisan's Guild of the Marid, a *united* Guild, under the sponsorship of the aijinate. Through the government's patronage of the Guild, exports and pricing will be protected and regulated. Membership in the Guild will by no means be mandatory, but government support will be prioritized to members of the Guild. Each subspecialty will retain control over the training of its students, but the overall

process will be regularized according to the recommendations of its collective masters. The Guild will have its own seal, and its masters their own registered marks, to guarantee their works as genuine, with heavy penalty assessed for anyone seeking to forge any of these marks.” He turned his whole body towards the wall that separated the chamber from the palace garden and simply *looked* in that direction, and when he turned back to the lords, he caught some of them still in the act of staring at the wall — but seeing something else, he was sure.

“Our heritage will be protected. And also our history! We are well aware of the ongoing looting of the Southern Island. As the birthplace of the culture of the aishihai’mar, it too will be under the Marid’s protection. The Guild will have an investigatory office, and we will grant it the authority to file Intent on those who seek to strip the Marid of its historic treasures.” Through the Ministry of Information, he knew that some of those lords had made a fair amount of profit from this trade, and he was not surprised to see certain faces fail to still their reaction to the news. He stifled a smile, in fact, thinking how much *more* they would react once they found out who it was he had placed in charge of that office.

*Kaordi, the Minister of Information, brought to his attention the renewed activities of an old associate of Machigi’s in Koperna — one Paigiti by name, legitimate owner of the very legal Paigiti Shipping, but those fingers had dipped into many other enterprises — questionable enterprises — indeed. Machigi had given the old man a pardon not long ago, but it seemed that the opportunities manifest in the Marid’s rapid recent economic growth had been too much for him to ignore, and he had thusly come to Information’s attention. And so Machigi sent for the associate of his wilder days, and Paigiti came to Tanaja by the new rail link.*

*And he was not a happy man, once Machigi had told him of his plans to curtail the illegal trade in antiques. “You’ll be the end of my business if you look too hard,” Paigiti complained.*

*Machigi raised an eyebrow. “Are you telling me that the success of your bottom line depends on looting the ancient sites?”*

*The man leaned back. “Am I useful to you, boy?” He demanded in lieu of an answer — only Paigiti could get away with saying that to him, and only in private.*

*“Indeed you are, Giti-sa,” Machigi said.*

*“My usefulness to you depends on you not asking those kinds of questions,” Paigiti said.*

*“Hm,” said Machigi. Then, “Are your associates that good at it, then?”*

*Paigiti did not answer, but his extremely unhappy expression spoke for him well enough.*

*“Not your associates,” Machigi said, making the connection. “Your son. The one the paidhi’s agreement brought back to you safely from the north.” Paigiti had sent his son out of the Marid, to keep him safe while his father engaged in chancy association with Tiajo of the Dojisigi. It was Machigi’s and the paidhi’s protection that had kept Paigiti’s son safe, and Paigiti safely disengaged from the Dojisigi, until Tiajo had been removed. That Paigiti now involved his son in criminal activities was outrageous, but completely in character for the old reprobate. A clever way to circumvent post-pardon expectations, Machigi thought. Hand over the shadowy side of the business to your son.*

If the son is anything like the father... *“How much of it does he handle?” Machigi asked.*

*Paigiti remained stonily silent.*

*“That much, eh, old man?”*

*Paigiti ground his teeth. “Didn’t I just say —”*

*“Because a person who is that knowledgeable about the ways and means and the people involved in such operations could be useful to the Guild. Such a person could be elevated as a master in its enforcement arm, working with the Guild and Ministry of Information.”*

*“Still trying to make me honest, are you, boy?” Paigiti said. He leaned forward. “I hear the Dojisigi need a lord.”*

*Machigi laughed. “Your usefulness to me — and now your son’s — also depend on you both remaining alive, Giti-sa. No, old associate, aim somewhat lower for now. But it would not be impossible to think of such things when the Dojisigin Marid is truly settled — and when you are. A master of the Guild could marry into what remains of that family and stake a claim, and perhaps even be elevated to lordship — in time. So long as that person were stable, intelligent, and above all sane, I would likely support it.”*

*“The Ministry of Information, you say?” Paigiti said, considering.*

*“Yes,” said Machigi. “I would not take it amiss if profitable information came your way through your son’s service, so long as you both remained discreet and curtailed your greed. Do you think the two of you can manage that?”*

*“As long as you’re willing to be flexible about the meaning of ‘settled’, and the meaning of ‘greed’.”*

*“As long as it serves the state, Giti-sa, I am open to negotiation.”*

There was more to say. “This version of the Artisans’ Guild — our version — is to be a uniquely *Marid* Guild. The Marid has welcomed the outside Guilds into our lands — let the other parts of the Association now apply for branches of the Marid Guild to be established in *theirs*.

“I elevate Haroai-tera as first Guildmaster, to oversee invitations to the association’s known craft masters to join and organize into a formal structure of apprenticeship, assessment, and recognition of mastery. When that has been established, ey will publish its recognized list of masters and direct the Guild to open its doors to applicants for apprenticeship.

“The establishment of such a Guild being so important, but the governance of the Marid as a whole requiring our undivided attention, we delegate oversight to the establishment, function, and expansion of the Artisans’ Guild to the aiji-consort, whom we name Guild-aiji. Lest anyone person be so foolish as to question whether her origin makes her unsuitable to an organization dedicated to the association’s artistic heritage,” he added sternly as a sussurrus of noise that attempted to build among the Lords. “Be you reminded, nandiin, that it was she who rediscovered the source of the Sungeni Blue glaze and who, with Haorai, restored this color — none like it anywhere in the whole world — to the Marid. There are *no other people* more suited to this endeavor,” he said firmly, and the hall fell into silence.

“Nandiin, the state looks forward to your support of the master artisans who, for the benefit of the whole Marid, will be invited into the Guild, so that the current number of one Guild-aiji plus one Guild-aiji may be immediately even more felicitous with an expanded Council of Nine.

“With regard to the Sungeni Blue: it will be limited and protected, under the auspices of the Marid Artisans’ Guild with the full backing of the state. The plants that form the source of the glaze will be restored to the Sungeni Isles and Lusi clan, as it was in the past, is proper to be again today, and will stretch into the future. We appoint Lord Telani to liaise with the Guild for full restoration of the industry there.”

Lord Telani rose in his seat and bowed into the instant attention of the Marid’s other lords. Machigi had met with him prior to the convening to inform of the plan and his part in it, but it was still patently clear — by the ashen paleness of his complexion — of how enormously overwhelming the man found this assignment. Conscious of everyone’s eyes on him, Telani bowed a second time and retook his seat.

Machigi knocked his knuckles against the rostrum’s bowsprit a fortunate three times, recapturing the attention of the assembly. “Nandiin, I know that some of you may feel that this is unimportant, as skillful and proud and ancient the tradition of artistry in the Marid may be. You may think that we spend an unnecessary amount of time worrying about porcelain when we should be focused on the development of the aishihai’mar’s economy, industry, and security.”

There was murmuring at that — he was not surprised to see agreement in the faces of his lords, especially the ones who did not have deeply-engrained traditions of artistry in their own lands. *What would an Artisans’ Guild do for us?* He knew it was what they were asking. “It serves as a model, nandiin, of the ways that the Marid might incorporate the benefits of the other Guilds without losing our ways and traditions, our essential *sense of self*,” he told them. “Think on it, nandiin: the masters of the Marid are not limited to artisans, no — every clan of the Marid has its masters in all manner of trades and crafts. These masters have driven every thing that the people of the Marid have reaped and mined and made — it is an educational system, *our educational system*, a system that has been in place for a thousand years and more!”

He could hear a deep muttering amongst the assembly as began to see what he was saying, as they began to understand that he was talking about more than the makers of collectables — he was talking about *every major industry* in the entire Marid.

He raised his voice to cut through the noise. “And yet now the Guilds come and say that they will teach us their ways, and ask us to trust that they will work better for the Marid. Should the Marid, we ask you, change that system now to conform to the ways of the North?”

“No!” Several voices shouted back, amidst the rising clamor.

“We agree!” He shouted back, pacing the rostrum’s floor as he would the deck of a ship, stalking their attention, feeling the flow of *association* from his lords, as heady as any drug. *You want to know how far I will go, nandiin*, he thought. *Let me tell you.* “Our system *works*, nandiin, as has become obvious to anyone seeing the trade the Marid has increased to the East — *that* change we have weathered — over *that* change, we have mastered, over *that* change, we have triumphed. We have mastered the Belt of Storms! Let our new Guild serve as a model and *preserve that system* — let the other Guilds come and bring us the benefit of development that we *need to thrive*, nandiin,

but let them fit *themselves* to the Maridi mold. We will not lose our way — they will walk *ours*!”

The lords of the Marid roared at him, he could see the understanding on their faces. Perhaps there were a few malcontents, but for the rest — *I have them by their souls*, he exulted.

“We recognize that not only the lords the strength of the Marid, but so too are the masters. We are resolved not only to preserve the masters of the Marid, but to set that system in stony permanence. Therefore, I make this second proclamation: that the Council of Ministers, working with the Artisans Guild and with delegates from all the trades and crafts of the Marid, develop a system to allow the professions and guilds to name their masters to the full legal recognition of the government. The council will submit this system to the committees of you Lords, nandiin, for consultation, refinement, and ratification. And once we have accepted it, the trades and crafts and Guilds will then so choose that body of masters, whom the state shall recognize as their representatives.”

That word — *representatives* — ran through the lords like a shock. He seized their sudden silence and forged forward relentlessly.

“And now for my third proclamation: the second chamber of this legislature stands empty and waiting. But we tell you now, nandiin — the Marid will have no hasdrawad. Instead, it will have a Hall of Masters, and it is this *terijad* who will sit in the second chamber of the legislature. They will regulate the education and management of the professions, and advise the tashrid when it crafts laws to protect and sustain the economic life of the Marid, and which, if accepted, we will enforce. In this way, a balance between the *felicitous three elements of governance* — the tashrid, the terijad, and the council — will be finally established in the aishihai’mar, long may it prosper. Let these proclamations be published throughout the Marid, so that all may see and hear and understand them.”

And with that, he simply departed, leaving an absolute uproar behind him, as all the lords surged to their feet in a cacophony of shouting.

But it was an astonished uproar, an astounded uproar, a chaotic uproar of shocked reaction, but it sounded like *approval*. He was behind a double set of doors by the time he made his way to the stairs that led to the underground connection to the palace, and he could *still* hear them — he could hear that they were already arguing, but about what they were going *with* this new branch of the government, as opposed to arguing *against* it.

*It will serve.* It was done.

## Chapter 47 - Reflection

Bren's brother Toby and his companion Barb — *or first mate, or common-law wife, or...I'm still not quite sure* — were making one of their uncommon visits to Najida. Bren suspected that it was not entirely because either of them missed him and wanted to catch up. No, Bren thought that it was far more likely that they were here to gather intelligence — the news of the happenings in the Marid were making waves, even as far afield as the human settlement on Mospheira, and he knew they wanted to know about it. In addition to sometimes serving as a spy for Shawn Tyers, the President of Mospheira, Toby had also periodically run some trade and exchange of his own across the Strait. This was a cross-species activity that had lately become more tolerated so in short, the changes in the Marid represented a business opportunity, potentially opening up a whole new stretch of the coastline where they hadn't been before — *for the less clandestine side of their operations, at least* — and Toby and Barb were here to figure out how to make it work for them.

Bren and his brother sat in the dining room of his house, the Township and shoreline of Najida visible from the windows, with Toby's big sailboat *Better Days* securely at anchor beside his own *Jaishan*. They each had a glass of juice-and-vodka and each other's company — though an infelicity of two, the staff had come to understand that humans had a different, entirely alien concept of twos, dualities, polarity...they intellectually understood, though of course could not *feel*, that humans felt comfortable in twos. Najida's staff would have *felt* better, perhaps, if Barb had been there, but she was down in the Township proper, shopping — *please God may she not cause another scandal in the dressmaker's shop!*

At that thought, Bren scolded himself. It had been two years and more since that had happened, and Barb knew better now. *Please God may be she remember!* And he sighed at himself anew.

"I thought the aishidi'tat already *had* an Artisans' Guild," Toby was asking him.

"They do, but this is different. The Guild in the north and west is really more like a federation of smaller guilds. Machigi's made one that is centralized, and more directly supported by the state."

"The state," said Toby. "I thought that the Marid was part of the aishidi'tat."

"It is," Bren said. "Machigi has five votes in the tashrid. But he's trying to become a power like Ilisidi is — a lord of his region from the perspective of the aishidi'tat, but an aiji — *the aiji* — within it."

"Huh. How does a guild of artists help this? I mean, I could see if it were the *Assassins*, but surely there's more power to be had in practical trade goods than artistic stuff. Copper, iron, fish, large-scale industry, those sorts of commodities."

"You're not wrong," Bren said. "What this is is an extremely clever foot in the door." He leaned forward. "Look. Historically speaking, the Marid has been a mess. It's *traditional*, which is a way to say it's *backwards*. Of all the Guilds on the mainland, they really only had the Assassins and Transportation. For everything else, they've been stuck in a decentralized Age of Steam."

"With wooden, sail-powered ships."

"With wooden, sail-powered ships," Bren agreed. "Though they *have* spent the last year or so building all-metal ships from Archive designs. But still, you understand

that the Marid *needs* the other Guilds. It desperately needs communication, education, medicine, computerized industry — all the things that the Guilds in the north have embraced. The Marid needs all of this, but it's all still *foreign* to the ways that the people of the Marid know. Having them come in is going to be a tremendous amount of change, and we all know what happens when change happens *too fast*. So Machigi is using this new Artisans' Guild as a way to exert control over the *other Guilds*," he said. "Once the Artisans' Guild is strongly established, it'll serve as a template for how he wants the other Guilds that want entry to the Marid to operate, and he'll be able to do it in a way that interfaces better with the Marid."

"How much are the other Guilds going to respect this?" Toby said.

"Normally, they'd probably ignore it, for the reasons you mention," Bren said. "Artistic pieces are the provenance of wealthy collectors, for all that they might bring pride to a region, so they're not usually the thing that will move economies. And that's what would get the Guilds' attention. But the restoration of the Sungeni Blue glaze has changed everything. It's captured people's imagination, and there's a power in that — Machigi knows he can use it, if he acts swiftly."

"Swiftly? Isn't that going to be change happening too fast?"

"Well, no, because what he's done is simply moved around pieces that were already in place in the Marid, in a Maridi way. For example, there are very few schools as you or I know them in the Marid. If people are noble or rich, they have tutors. If they're not, they either learn their parents' trade, or they're apprenticed to a master. The region has always had a very strong element of masters in their trades, crafts, and arts. So when he established the terijad — the Hall of Masters — he was simply making use of a system that was already in place, that everyone in the Marid understood, and that had worked very well for hundreds and hundreds of years. It was not so much of a change, it was a *shift*."

"Whereas a body of elected commoners would have been a *change*," Toby said.

"Exactly. It's brilliant. And to bring the Artisans back into this, it goes even deeper. The populace of the Marid is largely illiterate, even the Masters — they learn by *doing*, see? And in establishing the terijad, Machigi is trying to do something that's impossible without written records. Governance needs record-keeping, but it'll be generations before the Scholars are well-established enough to achieve wide-spread literacy."

"So he would have to import clerks — more outsiders, right?" Toby asked.

"That would be the *obvious* solution, and his lords wouldn't stand for it. But most of the Masters do have at least one assistant who can read and keep books, though — because they have businesses to run. So Machigi is using the Artisans' Guild to create an interim system of documentation, using these Marid-born assistants in rotating periods of service. One day, those assistants will be the masters themselves, and by then they will all have had extensive experience in government because they've been assisting the terijad."

"It sounds like the people who sit in this new chamber will have a great deal of experience and expertise, being masters of their trades," Toby said. "How does the hasdrawad compare?"

"Well, I suspect it'll be fairly similar," said Bren. "It's how it generally works out, because atevi value competence, and they recognize that competence comes with

experience, so the people of the aishidi'tat tend to elect those sorts of people as representatives. But I have to admit that it's not *all* that uncommon for hot-heads to get elected. The atevi may value competence, but they also favor *machimi*."

Toby snorted. "Sometimes it seems that Mospheira runs entirely on drama."

"It's one of the things our species has in common, I think: we're both wired for story, and the more outrageous, the better. So it's good to have people in charge who understand the importance of slowing things down."

"Telling stories *slower*," Toby agreed. "Yes, Shawn's done a great job at that, but he's going to need to retire soon, and when he does, things will get...interesting."

"Things are plenty interesting *now*," said Bren. "For example, I wonder if Tabini will tolerate Machigi operating so independently."

"Is that a bad thing? Doesn't that make *three* major powers on the continent, if you count Ilisidi in the East?" Toby furrowed his brows. "Wait, that would make four, counting Mospheira, wouldn't it? That's an unfortunate number."

"Very unfortunate," said Bren. "But we could always count the station. True, it's more of a joint effort between atevi and humans, but —" and here he chuckled "—you can always make the numbers mean anything if you have the right story."

"What does Ilisidi think of all of it?"

"She loves it," Bren said. "Well, you know that's the wrong word. Let's just say that she appreciates what Machigi has done, because it's exactly the same kind of thing she would have done. He found a way to bring advancement while holding strongly onto the Marid's traditions — he looked into what seemed was a fatal weakness of the Marid and found instead an overwhelming strength. Like what *she* did, when she reached out to associate with him in the first place — she looked into the Marid, with its long tradition of eating its own, and found *him*. Do you know, she's written to Machigi about the Marid Artisans' Guild setting up an office in the East and modeling a similar system there for her own master artisans? And she's proposing an exchange program by which artisans from the East and the South serve a year's residency in each other's regions."

"She wants that glaze."

"She absolutely wants that glaze."

...

"What can you tell me about the Reunioner integration?" Bren asked. "I haven't heard anything, which I'd love to take as good news, but..."

"Well, on the face of things, it *seems* to be going great. The University instituted a degree program specializing in the history of *Phoenix* spacefaring, including a whole section on the history of Reunion Station and its evacuation to Earth. Did you know that we have a Festival of Little Treasures now?"

"Little Treasures?" Bren was mystified.

Toby laughed at his expression. "The Reunioners always had shortages of things, remember? So they had a yearly event where they'd put something small and useful that they had into a box and hide it somewhere on the station. Then they'd send a riddle about its location to another household, and you'd have to figure it out and go find it. They had a whole system to make sure that every household would be randomly



assigned a single other household, and the rules were, you couldn't pick up a box you might just accidentally find — you had to find *your box* according to the clues."

Now Bren was fascinated. "Didn't people just use it as a way to get rid of junk? Or steal boxes? Or to signal status?"

"No, there was a kind of code of honor. People who tried to give away trash, or flaunt their wealth — such as it was — or steal other people's boxes would get named and shamed. I mean, it was such a small community, everyone would find out eventually, right? The challenge was that it couldn't be an expensive thing — it had to be little and *useful*. Something that would really help someone else survive. And it was a way to maintain trust."

"Because you had to trust that you were going to get something as good as you gave away," Bren said.

"Yes. Mospheira loves it, and the Reunioners love it because, by comparison to the station, Mospheira is *so unbelievably huge*, there are all kinds of places to hide these things. It gives people an excuse to get out and explore places where they've never been. I really think it's going to stick — I wouldn't surprise me if it turned into a year-round thing instead of a single festival — though I think that Mospheirians will skew it away from *useful* towards *clever and funny*, because really, by comparison to the Reunioners, have we really ever *wanted* for anything?"

"No, we haven't, not for the last hundred years or so at least. That's what we're trying to give the Reunioners — that kind of life."

"It's all for the good," Toby nodded with a smile. "So, to tie this back to your question about assimilation, brother, I'd say it's not so much *assimilation* as it is a — a *blending*, which I think that's going to make a real difference in the long run."

"I wouldn't put it against the Human Heritage people to stuff those boxes with propaganda," Bren said.

"Well, I think that the documentary on the accord with the kyo has tamped down on enthusiasm for that point of view," Toby replied.

The documentary, for which Bren had been exhaustively interviewed, had been a sensation both on Mospheira and the mainland. He had taken particular care to emphasize the difference between the ordinary residents of Reunion and the attitudes and decisions of a particular kind of mindset possessed of people like Lewis Braddock, the Reunion stationmaster. It had been that xenophobic mindset that had led to the alien kyo's attack on the station. *Because Braddock reflected the mindset of the kyo's enemies — the humans attacking them from the other side of kyo space*, Bren thought, that thing he must never admit to anyone beyond Shawn, the President of Mospheira, and Tabini, not even to his brother, for fear of the reaction it would engender in those humans on the planet — the ones who still, in their heart of hearts, harbored the fear of *other* that made them turn towards such xenophobic philosophies. *We cannot allow this kind of thinking to grow here, no matter how often it tries to take root — not here, on a planet we must share with its indigenous people, or in a wider space we must share with an entirely different species.* Toby's warning about Shawn had put a sliver of ice in his heart. *What will happen when people like me and Tabini and Ilisidi and Shawn are gone?*

But worrying about the future was not useful, not when there was so much to worry about *now*.

“Still,” Toby continued. “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. The fact that the Human Heritage types and the Cult of Braddock have been quiet makes me a little nervous, actually.”

Bren took a sip of his drink. “I tend to agree. I have a suspicion that they’re quiet on Mospheira because they’re busy elsewhere. The situation in Ashidama Bay is heating up and I can’t help but wonder if they’re getting outside help. There was that attempt on Machigi and Ilisidi — it was a suspiciously *advanced* attempt, as far as technology goes. Here’s another classified bit of information, brother: the attackers used remote-controlled technology.” He nodded as Toby’s eyes went wide. “Machigi has asked me to try to track down where that came from. So far I’ve come up with nothing, but it’s got me thinking — could there have been some human influence, trying to destabilize the agreement between the South and the East?”

“Could be,” Tony said. “God knows that if that happened, it would get Tabini’s full attention. Then other places would be in shadow by comparison, which would benefit the unsavory types. Give them room to maneuver. Like Hurshina Shipping — they’ve always struck me as being fairly shady. I think they’d be the type to fully embrace remote-control technology — for smuggling, if nothing else. And they’re practically your neighbors, so that gives me and Barb a *family* reason to go poking around.” Toby took a sip from his own glass. “We’ll look into it.”

“Be careful, Toby,” Bren said. “I know I always say it, but this is especially dicey. Whoever it was who made the attempt on Machigi also made the attempt on *Ilisidi*, so you know that both she and Tabini are going to react very strongly. It wouldn’t be the first time that bad actors have used that to try to frame a person or power they’d like to be removed, and personally, I think Tabini’s reaction the *last* time that happened, with the Dojisigi, was one of the things that set up *this* situation. Just...be careful with whatever you find out.”

“Aren’t I always?” Toby replied, as he always replied. Then, as he typically did when they started to talk about “his spy stuff”, as Bren thought of it, Toby changed the subject. “So tell me about this new consort of the Marid,” he said. “I don’t have enough Ragi to really follow the news, but I understand it’s controversial.”

“She’s Edi,” said Bren.

“Oh,” Toby said, profoundly shocked. “I can see where that would be an issue.” Toby had sailed in and around Najida Bay long enough to get to know many of the Edi living in and around the coastline, and well knew their opinion of the South. “How did *that* happen?”

“By accident, as I understand it. After the assassination attempt, Machigi’s yacht went down and he was lost at sea.”

“Was he?” Toby asked, fascinated. “That did not make the news.”

“I’m not surprised — that’s exactly the kind of that would also be classified: too operational.” Bren trusted his brother to keep quiet about the information he gave him. *That he needs to know, for his and Barb’s safety.* “At any rate, it turns out that Rao — her name is Rao, by the way — was out to sea and fished him out of the water.”

“How very romantic,” said Toby. “He wanted a coast but got a wife instead.”

*And she got the entire Marid,* Bren thought, with a little smile.

“Is it romantic, for atevi?” Toby wanted to know.

“It was *dramatic*,” Bren said. “Which serves very well for romance. Apparently they liked — excuse me, wrong word, they *avored* one another well enough.” And he grumbled to himself, remembering how much disruption that *favor* had personally caused him. *That* was a story — *a damned complaint!* — for another time, so he simply said, “he proposed to her and she accepted. It was not well received on either side. The rediscovery of the Sungeni Blue — she facilitated it, and that’s what she had to do to win the Marid’s favor.”

Toby blinked. “By restoring a glaze?”

“It’s much more than that to the people of the Marid, Toby,” said Bren. “Imagine for a minute that some person were trying to make a permanent alliance with our President, someone from the opposition, even, and no one would accept her until she proved herself. And that she did so by restoring an emotionally crucial chunk of the data archives we lost in the War of the Landing, like the video diaries of the first settlers. That’s what Rao did.”

Toby let out a low whistle. “Wow, that’s huge. Does it mean that the Edi and the Taisigi are allies now?”

“Well...no. The Edi claim that Machigi kidnapped her.”

“Is that what happened?”

“No,” Bren said. “And it tells me they don’t know her at all, if that’s what they truly think. No, Rao made the choice to go with him herself — I was there. It happened here, during a conference that Ilisidi wanted me to broker between Machigi and the Grandmothers of the Edi and the Gan. Rao was here because she was in the succession of lordship of the Edi — she was the Granddaughter, second in line.”

“Oh my god.”

“Yes. It did not go well.”

Toby pursed his lips. “The Grandmother of the Edi is furious, eh?”

“‘Furious’ does not really capture it, brother,” Bren said. “She exiled Rao at the time, and has since then ordered a complete embargo of all things Marid.”

“Surely that can’t last, not with all of the opportunities that are opening up down there,” Toby said.

“Maybe not. But I can’t see her backing down in this.”

“Even now that her granddaughter is going to be having a baby?” Toby said. The news of *that* had hit the newswires promptly.

“Well, there is hope in that, if she ever accepts that this was Rao’s decision, and doesn’t accuse Machigi of rape.” He could not stop himself from making a face. “I truly hope that doesn’t happen.” *Because she might just end up in Machigi’s garden if she does.* He sighed and made a concerted effort to turn back towards optimism. “Maybe the baby *will* make a difference, though, especially if — when, god willing — she understands her granddaughter wants this child. Babies do have an amazing effect on atevi — it’s another way they’re similar to humans, though of course for different instinctive reasons.”

“Will it have an effect on *Machigi*, is what I want to know,” said Toby.

“The baby? Maybe,” Bren said. “But I think that his wife will have more of one by far. Ilisidi thought she would be a good influence on him,” he noted. Toby, like he himself, had a good opinion of the dowager’s instincts on such matters. “Rao’s a bit wild, herself, being Edi, but the Edi are a very centered people, for all that they may still

be, ah, rough around the edges. Which oddly makes her a good match for him. But she is, at the same time, a grounded person. She's a good sailor, I'm told, and it's apparent that she's able to navigate political currents as well. Ilisidi thought that she would even out some of Machigi's wilder impulses."

"She'll be his sea anchor," Toby observed.

Bren grinned. "Exactly so." He swirled his glass and the ice in his vodka and shebai made pleasant little clinking noises. "I wonder whether being a father will settle him further. Or," and here he frowned. "Make him more ruthless, once he has a family to protect."

"Maybe you should worry more about *her*," Toby said. "What will she become, once she's a mother? Granted I have far less experience than you, brother, but the Edi have always struck me as fierce."

"Hm, good point," Bren replied. "I wonder how much of her Grandmother is in her. Both she and Machigi have adopted a rather Edi approach to her pregnancy," he added.

"Oh, how so?" Toby tilted his head.

"Well, by making a public announcement right away, for a start. Traditional mainland atevi would have waited a lot longer, but the Edi are far more outgoing — not just when it comes to celebrating pregnancy, you understand, but in *everything*. One of the reasons they've had such a challenge making their way in terms of the mainland culture is that they're *ever* so much more expressive than is generally accepted in the mainstream. In fact, the Marid is a lot like that also. I think..." and here he stopped himself from falling into a lecture about the history of the Southern Island and its impact on the Marid and Edi and Gan cultures. He could tell from the twinkle in Toby's eyes that his brother had recognized it, too, and chuckled. "Anyway, the northern and central attitudes towards these matters is much more reserved. It's a private matter, you see, and I can't help but suspect there's a lot of superstition about it also."

"They don't want to jinx it," Toby said.

"Exactly. You will recall that Damiri participated in limited state dinners and other events while she was pregnant with Cajeri and later with Seimiro, but that was fairly unusual. It had to do with the fact that she is Tabini's consort, but more because of the political issues with her family that were happening — she had to be seen.

"But there's a lot I don't know. When it comes to topics related to procreation — it's something that atevi generally aren't going to discuss with humans — even me." Bren held up his hands to forestall an improper observation from his brother about Jago. "I know! I know! But you have to understand, it's a very touchy subject, and what little I do know is *very personal thank you very much*, so I won't discuss with you." *Because I am sleeping with an Assassin and would like to continue breathing, brother.*

"So you think that Machigi has taken up his wife's Edi approach," Toby said.

"Not exactly. It think it's more than that. So many people made it plain how much they disapproved of this union. Few expected it to be successful. Most predicted ruin, both privately and openly. So I suspect that this is less about her being Edi as it is Machigi taking a certain glee in throwing their success in their detractors' faces. And, considering the source, I'm sure there is not a little personal satisfaction, at her, ah, condition," he added, taking a sip from his glass.

"He's proud of himself for knocking her up so fast," Toby translated.

The vodka absolutely made its exit through Bren's nose and — *god!* — it *burned*. Staff surged forward with surgical precision to wipe down the chair, replace the glass, offer him a handkerchief. He accepted gracefully and dabbed at his face in a vain attempt to cover his loss of composure. "Well...yes. Consider the source."

Barb returned from shopping — and no report of any incident in the township reached him, thank God. Toby went back to their suite to meet her and perhaps survey the damage to their accounts, which of course was *his* account, but for the moment, the result was that Bren was alone.

He settled down at his desk, his glass of vodka and shebai refreshed by the ever-vigilant staff, and in very short order he discovered that he was in fact not alone, and that his senior security team had a question. About language, comma, Mosphei', colon, vocabulary.

It was extremely useful to him that his aishid could follow conversations in Mosphei' that they happened to overhear. He rated their skill in Mosphei' as "enough to be dangerous" and he knew that they were always seeking to expand the boundaries of their knowledge. So he had rather expected this.

He carefully set down his glass, not wanting a repeat of the earlier incident. "To be 'knocked up', intransitive, is to be pregnant," Bren explained carefully, trying to be both technically accurate and also delicate about it. "There is, as you heard, an, ah, transitive form." *God*. "But the phrase itself in either aspect is not entirely proper. It is, ah —"

"Blunt," said Banichi. "Somewhat irreverent."

"It is an energetic metaphor," Jago suggested.

"Yes." Bren felt his face go hot. '*Energetic metaphor*'. *God*. The two of them were getting far, *far* too conversant in Mosphei' these days.

## EPILOGUE

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She was dressed in layered silks, all in deep, rich blues and muted greens and touches of the red-browns and golds of the Edi in between. A long strand of pearls and beads was wound around her waist in several passes, and draped over her belly, where a certain roundness was just beginning to take shape. Bren had seen it before and knew it for an Edi practice, for the fortune of the growing child within, and she rested a light hand there protectively.

"In my admittedly few visits to the Marid, I have never seen a pregnant woman, daja-ma," Bren noted. "And not many in Shejidan either, with the exception of the aiji-consort. Is it a duty of aiji-consorts, to be seen? It is perhaps an overly-bold question," he added. "But this is something outside of my education as paidhi and I am curious. Though I beg you tell me if it is improper, and if so I will withdraw it and beg your forgiveness."

"I do not find you overly bold, nandi," she replied. "I understand Ragi are more retiring when it comes to pregnancy and here in the Marid, the sentiment is similar. But I know you know the Edi, nandi. We celebrate the impending future, we do not hide it."

*You may be celebrating it, daja-ma,* Bren thought. *But the word I would choose for your husband runs closer to 'flaunt'.* "Perhaps, among the rest, the sentiment is not so much to *hide* as it is to *protect*," Bren, ever the conciliator, suggested.

"Just so," Rao dipped her head in acknowledgement. "That is an apt observation, paidhi. If recent history is to be any guide, I can well understand why a family might be concerned for its future."

Bren knew what she meant: the outright illegal actions of the Shadow Guild, in its effort to remove Machigi from the scene — what remnants lingered, to continue the assaults? That such things lacked finesse and brought an outraged reaction, well, outrage did not in any ways help a person who had been killed through such an action. *Or bring back a dead child.* "It is my earnest hope that the aijiin have finally put paid to that, Rao-daja." *Though I doubt it.*

"I as well, paidhi," she said. *And I think you doubt it too, daja-ma.* "And so I continue to work in the public sphere. It is important to show the people what we do, in all the ways we are capable of doing it, and how committed we are to success."

He thought, then, that the word 'flaunt' might work for her, too. "You are brave," he said admiringly.

"No," she said. "Simply confident."

It struck him that she was, that. An Edi woman, cast out by her clan for her choice of a spouse — *what a choice!* — and finding her own way among a people that had, until recently, been her people's sworn enemies. Surely she must be lonely? He did not see it, though. He had been invited to attend this conference and exhibition, the first opened to representatives of the wider world, and he had observed that the Maridi here — the nobility, the mercantile, and the artistic — genuinely seemed to hold her in high regard. Some of them, he suspected, had even given her their man'chi. *How did that work?* He wondered. All his years among the atevi, and he still did not completely understand how it was even remotely possible that there could be an exchange like this. It happened all the time in the machimi, but was never explained, and he — lacking the wiring to understand at the fundamental level the authors relied on the audience to

know — did not comprehend it. Man'chi was the key, he decided, as it always was: it would bridge any and all gaps, when it settled.

But what about hers? She was an aiji also, he reminded himself. What did *she* feel? Was it, as he suspected, a *separate* emotional bond, one unique to ajiin? *Can an aiji feel that not just for a person, but for a place, or for a people? Is that what binds them as tightly to those who follow them, as man'chi binds their followers to them?*

And yet he thought she must feel something for the loss of her own Edi people. *Can whatever she feels possibly make up for that?* “I hope this impending felicity will offer you an opportunity to reconnect with the land of your birth,” Bren offered. “One feels that you could provide valuable wisdom the Edi, even to the Grandmother. They are so new to lordship in the Western style and I cannot help but observe that you have taken to it superbly.”

Rao chuckled. “My husband is correct: you are a flatterer, paidhi.”

“But am I wrong, Rao-daja? One is always willing to be wrong.”

“It is not for me to say,” she replied. “Perhaps you are correct, but only time will show whether I have been effective. As for the Edi, I think not. I sent my Grandmother a cup, nand' paidhi, of the Ujae Blue with Edi patterning. Not *the* cup,” she smiled a little. “But one ter' Haorai and I made for her bespoke.”

Bren blinked. He knew what a breathtaking gesture that was.

“She sent it back, broken into two pieces,” Rao said.

He could not help but suck dismayed air through his teeth — what a breathtaking gesture *that* was, also. “I regret it so extremely, nandi,” was all he could manage.

“I ask that you do not mention it to my husband, nand' paidhi,” Rao said. “If he knew, he would take...grave offense.”

The word “grave” did not have the same multiple meanings in Ragi as it did in Mosphei', but Bren thought of it anyway. “I will keep it in confidence, nandi,” he told her.

Rao gave a soft sigh. “Too much unfortunate history has become one with the bones of my Grandmother,” she said. “They are hard, old bones. And although they have in their hardness served the Edi well in the past, I do not think they will give for me now. Perhaps when the Mother becomes Grandmother. Until then, and maybe until the end of my days, this will be my place.”

“But perhaps the Grandmother's bones may soften because of the child,” Bren suggested. “Surely a great-grandchild is someone to bridge the gap.”

“My Grandmother has many grandchildren, paidhi, and many more great-grandchildren. She has no need to be eager to know this child, or any child of ours.”

“Because the father is a beast,” Bren dared to say it, *vakhe'in*.

“Yes,” Rao said. “He is that. Beast. Liar. Tyrant. But he is also the strongest person I know. He carries the weight of the whole Marid on his shoulders, paidhi. He is the lodestone towards which the whole Marid turns. He has forged together all the different pieces of it, blown apart by the foolish pride and self-glory of preceding generations, into a collective,” she said, using that ancient word for the fortuitous, harmonic whole. For a moment, she and Bren watched Machigi, who was speaking softly and earnestly with Beskano, the Hagrani sept lord and Prithani, the new Master of Steel. Beskano was as well into her elder years as Prithani and both of them listened to their aiji with half-bowed heads, expressions respectful, leaning ever so slightly towards

the much younger man. Even though, being human, he could not feel it, Bren knew that the atevi could. For him, it was those postures that showed, more eloquently than words could say, whither their man'chi pointed, so that a human could literally see it.

Then she said, "When he is ready to lay down that burden, we must ensure that others are able to take it up in that same unity. The whole Marid must be preserved."

He thought back to his conversation with his brother, about his worries for the future. "Through the heir?" *I will have no heir — of my body, at least.*

She smiled, giving her belly a gentle pat. "Perhaps. Through this child, or through another, or through someone else entirely. It does not matter, so long as whoever it is, they have the soul of the Marid."

He regarded her, surprised. "Rao-daja, forgive me. But I am surprised to hear such a sentiment from you. Regardless of your status with your people now, the previous enmity between the Edi and the Marid must have been a part of your upbringing, is it not?"

"To be sure, nand' paidhi," Rao replied. "But however my upbringing may be my foundation, it is no ways my ceiling."

He caught his breath, astonished. *I believe it. But what do you feel? What drives you so inexorably?* He knew he would never truly understand it — he wasn't wired to. But he still felt compelled to ask. "How could this place have won such regard in you, daja-ma?"

She smiled again. "How could I not hold the Marid in special regard, paidhi? It fashioned my husband. And it is where the kelikiin flock."

*Extraordinary. How is this not love?* He could not help be touched, or to feel those all-too human feelings, that yearning for connection between their species. He *liked* her, loved her even, in the way that he loved Ilisidi: he loved them both for the fierce regard they had for all the living things in the world and their determination to make there own way whatever the cost. The idea that there were those who wanted to cut short people like this hurt his heart. "I worry that they are still out there, Rao-daja," Bren said.

"They, paidhi?"

"The ones who actually built the boat that started all of this," he said. "We have not yet tracked down how that technology made it to the Marid. I worry that they will come after you and your children."

"They will have more than our family to deal with if they do, nand' paidhi. Chance and fortune," she said in Ragi. And then, in Edi: "It will be well."

- *fin* -