

GOING DOWN

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“You can come inside now. She’s gone home.”

Einan drew in a deep breath of the humid night air before he turned to face his boss, framed in the kitchen’s doorway. “Sorry. I...I just forgot. I tried to calm her down and it—”

Lano waved away his apology. “Forget it. I told Jaril twice already to knock off the temper ‘round you, but she...well, you know. She just gets riled and then it’s duck and cover for everyone.”

Einan had to grin. “Yeah.”

It hadn’t been funny at the time, though. Jaril stomping through the kitchen, throwing down plates and cutlery every which way and cursing over some customer bitching at her about an order, had scraped saw-edged teeth on his talent. Automatically, he’d reached out to soak away some of her anger, forgetting that was the very last thing he could or should do any more—the shock to his empathy had sent him reeling. He’d had to bolt outside before he puked all over Lano’s kitchen.

“Biene ‘n me can finish up, if’n you like. You been working like one of them machines they build in the factories up in Nordat. You get your supper and hit the sack.”

Einan followed Lano back into the kitchen. There were a few dishes, a couple of saucepans left to be done, but he felt so jangly and nauseous....

“Are you sure? I don’t mind—”

“Nah. Figure I owe it for inflicting our girl on you. There’s still some stew if’n you want something hot.”

“Just some bread.” The idea of food made Einan’s stomach roil queasily. “Any of those herb rolls left?”

“In the breadbin.” As Einan slung his apron on the hook, Lano touched his arm. *You get some sleep, you hear? Them dark circles under your eyes are blacker than my frying pans.*

Einan gently brushed away Lano's hand. "I'll try, boss. 'Night."

"Take the blessed bread, for holy Nardi's sake."

Einan made a sarcastic bow, hands together, saluting the god of bounty, but he doubted Nardi gave much of a shit whether he ate supper or not. He grabbed a couple of rolls out of the bin as he passed, just to keep Lano off his back. Who knew, he might even eat them, if he washed them down with some giazo later.

He only lit up after he cleared the yard. Lano was pretty easy going but he disapproved of jetka weed, and there was no point in poking him just because.

The cool smoke kissed his throat. Slowly the click-scratch-chatter of dozens of souls and their troubled feelings, eased back. Not quite to silence, but enough so he could relax his control. His talent felt battered, fraying at the edges. Losing himself in someone else tonight had been a stupid mistake. He just couldn't do that kind of thing any more, and he knew it. He just...kept thinking he'd get better somehow. It'd been nearly a year. It wasn't getting better, and he was a fool to keep hoping it would.

He desperately needed a full night's sleep, especially before Jaril came on duty again, but tonight wouldn't be that night. He'd have to make do with weed and booze, and maybe one of his carefully hoarded pills. He'd only taken five since he'd arrived in Kundo. One day the hospital would stop dishing them out and he'd only have what he'd saved for the very worst nights. He'd manage without, tonight.

The scent of rust, motor lubricant and decay burdened the humid air, overlaying the jaiger shit and drain stink as he walked down to dockside. Two of the sparse lamps flickered, threatening to go out. Kundo was bigger and richer than Minwal on the north coast where he'd spent almost half his life working, but 'The Bird's Nest' wasn't in the wealthy part of the city. The street lighting here was little better than in Einan's tiny two jaiger hometown on the plains.

He walked down to the water's edge. The rising tide slap-slapped against the banks, and pale shapes floated in the oily dark water. His hand shook as he lifted the smoke to take another calming drag of the weed.

Logs, bits of sail—just crap, he told himself. *Not drowned bodies.*

He stared until the drifting forms made sense, until his nausea eased down and he could unclench his hands. First time he'd come down here, he'd thrown up

as a piece of timber floated past. He was getting better, he told himself, if he could come here now and be rational. A little hand trembling was nothing. The nightmares were just as bad, but he could handle them. Or the giazos could.

When he'd faced down his terrors long enough, he turned southwards, towards the old warehouses and tenements. There were more gas and oil lamps than electric down here, pale glows showing in the windows of boarding houses and leaning wooden terraces. Here and there, indigents who skulked in the ruins of buildings, had set fires on the ground or in metal barrels, cast off crates—whatever might make a makeshift fireplace or stove. The ashy, distinct scent of burned houses settled in cool shadows, wherever moisture pooled and trapped it in the timbers and refuse. Better street and house lighting would mean fewer fires, but the comfort of the poorer folk was never much of a concern in the big city, and who cared if the shiftless burned to death?

There was no city lighting at all now, but enough from the moon and the small spill from window lamps for him to make his way along the potholed road. He walked past three men cooking something—he really didn't want to know what—over a small fire in a tin, out front of a closed down store. He resisted giving them the lecture about safe handling of open flames in an urban situation. Not his job any more. Not his concern. All he cared about was that the men's curiosity didn't turn hostile.

They were bearded and elderly, dressed in heavy, greasy coats despite the oppressive heat. A distinct smell of urine and rotten food floated around them, barely covered by the smoke and the roasting meat.

One of them raised his bottle in salute as Einan walked past. Einan reached into his pocket and found the end of his packet of weed, tossed it at the man along with an almost empty box of papers.

The guy caught it and grinned. "Thank'ee, thank'ee kindly. Want a slug?"

"No, thanks, the weed's fine." He had another full bag in his pocket. What he'd given away would give them all a few welcome puffs, or one of them a long, luxurious smoke. "Evening to you all."

They mumbled back in a friendly way, and Einan walked on, surprised a little at his gesture. He didn't have money to burn, not with the tiny invalid allowance his only income on top of bed and board at Lano's. But at least he had that bed and board. These ones didn't. "Full employment" the governors claimed. Yeah—if you weren't sick, crazy, drunk or too old to work in the factories or the docks, or too proud to beg for temple assistance. Pride might disappear in the wet season, but for now a free man's fire might offer more comfort than

temple charity and lectures.

By day, all that could be seen down at the docks were the boats and the rollo carriages, the urtibes and jaiger carts and the dockers, the traders and the revenue inspectors. But now, in the dark, there were people everywhere, sleepless and peaceless as he was, hunching over fires or lamps, scurrying about from one dark hidey-hole to another, clutching sacks of belongings in one grimy hand, and a rushlight in the other, if they had nothing better to see by.

He was the only one out for a walk, without purpose. The only one who didn't look as if he belonged here. But appearances lied. Only Lano's kindness and the scraps of Einan's sanity, divided him from the desperate men living among the litter and the ruins, the flotsam of a booming urban economy that fell through the cracks, unwanted.

A powerful gas lamp flared blue-white to his left. Were the Corps down here again? He'd heard their bells a few times over the past weeks. But it wasn't a corpsman carrying the light, but a civilian, holding it at shoulder level as he talked to two men. The guy was so tall that though the lamplight illuminated the hair of the men he spoke to, his own face was in shadow. Wearing a tabard—a temple worker, then, though Einan couldn't read the insignia. Strange he was alone. Einan had seen temple workers around Kundo a few times and they were always in teams, same as in Minwal. But he was doing what they all did—handing out food and flasks of clean water, mouth moving in prayer or lecture.

The homeless men would welcome the food, and the clean water was a bare necessity. But no one chose to live like this if they had realistic alternatives, and telling them off for using booze or weed to ease the pain, was just insulting. Einan'd had his fill of sermons from well meaning do-gooders determined to impose their values on him.

He blew a plume of smoke in the general direction of the busybody, just because, and strolled off before the man spotted him and decided to come save *him* instead. He couldn't detect any emotions from the three of them, with his talent muted right down because the jetka had him in an almost placid state, nice and numb. He should go back to his room while it lasted.

From a safe distance, he stopped and turned to look back at the temple guy. He was still talking, his companions wolfing down the food and nodding. Who knew what he was saying to them. They weren't paying much attention but probably figured it was only polite to listen, since he'd brought supper. Einan couldn't scrape up the interest to care.

The numbness wore off before he got back to his airless, stuffy room behind the restaurant stores, but now, close to midnight, the scratching of other souls had died down as their owners went to sleep.

By the light of his little kinetic lamp, he stripped off and washed his face and neck under the pump out the back, wondered if he could manage another day in his shirt or if he should break out a clean one. Still bare-chested, he went back to his tiny room, carefully leaving the door unlocked. Low ceilinged, and barely big enough for a narrow bunk bed and a shabby chest of drawers, it had been a tool and junk room until Einan had answered Lano's call for a kitchen hand.

To Einan, this bare, isolated shed was worth more than gold. He'd tried a boarding house for a few days, but other people's troubled emotions constantly scraping on his empathy had been torture. He'd fled, preferring to live on the street. Lano hadn't hesitated when he learned Einan was sleeping rough, telling him he could live on the premises in exchange for wages. Lano had given him a haven.

But his dreams followed him wherever he lay his head, and his walk hadn't brought him enough distance from his thoughts. So he split the seal on a new bottle of giazo, and gulped back some of the raw spirit, coughing at the burn. It tasted like piss, but the looseness in his bones and head was worth it. A ketiz pill washed down with it would make him mellow, smooth it all out, but he didn't need that yet.

He swallowed another mouthful of booze and wondered if he should eat. He hadn't eaten since noon. He should be hungry, but he wasn't. He pulled the squashed rolls out of his pocket. The bread's herby aroma smelled rank, and forcing himself to take a bite made him gag. He shoved the rest of it into his tin. He'd toss it out for the birds tomorrow, maybe. *More charity from the hopeless*, he thought, sneering.

He reluctantly turned off the little lamp, telling himself the door was unlocked, the river downhill with no rain forecast, and there were no hills here to slip. He was safe. No one was in danger, and no one needed him. He forced himself to think about...yeah, temple boy. Man, really. Big guy, built like a shitting urtibes. Two urtibes, stacked one on top of the other. Not the usual temple milksop. Someone made to work hard, build big—not mouth platitudes at drunks, preaching to hobos.

For once, the distraction worked. His drifting thoughts let the booze and exhaustion and the end of the weed in his system tug him down before the other demons could catch him and tear him to bloody shreds.

