

IN THE GARDENER'S SERVICE

Michèle Laframboise

Michèle Laframboise lives in Ontario, where she creates science fiction stories so compelling even non-SF readers can relate to them! To witness, her latest SF novel, *Rose du desert* (David), won a provincial literature award. Her most popular series follows a space-faring Gardeners' civilization. It includes five YA books, two graphic novels, and a flurry of short stories. This is somewhat ironic because the author admits to being a lousy gardener who sprinkles coffee grounds on her budding plants to prod them on. Her eighty-plus short stories have sprouted in several pro magazines. Even as she pens far-fetched, nut-hard SF, Michèle stays a faithful protector of natural parks. However, you might find this story's imperial preserve a tad too wild . . .

The Imperial Preserve, on the Root World

Sirius kho Delsi swam in the muddy water filling the abandoned conduit leading to Wisdom Lake, a tear-shaped pond enclosed inside the Imperial Preserve. Fingering the cracked walls in total darkness and bumping against gooey obstacles had taken longer than he expected, pushing his lungs' patience to their limits.

The hairnet pulled at his roots, a weight on his nape. The questor had had no choice but to stuff his wealth of hair inside this ugly lump, lest his seductive braids be snared by the numerous roots piercing the ancient duct he was negotiating.

Not only would Sirius die a horrible, asphyxiating death, but the alternative, slicing off the tangled braids, would deal a fatal blow to his sex appeal. You didn't grow those luxurious, knee-reaching braids in one day (except for those clods cheating with false keratin, but you could always tell the difference).

Suddenly, the constricting walls of the conduit fell away, allowing him to swim upward, until his head broke the oily surface among a crowd of water lily leaves.

Sirius sucked in lungful after grateful lungful of warm, moisture-laden air.

Great Gardener! he thought.

One more *pikrel*, and his lifeless corpse would have made a fine meal for the alien species kept in this park. He was loyal to the emperor, but not to the point of providing a free dinner for his pets.

Sirius slowed his breath, keeping his head low against the curled edges of the lilies' waxed leaves. The flowers covered most of the lake, their pearly petals shut like tiny eyeballs, their free-floating roots feeding on the suspended dirt.

He listened, his ear spread like twin radars, to capture the tiniest sounds from the forest surrounding the lake.

The chittering of countless night birds filled the sonic landscape, along with the low-toned croaks of a hopeful frog and the shrill cries of the Luurdu-imported monkeys nestling on the highest limbs of the parasol trees, their sleep disturbed by the soft padding of a larger, more dangerous inhabitant of the forest.

The less noisy, the more deadly, he thought.

Among the leafy, oily scents, his nostrils picked up the pervasive sweetness of the *llomu* that lovers liked to exchange at spring festivals. The high-maintenance, many-petaled flowers indicated the presence of a pavilion nearby.

The water felt like a cool glove around the bare skin of his arms and legs. But it was only a mild inconvenience. The clement weather of the Root World never went lower than a pleasant coolness, contrary to the Humans' blue planet, where the winters saw the life-giving water freeze into hard, unforgiving ice.

No Gardener could survive such a cold without a heated bodysuit.

Sirius regretted having to carry out this mission without the shimmering robes and silver pectoral he wore in public (along with the carefully braided hair that captured the ladies' attention), but the bulky clothes would only impair his movements. Moreover, the position chip embedded in his pectoral would light him up like a candle on a tea table.

The imperial preserve covered more than sixty-four square *sious*, protected by high barriers studded with sensors and laser mounts. Only the distinct imperial signature blimps and approved transports could fly over the expanse. A walker would need ten days to cross the entire span, provided said walker survived the resident fauna.

By luck, the waters of Wisdom Lake were filtered and drained off the preserve into the palace grounds to sustain the expensive gardens. So Sirius had used his most efficient weapon, friendly persuasion, to obtain the location of an unused maintenance hatch, and the code to open said hatch without alerting the entire palace.

As he progressed toward the shore, Sirius's night-trained eyes made out a clump of delicate stalks wearing pale funnel-shaped flowers. These flowers were coated with a thick, honeyed smell evolved to attract insects. Clouds of bugs buzzed about the deadly traps, confirming that evolution had worked well for these peculiar plants.

One of the honey-scented funnels suddenly closed, trapping the bugs inside its silky flanks. Before it had time to ingest its carbon-rich meal, the funnel flower and its immediate neighbors were crushed under the paw of the top predator, a calamity imported from a backwater planet for the pleasure of a previous emperor.

The sinuous body of a Sinju feline flowed against the shadows, its creamy flanks mottled with darker spots imitating the vegetation on its origin world, its slender limbs hiding powerful muscles grown in a higher gravity. The feline lowered a triangular head fringed with a stiff, spiny mane to lap at the lily-covered water, mere body lengths from Sirius' glistening head.

The beast's blood-smeared snout indicated that its efforts at stalking the monkeys had met with success. Its head went up, questing, nostrils sniffing, the spines of the

mane raised in a tense collar. This specimen was sated, but caution prodded Sirius to hold his breath in, lest his odor betray a new prey for the feline to play with. He counted himself lucky that the cool water masked his body heat.

At last, the predator padded away. Sirius counted a dozen heartbeats before letting his breath out. He would have to find a safer place to come out of the lake.

His was not the place to question the Supreme Gardener's motives, but . . . he couldn't refrain from asking himself what had passed under the Great Chhoani's luminous braids to raise such a bloodthirsty creature from the primeval mud, and to gift the beast with a superior sense of smell. Unless the crafty Koudriss, the god of chaos, had a hand in this peculiar creation. . . .

He glided forward in a parallel line to the shore, his head low. This errand was proving more annoying than he'd expected.

And all this for the teary eyes of a young girl. . . .

Maybe the Great Gardener would be lenient and help Sirius achieve his mission sooner than later, allowing him to wade back into the spring festival's delights. Especially that fine Bourbi wine coming from the imperial vineyard.

As he swam, his objective loomed in view: a pale-sided pavilion overlooking the lake, surrounded by the illuminated fronds of thirsty trees. Somewhere in this opulent mansion, a young, innocent flower was kept prisoner, slowly deprived of hope as the glowing trees were denied water.

Sirius was making his way among the thick lilies when the buzzing of a much larger insect drowned the other sounds.

A hovercar passed over him, the powerful repulsor jets casting water droplets in all directions. A whoosh of displaced air shook the lilies' leaves, and the water rose and fell under its wake.

Then the air vehicle dipped on its side and veered in a scream of rotors, toward Sirius. Had he been spotted?

The hovercar dove in a large arc. Its left wing grazed the surface, producing a long plume of water. Sirius had time to hear the raucous laughter and whoops of joy from the open canopy before getting splashed by the foamy wake.

The hovercar lurched up, brushed by the head of a tall parasol tree and veered toward the pavilion. Its now-tiny shape landed on the sunning terrace that protruded like a thirsty tongue from the highest building.

Sirius sputtered. He had not reckoned with a bunch of young revelers coming here to prolong the festival's frolics. He wondered if the Great Gardener, Creator of the Universe and Seeder of countless worlds, had decided to punish Sirius by making his task more demanding.

Great Chhoani! Is this the way to treat Your most faithful servant?

Two days before, at the emperor's palace

The spring festival was in full swing on the petal-shaped terraces flowing from the palace like rounded stairs, where the more prestigious families and citizens enjoyed a fabulous evening meal. Under the spicy-scented leaves of a thick-barked Bota tree, a trio of blue-robed, shorthaired musicians was playing the ballad of "The Lazy Gardener," with appropriated gusto. The pale *orunzo* wood of the wind instruments emitted a rich fragrance as the chords vibrated, telling the romance of the titular character with the Sweet Silene, daughter of Chhoani.

Under the elevated balcony where the emperor would appear to address his

guests, servers in dark brown tunics circulated among the visitors with trays filled with delicate pastries or challenging fruits. Or lumps of brown cane sugar, for the older folks who needed to spike up their flagging energy after sunset.

Both of the Root World's moons glowed like appetizing half-pies in the early evening sky. From time to time, the plump contour of a cruising airship obscured the soothing blue that would soon turn to black. Around the feast terrace, a line of small trees emitted a soft golden light, their round leaves shining from a phosphorescent reaction originally set up as a warning for the caretaker to water the roots.

A cruelty, to leave those plants thirsty, Sirius kho Delsi thought.

Resplendent in a pale blue tunic that set off the rich brown of his four heavily decorated braids, Sirius enjoyed being the focal point of a semicircle of court ladies. He picked up a fist-sized fruit from a passing tray, dispensing a grateful nod to the server whose single, unadorned braid marked a low status.

He then proceeded to demonstrate the delicate art of peeling a safe-fruit.

Their male companions could not tear their eyes off, either. While his fingers expertly worked on the rock-hard scales of the sphere, Sirius surprised a scowling glance from haughty Lar Murlon, currently rumored on the prow for a wife, either for himself or for his sons.

Sirius noticed with satisfaction that Murlon's new keratin add-ons were beginning to show, the ends of his braids turning a pale green. They were rivals, each enjoying a high level of prestige, the main currency of the Gardener's Empire.

Only high-merit guests were allowed to attend the emperor's festival address, and the preening went both ways, males shaking their luscious braids studded with achievement medals, cropped-haired females wearing rows of merit insignias on their robes. Sirius wondered what the emperor's counsel would make of their customs.

He searched the grounds for the elusive being, tall as two men, without success. The counsel, hailing from a distant world, had a knack for passing unnoticed. Maybe he—or she?—didn't share their enthusiasm for revelry.

Nevertheless, Sirius enjoyed the challenge. Each safe-fruit was unique in its scale disposition, and required a fine skill to peel it.

A chorus of *Oooh, well done!* rose when his thumb flicked off the last scale, revealing the soft, moon-yellow heart inside.

"And that, my dear Lor Emerin, is how you coax a safe-fruit to drop its defenses: by a gentle probing of the fingers, instead of resorting to violence, like your poor husband," he said, gallantly offering her the sweet juicy ball.

The husband in question glared at Sirius, his clumsy fingers pressing the poor fruit this way and that.

Lor Emerin's fair hair bloomed in a perfect half-sphere around her head, setting off her dark blue eyes. Her opulent bosom and golden belly shield engraved with leaves told Sirius she had already borne children.

"Lar Sirius, you are *sooo* talented!" she cooed. "Your wife must be delighted!"

"It is my sad duty to inform you, Lor, that I have not yet founded a family," he said, his light tone hinting that his celibate condition was of his own choosing.

Lor Emerin popped the juicy heart of the fruit between her lips, her eyes appraising the tall questor. One of the shiny insignias adorning Sirius's braids attracted her attention.

"By the tender Silene, is that a *frol* badge? They are said to be near-impossible to germinate, and much less to get their flower!"

Sirius offered her his most dazzling smile. "Oh, but I could show you one or two tricks to make it bloom."

As he wondered if the lady caught the *double-entendre*, one of his braids was yanked down, the sudden move sending a painful message to his roots.

Lor Emerin gave a shocked gasp. The other guests recoiled. Sirius surprised a mocking snarl etching the false-haired Lar Murlon's countenance.

The questor managed to keep his smile and stay upright, despite the powerful traction that threatened his balance.

"You know that pulling hair is only for little girls?" he asked, his conversational tone hiding the burning ache on his scalp.

A growling voice answered him.

"Get away from my wife, you human worshipper!"

Sirius kept his face straight.

When the first radio waves from that distant blue world reached the outer perimeter of the Empire, a lot of Gardener children had been given human-sounding names. The discovery of this new civilization had brought hope and wonder. But the sunny promises of the first contact devolved into nasty discussions, disputes, and skirmishes that escalated, until the eradication of a whole world shook the Empire to its roots.

"*Oko!*" Lor Emerin cried out. "He was talking, only talking!"

"*Tac!*" the husband replied. "And honey-talking prestigious ladies into his basket!"

The husband yanked harder. Sirius turned his face to the gilded balcony over them.

"It seems my reputation precedes me," he said, keeping his voice even. "But I would be loath to exhibit such bad manners in our lofty emperor's presence."

The half circle of ladies gasped aloud, their cropped hair swelling as they turned to cast an anxious look at the gilded balcony overlooking the garden. The hand on Sirius's braid loosened its grip.

He whirled on his sandals to face the ill-mannered husband, whose upturned eyes were still searching for the emperor's stooped silhouette. In one fluid move, his fingers connected to the hollow of the man's neck in a butterfly's touch.

The husband's eyes swirled up, and his knees buckled. Helped by a slight push from the questor's palm, he collapsed in a heap of braids and robes among the blue-lit branches of a thirsty bush, just as the ladies were turning back from the empty balcony.

Lor Emerin's eyes went wide.

"By the fair Silene! What happened?"

"Do not fear, Lor, he just stumbled," Sirius said.

A low groan coming from the leafy limbs confirmed his words.

Annoyed that the lady actually cared for this oaf, Sirius bowed down and expelled a perfunctory *May the Gardener keep you* before taking his leave.

This was neither the first nor would it be the last time the questor had to defend the integrity of his braids, or his alien-sounding name, but he was growing impatient with the emperor who had requested his presence at this feast.

Wisdom Lake shore, in the Imperial Preserve

Sirius waited like a patient gardener until silence returned, keeping himself in the deeper water. When he felt his legs grow numb, and the craving for sugar loomed large in his mind, he swam toward a bouquet of silky trees, their branches arching over the shore.

His feet struck a sandy bottom, then he emerged under the silvery leaves of a *khuimsi* tree.

Once he had grasped the nature of his mission, Sirius had memorized the plans of the vast expanse that was reserved for the sole pleasure of the first three families from which the present line of emperors descended. The Root World's temperate forests had been dangerous once, and the preserve's high walls had been erected as much to protect the last natural predators as to keep the rabble out.

A thin smile curled his lips as he pulled off his soaked undergarment dripping with smelly, nutrient-rich water.

In theory, the mighty Gardener's Empire was a meritocracy, each citizen scaling the Honor Stairs by his or her own achievements. Any candidate gathering enough prestige, as decided by the intelligent Umbrella compiling merit points, could pass the succession trials and become the ruling emperor of eight hundred worlds. The position remained valid for the rest of his life, unless a candidate with more merit challenged him.

In practice, only a handful of families could raise their offspring in the rich soil of their accumulated prestige, giving those heirs an incredible advantage. Even with more valid candidates competing for the title . . .

Sirius pushed those unproductive thoughts away as he wrung the last drops of water from the fiber, using a tad too much strength. He pulled on the moist garment. He smoothed down his hair and braided it in a single, thick cord, using a thread pattern that would shorten its spectacular length.

He made his way over and under the twisted roots anchoring the high-reaching parasol trees, their protective branches cutting the starry sky above him. The majestic trees soon gave way to shorter, cultivated trees, injected with the genetic tracer that made them glow in the dark. From the air, the light would make the estate visible to the blimp pilots.

The dry ground crackled under Sirius's foot. Those trees were clamoring for water! They were kept barely alive by sparse vaporizations from the sky, probably at first light in the morning.

However, the glow of those suffering trees prevented the questor from bumping into a solid wall, covered by a riot of fibrous *hibriss* vines. He could see the pale concrete under the tube-shaped flowers, closed for the night. A peal of laughter rose, followed by a splashing of water. The young sprouts were amusing themselves.

The barrier reached high over his head, probably to keep the meat eaters away. Sirius knew better than to grab the prickly vines to climb over the wall. Not only could he set off passive sensors linked to the vines, but his touch could cause a magnetic burst that would freeze his brain, a protection against land predators.

Sirius followed the wall, pausing occasionally to listen to the snappy cries of the monkeys. His fine-tuned ears did not detect the bubble of silence that grew around the soft padding of a feline hunter.

He stopped to offer his personal water to the roots of a very thirsty tree, its leaves glowing a fierce emerald green. The green began to dim as Sirius heaved himself over the branches to get a view of the pavilion. One thick limb arched over the top of the wall as if the Great Gardener Himself had decided to facilitate the passage of his faithful servant.

Inside the enclosure, the beautiful forest had been hacked down to make room for the typical architecture favored by opulent families, rounded pavilions linked by covered pathways into a slanted rectangle, surrounding a central area of low grass. One pavilion dominated the others, a tower sprouting from the bushes. A sundeck protruded like a tongue, from which a tinny whirring escaped. Sirius was too low to see the hovercar powering up its rotors, except for a gleaming curve as it rose up. A shorter and noisier vehicle soon replaced it.

Of course, this pleasant estate was only accessible from the sky. The perimeter was

protected by the wall, integrating an existing creek into a series of raised pools seeded with luminous algae, the red, orange, carmine, sky-blue colors offsetting the figures of the occupants. Brown-clad servants walked from one pool to the next, offering glasses of red wine made from Narrles berries.

The glow of the leaves around him was darkening, an effect of his watering the poor tree. That would make him less visible.

Advancing as a shadow over the sturdy branch, Sirius identified two sons of the high families in the red-lit pool, and took note of one brown-clad man walking away from the central pool area with a tray, toward the smaller south pavilion. Maybe the kitchen; the aroma of steamed fish reached the questor.

Sirius waited until the tray-carrying servant had passed near his position.

He studied the garden. Disciplined rows of Narrles berry tree bulbs occupied the space between the covered pathways and the outer walls. Farther away, a bed of head-sized roses were blooming, their nectar-rich heart ready to emit a fast-acting poison unless it recognized the chemical signature of its approved pollinator. (In nature, a growing mound of animal bones around the roses made them easy to identify.)

One mangy, curly tree offered soft-skinned fruits that would spell death to any who ate it.

Militaries were always the best gardeners.

He checked that portion of the garden for more venomous plants, finding none. Then he slipped from the branch, landing between two waist-high bulbs of Narrles berries. It took him only a half-pikrel to localize and disable the two flower-shaped sensors around his position.

The security surveillance system was geared to keep animals from getting inside rather than people from going outside. Sirius crouched among the hardened shells of the Narrles bush, the fermenting berries erupting from the top, dispersing their thick sugary odor. If he guessed right, he wouldn't have to wait long. . . .

Just as he thought his intuition had let him down, footsteps sounded. *Praises be to gluttony*, Sirius thought, extracting a tiny seed from his belt. The silhouette of the servant was briefly set against the kitchen's lamps, as he exited the pavilion. Instead of taking the covered path, the servant detoured for a gourmet stop by the juicy Narrles berries.

The servant cautiously lowered the wine-laden tray to the ground. As he bent his head back to gobble a bunch of small red globes, he never noticed the half-naked silhouette flowing from the narrow space of two adjacent bulbs, until Sirius's long arms snaked around his torso.

"What—"

He had no time to complete his sentence before Sirius's hard palm cut off his cry, pushing the tiny seed through his teeth. The buccal moisture woke the seed, which exploded in a puff of sour-tasting gas that filled the man's mouth.

Sirius held the servant until he sagged in his arms. He laid down the unconscious body between the rows of bulbs.

"May the gentle Silene keep you warm," he said, before pulling off the servant's coarse *mutchi* pants and vest.

Two days ago, at the emperor's court

Sirius walked to the edge of the terrace, his braids' decorations chiming softly among themselves. While the guests clustered under the imperial balcony, he de-

scended a flight of stairs leading to the lower garden, saluting the copper-armored sentinel at the foot of the stairs. His own silver engraved pectoral was studded with honorific markers, allowing him free rein of the premises.

He walked on a well-maintained patch of short *drinn* grass, each of his long strides detaching the soft-feathered blue heads that rose to drift far away in the wind and, eventually, land a long way out, taking root.

The air carried the clean, salty smell of the distant sea. The first stars were blinking on, forming familiar constellations. The questor let his eyes travel from the Reclining Lazy Gardener to Chhoani's Trowel, gliding over the Crouching Koudriss. The activity used to sooth his mood. But as he was counting the brightest stars of Silene's Basket, a soft gasp alerted him.

Under the silky leaves of a *khuimsi* tree, he spied a slim, short-haired silhouette in a pale green dress. The young girl looked like a frail-petaled *llomu*, her fingers prodding the scales of a violet fruit. He would not have given her a second thought if not for the tears trailing down her cheeks, falling over the scaled safe-fruit.

Intrigued, Sirius drew near to inquire about her sorrow.

"May the Gardener be with you," he said.

The girl raised her head in alarm and instinctively backed against the fibrous bark of the tree. Her eyes went wide as she saw Sirius approaching her, the medals sparkling on his long braids.

"Lar, pardon me!" she murmured, her eyes darting left and right.

Sirius didn't correct her about his marital state, but the dress, made of a fine silky fabric, and the row of copper and silver achievement medals on her flat chest told him she was not a hired help. He also noted the absence of the rounded shell on her firm abdomen. She *was* very young, not yet grown to soft-bellied womanhood.

The row of medals revealed an unusual talent. However, she looked afraid of something or someone, terrorized to the point he could smell the sickly sweet fear molecules emanating from her skin.

A quick look around turned up no lurking stranger. This lower garden was empty, except for them and the silken trunk of the *khuimsi* tree. String music and low chatter spilled from the stairway, indicative of many guests assembled under the balcony. The emperor had perfected the art of making himself desired. The questor should also be there, but the distress of a young girl proved a powerful magnet.

"My child, what is making you water this garden with your tears?"

The girl sniffled. And sniffled.

Sirius folded himself down to sit, so his height would not intimidate her. He waited, relieved of the weight of his braids lying among the *drinn* . . . and content not to be laden with the burden of fatherhood.

"My sister," she said, after gulping her tears. "Lami. She disappeared yesterday."

Sirius inclined his head toward the lights.

"This is the Spring Festival, child, where any girl of ripe age can go and choose her mate. Maybe . . ."

But the teen's fists slapped the short blades of *drinn* grass, sending the tufted blue heads drifting up.

"That's what the tribune told me, but Lami would never leave me! She was so proud of having been selected to play for the emperor tonight!"

"Oh," he said. "What instrument does she play?"

The young girl's eyes shone under the half-pie moons.

"The double flute. When she plays, you would think you heard a bird."

Her small hands were flowing as she talked.

"So you came here, hoping to find your sister?"

She nodded.

Sirius squinted. They were sitting close to the soft, fibrous bark. He wondered if she had hidden in the branches and waited to make a clandestine entry. The amount of prestige of anyone present would be closely monitored by the Umbrella's net of roots.

"What is your name?"

"Malli," she said. "Malli kha Sonni."

He could access the Umbrella's net with his pectoral, to check her name against the guest list, but decided against it. A chord reached him from the trio playing.

"And you?" she asked, her large eyes liquid.

He dipped his head.

"I am Sirius kho Delsi."

A stunned (and stunning) smile etched her face.

"Is Delsi your *mom's* name? It is rare for a male to filiate from his mother."

Sirius bit his lower lip.

"It's a long story," he said.

He uncrossed his legs and pushed himself up in a fluid move, offering his hand to Malli.

"We could ask the musicians about your sister."

"Oh, I already did, Lar. They waited for Lami, and she didn't show up. And the Umbrella confirms she's not at home."

"Does she currently see someone?"

She shook her short curls.

"*Oko!* Music is her sole boyfriend."

The child grew pensive, her profile promising a fine Lor later.

"At least, I thought so," she said. "There's that oaf, Dolmo kho Murlon, always strolling by, showing off his hair!"

Malli mimed the familiar gesture of a boy puffing up his capillary assets to impress a girl.

"Then maybe they eloped," Sirius said. "How did you manage to enter the palace's grounds?"

She lowered her head.

"The child got in because I allowed her," a familiar voice said, so close that Sirius felt the hair on his arms prickle.

He turned, but before he could get a clear view of the speaker, a wave of dizziness clouded his vision. It was as if a strong magnetic pulse had exploded nearby, blurring his senses. Then the sensation passed.

Sirius saw a shadow among the blue heads of the *drinn*. All the sounds spilling from the upper court had stopped.

What *was* happening?

He grabbed the tree to steady himself, hoping no one of the group of revelers would come here to gloat at the prestigious Sirius kho Delsi coping with a spell of dizziness.

But instead of meeting the soft, fibrous bark of the *Khuimsi*, his palm met the coarse coat of the emperor's counsel. He pulled his hand away as if burnt. He barely heard Malli's thin cry of surprise.

Sirius was taller than the average Gardener male, but he had to look up, and up, for his gaze to meet the multi-pupiled eyes of the counsel. The alien's legs or tentacles were invisible under the trailing hem of the rock-colored coat.

That such a towering being could sneak up behind him without him being aware of its approach was remarkable. Not even Sirius' pectoral sensors had warned him. That was a useful ability of the mysterious race from which the rock-like counsel hailed.

"The counsel is able to project his presence at will, or suppress it, so you can walk beside him without noticing his presence."

The voice came from a slender Gardener in white flowing robes standing close to the rock-like being, one delicate hand holding up a flute of deep red Bourbi wine, as in a salute. His thin symmetrical face and emerald-green eyes were arresting. His thick dark braids glittered with hundreds of insignia that were as familiar to Sirius as his own. A golden breastplate hung from his narrow shoulders.

A buzzing cloud of botflies lingered a few handspans over the man's bare head, each able to dispatch a would-be assassin. Or a too-audacious questor.

Sirius kho Delsi lowered his head, as was only proper in the exalted presence of emperor Pallan kho Chhoani, Head of the Gardener's Empire, Ruler of eight hundred worlds.

Pallan's prestige had been accounted for after the trials he and three other candidates had endured. Today, Pallan sat at the very top of the Honors Stairs, his new honorific name underlining his connection to the Great Gardener, creator of the Universe.

"Impressive," Sirius said. "A shame the counsel can't share his trick for turning invisible."

A soft hissing laugh, as Pallan twirled his flute, the fine liquid loping up and down inside capturing Sirius's eye, its rich aroma titillating his palate. He had been too busy with peeling the safe-fruit to partake of the fine, high-class Bourbi. The crest of red fronds adorning the counsel's head rippled in response.

"Oh, but he does turn me invisible," Pallan said. "My guests won't retain any memory of me passing through their midst. They are still waiting for me to appear at the balcony."

Sirius' lips curled in a tight, polite, frozen smile as the emperor took a sip. If the guests waited too long, the Bourbi wine caskets would run empty.

"I suppose you are here to ask something of me, Pallan," he said.

"What a familiar way to address your emperor! But I do allow it, because of our common history."

Because of what you owe me, Sirius completed for himself, keeping his frosty smile. *You wouldn't be lording it over eight hundred worlds without my timely help at the Trials.*

"So, what can I do to propel your prestige to new heights?" he asked.

Instead of answering, the emperor turned to the slip of a girl, still cowering in fear.

"Malli kha Sonni, your concerns have been heard. You may leave us in peace."

Still trembling, the girl bowed from the waist and slipped off through the dark blue grass. Sirius waited for her small frame to disappear before turning back to the emperor.

"Was she just a ploy to get me here? She was quite upset about her sister."

"Malli and her sister Lami are my nieces," he said. "Both are talented in the feminine arts of music, taking after my wayward sister, Sonni. Their mother perished, so I cannot refuse to help them."

Sirius caught his breath. He had known *that* Sonni a long time ago, a promising musician ravaged too soon by an infection.

"She walks the paths of Chhoani's eternal Garden," he intoned. "But then, why don't you act to get Lami back?"

Pallan drained his glass.

"Because, as you told little Malli, the Spring Festival is a free time for lovers. My sending guards to storm Lar Murlon's house would be construed as power abuse. Especially if my niece has already chosen her mate. The Murlon clan has always opposed my views, and they possess great influence, and quite a lot of prestige."

"Young Malli thinks her sister didn't go willingly."

"Indeed. Lami's talent—and her family's accumulated merit—could add a lot of prestige to the Murlon."

Enough to challenge you, Sirius thought, keeping his features as bland as he could. That's why you can't openly meddle in their backyard!

"Let me guess: you want me to make discreet inquiries because you can't."

"As I said, my hands are tied. Questor, if Lami has been coerced, do everything to get her safely back. I will make it worth your trouble."

"And what if I find out she wasn't coerced?" Sirius asked.

Pallan's clear, emerald gaze rested on a two-pronged trowel, half embedded among the *Khuimsi's* fibrous roots. A weeding tool, probably forgotten there by a distracted caretaker.

"I know you will act for the good of the Empire."

Before Sirius could respond, the garden blurred, as if seen from the other side of a wide aquarium. Suddenly, he was alone under the silken limbs and silver leaves of the *Khuimsi* tree. A storm of whistling and banging of rattles exploded from the upper garden. He guessed the hopeful revelers had had their wish granted.

Sirius trod up the stairs, wondering how far the emperor expected him to go to uphold the good of the Empire.

The Imperial Preserve, Lar Murlon's estate

Nobody took notice of the brown-garbed servant emerging from the side garden, a tray in his hands. Sirius kept his head low as he crossed the estate's grounds, hoping his thick braid would not draw attention. A sip from the fine wine carafe on his tray was tempting, but the alcohol would dull his reflexes.

The emperor had been kind enough to provide Sirius with the Umbrella access information, but the lush mansion sitting on the highest spiral of the capital had stood empty. By prodding the lone caretaker, Sirius had learned that Lar Murlon had taken his extended family to his own estate on the Imperial Preserve grounds, "for a celebration."

Sirius identified some of the family members lounging in the pools, younger cousins of varying degrees. His gaze roved under his lashes, over the opulent women attending their chosen mates in the smaller pools, braiding their moist hair strands.

His observations did not turn up a black-haired girl who looked like Malli. Nor did he find the Lami's alleged boyfriend, Dolmo, around the pools.

A soft, melodic note thrummed in the air, like the wind blowing through an open-end reed.

Sirius paused to listen. The first note died, replaced by a succession of brisk, off-key tones, going up and down the scale, a complex sonic landscape that dripped into a slow melancholic tune that Sirius recognized: the lament of the Lazy Gardener, tricked by the devious Koudriss into caring for his rock garden.

The talent of the fingers roaming the wooden tube was impossible to deny. He could envision the forlorn Gardener sitting alone, crying . . .

"Hey, you there!"

Sirius managed not to jump, but the carafe wobbled on his tray. The voice had come from a snitch-faced youngster, his sun-bronzed arms draped over the rim of the pool, his long braid stretched over the rim, probably to show off his metallic array of achievement badges.

His companion lay gaping on the opposite side of the pool, his undone hair dipping into the water, in dire need for a female servant to braid it. A smoking tube of mind-blowing *Shuban* herb hanging from a dark bin explained his current unconscious state, confirmed by the horrid breath escaping his mouth.

A woven basket of empty wine jars lay against the pool's low edge. The snitch-faced reveler proffered a crystalline glass.

"Get me more wine!"

Tulmo kho Murlon looked like a younger version of his father, minus the false hair tips, plus the easy arrogance.

Sirius obliged, depositing his tray on the pool's edge. He kept his eyes lowered, hoping the reveler would not recognize under this coarse tunic the elegant questor from the palace.

As Sirius poured the wine, he got a whiff of the rich aroma of a high-rate Bourbi, worthy of the emperor's taste. The young man emptied the glass in one long draught that made Sirius mourn the fate of the refined, lovingly aged wine.

"More," Tulmo ordered, swinging his empty glass in a wide arc that almost caught the carafe.

Sirius obliged, and witnessed the last of the refined drops going down the young man's throat.

As he turned to pick up the tray and the empty carafe, he heard a yelp of surprise and a splash of water.

"*Didja* see that snake down his back?" the Shuban-addicted cousin said, his voice garbled. "Thass quite a braid, for a servant!"

"He could sell it to repay his debts!" Tulmo concurred, with an arrogant smile on his lips.

Sirius's hands tightened on the tray.

Most hired help were indentured servants, forced to do any low work to compensate for a negative sum of merit, incurred from debts—often family debt brought on by abject poverty. But not many of the poor souls would stoop as low as cutting their hair, imitating the Lazy Gardener. Long hair was their last dignity.

So the callousness of the remark, emitted by a privileged son who would never have to contend with the dilemma, gave Sirius a burning urge to yank Tulmo's carefully done braid and punch his canines out.

"Wass say we cut it?" another inebriated reveler asked from the next pool.

In their inebriated state, none of those foolish weeds had a chance to carry out this plan. Sirius bowed and receded, choosing a path going to the main house.

"Heeey, wine cellar is th'other way, clod!" Tulmo cried out, his hand pointing to a low-thatched hut.

He turned.

"Lar Murlon had asked me to take the best Bourbi from his kitchen," he said, wrapping up the lie in an apologetic tone. "Unless you prefer to go yourself."

Offering the option to leave the warm waters prodded a lazy wave of the snitch-faced son. Then, as he noticed another domestic coming up with a food tray, he made his way to the nearest covered passage.

A few steps from the tall house, Sirius came aware the music had stopped. And had been replaced by the sound of voices. One angry, one pleading. He strained both ears to catch the conversation.

"Oko!"

A young girl's voice, covered by an adult's growling voice.

"You will comply, for the Empire! Unless . . ."

"Oko! You're hurting me!"

"If you want to keep your well-trained fingers intact, think about it."

He heard the sound of a door swishing shut. A silence, then heavy steps trod the main room floor. Sirius stepped away from the path and crouched in a clump of ferns, the lace-contoured fronds tickling his contracting ears.

A gray-haired man stomped out from the house, his onion-like robes flowing be-

hind him, his bronze pectoral glinting under the moons. Lar Murlon, his face displaying annoyance, looked at the subdued lights of the pools.

His left hand reached inside a pocket, coming out with a brown rectangle that he popped in his mouth. Sugar, to keep his waning energies up well into the night. Or to keep up with the fiery-blooded youngsters enjoying his hospitality. But it didn't protect from distraction, and the master had left the door ajar.

Inside the preserve's high walls, the estate did not need much more protection than the few measures to keep beasts away. Sirius's handheld detector did not find any alarm system.

He stole inside the house, carrying the tray with the empty carafe. A loud clang of plates and a slush of pouring water came from the recessed kitchen, along with voices.

"I told that empty-headed Duvvin to get us some Narrles berries!" one snarling voice said. "He must be sampling them! I should go m'self."

"Empty wig! Better the master finds him in the bushes instead of you!" a woman replied. "Cause you'll see how fast a hired help can get *un*-hired in this place."

Sirius ignored the typical servant's talk to explore the main room.

The table running along the length of the dining room had already been deserted, the guests eager to try the pools. They had made short work of its delicacies, except for a few wrinkled fruits and still-warm berry pies. Sirius grabbed the small pastries to fill his too-empty tray, minus one that he munched gratefully, absorbing the rich sugar paste. He was hale and fit, but getting here in the night had cost him much energy.

The questor had been invited to countless houses and could find the central stairway with his eyes shut. Dark *frol* leaves erupted from a tall earthenware pot, engraved with a graceful profile of Silene. He took care not to touch the delicate leaves, noticing with a certain smugness that no one in this prestigious clan had managed to make it bloom. In the long term, the plant had been left in a state of neglect, the yellowed tips hinting at a lack of water.

He ascended the stairs revolving around the central spire that supported the entire structure, sprouting long arches around and around like a birthday cake. The stairs were covered with a moss layer that muffled his steps, as they might have muffled Lar Murlon's steps a moment before he came on the first floor.

Sirius climbed the stories until he found a narrow landing with two metal-plated doors. The first had a small grid, showing the sundeck, with the streamlined silhouette of a sports flitter visible. *That might come handy to get out in style*, he thought.

He turned to the second door. The panel was made from pale *orunzo* wood, with a convex protrusion waiting for a palm.

His free hand hovered close to the bald metal. The devious *Lazy Gardener*-type mechanism was a passive-aggressive lock used to thwart any attempts from both sides.

The questor would be identified by his genetic signature.

He deposited the tray on the tiled floor and padded quickly down the stairs to the neglected *frol* plant. He carefully ripped off two long leaves, praying Chhoani for forgiveness. A *frol* was the epitome of fragility: Sirius might as well have hacked it down. He would water the poor plant as soon as he could do so without raising suspicions from the kitchen's team.

Back on the upper landing, he gently rubbed the dark green leaves against the knob, turning at the same time. The Lazy Gardener sensor detected the plant's marking but, also, a faint trace of the master's cells lingering on the leaf's surface.

The door unlocked. Using the leaf to push the panel, Sirius slipped inside the darkened room.

It was a typical bedroom, with a wicker basket filled with pillows hanging from the ceiling, with shimmering drapes falling from the hook, to give intimacy to the occupant. By the light of the moons pouring through the high window, he saw that the sleeping basket was empty.

A cushioned bench sat under the window, covered with a fine-meshed grid. On the bench, a flat-chested girl sat in a sand-colored dress. When his eyes adjusted to the ambient light, he saw she was holding a silvery tube dotted with two rows of oval holes.

"Lami?" he called.

She jumped, almost dropping the gleaming tube.

"Who are you?"

Her voice was as melodious as her flute. By the light of the moons, he saw that Lami kha Sonni was the portrait of her late mother, with the same dark brown hair framing her face, and the same green eyes as Pallan's sister. Green eyes that were considering the intruder with dismay.

Sirius put his finger on his lips.

"I'm a friend of your sister, Malli."

Her face lit up.

"Malli! How is she?"

"Worrying about your safety."

As he crossed the room toward her, Sirius felt something amiss.

"Where is Dolmo kho Murlon?" he asked. "Shouldn't you lovebirds be together?"

Her face crumpled.

"Dolmo has been punished! His father has consigned him to the cellar."

"A harsh punishment for enjoying himself!"

She shook her curls.

"No, a punishment for *refusing* to wed me!"

"Your sister told me he was pursuing you!"

"Oh, Questor! Dolmo is like a brother to me. He loves my music and visits often, and my sis resented him, as she wanted more time for us. Dolmo knew my feelings."

That was unexpected. Sirius deposited his tray on the bench.

"Then who took you here against your will?"

"His father's men! They grabbed me from the garden and brought me here."

"Then there's no time to lose. Let's go."

Her hands went to the unprotected bulge of her belly under the sand-colored fabric. Sirius sucked in a breath: a woman's fragile reproductive organ lay under a thin layer of skin, the abdominal muscles melted in adolescence. The vulnerable belly needed to be protected from shocks by a shield lined with soft leather, held in place by a wide belt.

Sirius scanned the room and the basket for the missing piece.

"By the Gardener, where's your shield?"

"Dolmo's father, he, he took it."

Irresponsible, he thought. Without its support, she would barely be able to move, the soft organs sloshing around without the muscular wrapping to keep them in place.

An evolutionary hiccup had made half of the Gardener's race fragile around child-bearing age and childbearing itself fraught with danger.

Sirius was inclined to blame the devious, chaos-loving Koudriss for the deed. Never would the wise Chhoani or the gentle Silene do such a bad turn, despite many priests' smug advice to females.

He *would* ask the ruler of the Empire for a longer R&R time, because this mission was getting uncannily annoying.

He extended one long arm to rip off a band of the gauzy drape hanging over the basket.

“Here,” he said. This should hold for a while.”

He was about to wrap it around the young girl’s waist when he noticed a faint change of the light. She let out a gasp, her eyes round with fear. Someone else had taken advantage of the moss-covered stairs to sneak up on them.

He swiveled, the length of gauze still in his hand.

The snitch-faced son to whom Sirius had served the wine stood, his broad-shouldered body filling the doorframe. Tulmo kho Murlon had reclaimed his pants and a fine-woven tunic, but had lacked time to dry his hair. His wine-laden breath stank like rotten fruits.

“Oh, did I forget to bring you the Bourbi?” Sirius asked, amiably.

“Get out of my fiancée’s presence!” he said.

“*Okoi!* I’m not!” Lami cried out.

“You’re just a piss-poor servant!” Tulmo said.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Sirius said, in the same amiable tone.

The young man lunged forward.

Sirius’ right hand swirled the shimmering fabric over the newcomer’s still-moist hair. Before Tulmo could react, he yanked the fabric toward him, like a fisherman netting a squirming fish. The young man lost his balance; a hip bump flipped him inside the basket.

The basket was still wobbling with its groaning load when Sirius took the slim wrist of Lami as delicately as he could. She awkwardly tiptoed, her free hand flat against her soft belly. Her face twisted in pain as a sudden cramp shot through her.

The basket, not designed to carry such a weight, crashed to the floor along with the hook. *The noise will alert the house*, he thought.

Sirius hesitated.

For a fraction of a beat, he considered calling this ugly thing off, using his secret transponder to warn Pallan about his niece’s situation.

The delay stopped him from reacting in time when he felt another presence.

Sirius’s hand slashed backward by reflex, met pliable flesh, eliciting a surprised groan. The heavysset Gardener stumbled back, but a thick smile etched his lips. A blue fly was buzzing in circles around his gray-haired head.

Sirius recognized Lar Murlon by his frosty eyes, double chin, arrogant lips and the greenish false hair tips. He frowned at the red Narrles berries stains on the tunic.

The feeling was mutual.

“By my trowel and spit! Sirius kho Delsi, here! I expected more elegance from the likes of you!”

“You’re keeping this innocent against her will. Give back her shield and let her go free!” Sirius said, putting in his voice the authority conferred by his position of questor.

That almost imperial voice had cowed down many lazy workers, sneaky thieves, and corrupt administrators.

“Oh, I don’t think so, Questor,” Lar Murlon said.

Sirius did not fear the older man. As he turned to grab the young Lami, he felt a sharp sting on his neck, close to his braid.

The blue botfly shot up, bounced on the ceiling, then dived down for another bite.

Sirius stooped fast to evade the botfly; the buzzing scourge corrected course but got tangled in the flying braid. The questor grabbed the tray from the bench and, before the carafe crashed on the floor, he flung it at the fly with all his might.

He had the satisfaction of feeling the tiny crunch of the botfly’s metal body exploding.

The swift move had made him dizzy. The buzzing did not cease; instead, it grew loud and louder in his ears, slowing down his reflexes.

He heard Lami's strangled cry from a distance; more voices filled the tiny room as it spun faster and faster. The poison from the sting coursed through his veins, would stop his heart soon, but Sirius swatted at those tall, buzzing flies, until his coordination gave out and the tray slipped from his hands.

New stings exploded over his body, their pain getting duller, receding.

As he drowned into a darkness deeper than Koudriss' Well of Despair, Sirius felt less rage than regret, for the slim musician forced into a path not of her own choosing.

The Emperor's Court, four years ago

“I know what I owe you, my friend.”

The emperor's voice was even as he fumbled the blue *frol* bouquet. The graceful and rare blooms captured the eyes with an otherworldly blue fire.

The two of them were having tea in the palace's inner garden, a riot of exotic plants that was as large as the small village where Sirius had grown up. Everything had been managed to relieve the pressure of governing: the mingled perfumes of a dozen varieties of plants, the honeyed scent of ripe fruits from the orchard, and the pond where fishes darted this and that way, their slim red bodies undistinguishable from the pebbles covering the bottom.

As they waited for the tea, the orange ball of the afternoon sun floated over a fringe of violet clouds, offering the two Gardeners a perfect combination of light waves. Sirius let the warmth enter each of his exposed skin cells; the partial photosynthesis brought a surplus of energy to his body.

It had been two months of the larger moon since Pallan's consecration. The festivities were still carrying on in parts of the capital, sending faraway rumors over the palace's wall. A trio of servants brought the steaming pitcher, the infusion, the cups.

Two months before, Sirius had run through the Imperial nature preserve, coming out with his life, and even saving the clod-headed candidate beside him. He had succeeded in the rest of the trials, but the judges had not ruled in his favor.

“A sad thing your name sounded so alien,” Pallan said, lifting the cup to his lips.

“Blame it on my mother,” Sirius said, pulling his shirt over his sun-sated bronzed skin. “We had nurtured so much hope at the time. A peaceful settlement with the Humans had seemed possible. I've even had a friend named Mazda. Of course, that was before the destruction of Hiagir.”

He sipped the too hot tea, trying to unsee the horrid images transmitted from a satellite. Hiagir's continents, seas, teeming cities, all blending under a cloud of nano-destroyers that left a clean white marble drifting in space. . . .

Sirius looked up. The lone silhouette of the counsel stood like a living statue, his head fronds rippling, under the thick-barked Bota tree.

“I still need you,” Pallan said. “I have many enemies waiting to pounce. . . .”

The tea tasted bitter on Sirius' tongue.

He had gained more prestige than Pallan at the succession trials, but his views about the humans, especially his intention of reaching out to this warrior race and negotiate a peace treaty, did not sit well with the panel of judges. And, of course, his alien-sounding name did not sit well either, or his *kho* filiation to his mother, a choice that he had often been forced to defend at school.

Once when he was ten, he had hurt all over from the beating he had taken. . . .

The Imperial Preserve, Lar Murlon's estate

Sirius *did* hurt all over; it was not a dream. He heard a low groan echoing around a very tight space, belatedly realizing that he was the one making this noise.

"The Gardener is a sick joke," a raspy voice said.

He tried to turn his head, but yellow flashes filled his vision. The roots of his braid were pulled taut, as his body weighed on it. More shifting told him the pouch of sleep seeds hidden among his strands was gone. As was, most certainly, the short knife under his belt. He moaned as the sensitive skin of his cheeks grated the hard ground.

He tried to push himself up, but his hands were bound behind his back with cords made from thin *mutchi* roots, strong like iron. Same for his ankles and knees.

"Try not to move," the voice said. "I saw how bad you were hurt when they dumped you here like a sack of *passfol* flour."

Sirius blinked. And blinked again, seeing nothing at all. Total darkness, not a single diffused light particle in sight.

"How could you see me?" he asked, feeling his tongue thick with acid.

"'Cause they had light when they opened the door. Blessed yellow light!" the young man added.

The questor took one sniff of moisture-laden air, smelling of rot and dead leaves, and a metallic smell that could be his own blood. A residual scent of Narrles berries told him the room must have served as a wine cellar. A logical place, because a good wine cellar needed a good lock.

"May the Gardener be with you," he said, feeling his swelled lips and canines with the tip of his tongue. "I am Sirius kho Delsi."

A loud gasp.

"The, the questor? The one who had sowed more prestige than Pallan?"

Sirius was not exactly in a mood to discuss that subject.

"And to whom do I have the honor of speaking to?" he asked instead.

"Dolmo kho Murlon."

The young man shifted on the floor, but did not come closer. A groan.

"You'll forgive me for not getting up, Questor," he said. "I have lost count of time. Not as strong . . . as I thought."

Sirius felt his skin prickle. A Gardener needed sunshine like any plant, even if they were evolved from fierce animals.

Keeping an adult in total darkness for more than two days provoked hallucinations, then madness after four days, and later, death. Under the Gardener's old rule, it was the father's prerogative to punish a member of the family, short of outright killing.

Lar Murlon had despaired of his eldest son and shut him off. He had tasked his other son with seducing Lami, hoping to add her notable merit to their family's, gaining enough to let Murlon, the family's head, challenge the current emperor.

And a certain too-curious questor would share Dolmo's fate.

Sirius had seen survivors emerging from a cave-in after days in the dark, drooling, chanting, their minds snapped. A fine display he would make!

"How I wish they had left me my basket!"

Sirius felt the same craving, to roll himself on the soft pillows of a well-balanced basket. Sleeping on that hard floor must have been hard for the young man.

Their remote ancestors, fleeing the dangerous life roaming the jungle floor, had taken refuge in the generous limbs of a Bota tree, huddling in nets made from its fibrous roots, eating its fruits. Nobody but the very ill, or the humans, slept in beds.

"Can you tell me when you were imprisoned here?"

"It was on the midmorning of the third quarter of the first moon. When I, I refused to obey."

Five days! Sirius thought, amazed. The young sap was stronger than he thought, but on the verge of madness.

"What was asked of you?"

"Under the Spring festival tradition, mating with Lami kha Sonni. Then exchanging our vows."

He would have spat on the ground if he could.

"Lami, my dear, dear friend! How wonderfully she plays. Did you see her at court? Is she well?"

He doesn't know she's here! Sirius thought.

"What do you think of your father's plan?"

"I, I don't know. I love my father, but . . . I couldn't do that to a friend. I'm a bad son, I guess."

Sirius heard the hesitation in Dolmo's voice, from the loyalty conflict. Then a sob. The ambient darkness was seeping into the young man's mind.

"Lami is like a sister to me," he said, his throat thick with tears.

The darkness hid Sirius's ironic smile. For all his professions of friendship, the young sap was clearly in love.

Following his feelings would further his father's ambitions. And conflict with Pallan's will.

The questor's mood took a half-turn, as he guessed at the true goal of his mission. Nothing at all about his niece's wish.

I know you will act for the good of the Empire.

Meaning, anything to keep Pallan on his throne.

"Questor?"

The harried voice tore Sirius from his reflections. He hadn't found a palatable solution to the emperor's wishes.

The talented musician *had* been coerced. But if the questor managed to spring Dolmo out, the lovebirds *would* mate, and raise the overall prestige of the head of the Murlon family.

Even if Lar Murlon met with an unfortunate accident, his accumulated merits would transfer to his eldest son, Dolmo, who would be in a favorable position to court the imperial throne.

And Pallan would still be displeased, not only with Sirius, but with Dolmo as well, and poor, unlucky Lami.

"I'm still here, young sap."

Another sob. In a few krels, the young man's carefully balanced mind would tip off the edge.

"Dolmo. Listen. Do you have any intention of running for the throne?"

A gasp.

"Oko! That's my dad's wish. Not mine."

The lad seemed sincere in his disinterest, as in his friendship.

Alas, Sirius had had a taste of Pallan's craftiness. The emperor would not trust the young man any more than he trusted Lar Murlon.

An elegant solution was taking form in Sirius's active mind: if Dolmo died here and Sirius got out of this trap, he could take Lami back to her house, before the other son's lust proved too much. . . . The emperor would not wince at one death.

He let out a sigh. Was Tulmo, the other son, forcing himself on Lami at this very moment? Sirius felt a terrible temptation to kill the snitch-faced youth. Would the emperor cover *two* deaths in the same clan?

“Questor, I’m, I’m afraid.”

And you do well to be afraid, poor boy, Sirius thought. I would not even need to dirty my hands!

Then Lami’s tear-streaked face floated before his mind’s eye. Who could pretend to know what was best for the Empire?

Certainly not a simple questor.

“Dolmo. Can you do something for me?”

“I’m not tied, Questor, but I can’t feel my legs anymore.”

The boy was so weakened he was barely more than a rag doll. Sirius forced himself to roll over until he hit a leg. The young sap had propped himself against the wall, which would help.

“I need you to put a finger in my mouth.”

“What?”

The youth was appalled at the suggestion of same-sex intimacy, a taboo in the strait-laced Empire. Sirius would have barked an equivocal laugh if the situation had allowed it. He bit his swollen lips as he forced his body to sit up, the bruised muscles crying out.

“Do not fear for your virtue!” he said. “More precisely, I need to vomit.”

“Too much wine, eh?”

A light note had crept into the youth’s voice. *Good*, Sirius thought. The sapling was not done yet.

Hesitant hands groped his lean body, up, up, until fingers met the swelled lips.

“Koudriss’ turd! You’re bleeding sap all over your face!”

“Details, details! *Do it!*”

A long finger prodded his tongue, then plunged into his throat, triggering the gag reflex.

Sirius folded over and heaved the acid contents of his first, then the mushy half-digested content of his second stomach. Among the sounds of liquid splashing on the floor, he heard the tinkle of a small, hard object bouncing off the stone surface.

“Hurh,” Sirius said. “Take it.”

A hand scraping the floor. Then a gasp.

“*That* was in your belly?”

Sirius sighed. If the digestion had moved the object past his second stomach, he would not have been able to return it.

“Place it on the floor,” he said. “Tap it twice.”

Sirius knew he had been obeyed when a blessed light filled the room.

Squinting, he saw that he had been right about the cellar part. An abandoned cask, broken, lay in front of the sturdy ironwood door, with a lock to boot. Two well-worn steps led down from the door’s threshold to their prison.

A loud sigh of pleasure rose.

Sirius turned to check on his companion. And almost gasped, himself.

Dolmo kho Murlon had the makings of a fine emperor.

The young sap had reached his full height and, despite his starved state, Sirius could appreciate the lean muscles of the legs, the tapered torso, and the dark brown hair flowing down his wide shoulders, with a few low-rank medals still clipped there. His skin was the deathly white of the sunless, but that would turn into a healthy brown as his cells drank the warm yellow light.

“What is this thing?”

“Emergency light pod and transponder,” Sirius said, clearing his throat. “Never go out without one.”

His attempt at humor fell flat.

"How long will it last?"

The boy's voice was already stronger. Dolmo flexed his arms and legs with relish.

"Oh, by Chhoani! They really gave you the royal treatment!" he said.

Sirius could feel the blood caked on his face, but he was more concerned about the state of his disheveled hair. Some grimy hands had *groped* his braid. Unacceptable! But now was not the time to act like an offended boy.

"Let's concentrate about getting out of this pit, young sap," he said. "We'll preen later. Are you able to stand?"

"I, I think so."

"Then help me get these bonds off."

Some hurt-filled pikrels later, Sirius took the light-emitting cylinder (easy to swallow) that had sat in his lower stomach. He searched the gluey surface for the tiny button on the side. The intensity of light wound down.

Putting one weary hand on the wall, he propped himself erect.

"Are you well enough to rescue your dear friend?"

The young man sprung up as if propelled by a hidden spring.

"Lami? Lami's here?"

"I'll take that as a yes," Sirius said, with a half smile that spared his sore lips.

He directed the instrument at the lock. One push of a finger, and the wide-angle light became a tight reddish beam, only visible by the ambient moisture. The point of the laser bit into the metal, creating a smoldering circle, coloring the two Gardener's faces in tones of red.

Cutting through ate more precious pikrels. However, the lock gave in without much further ado.

The first moon had set, but the second smaller moon gave enough light to guide their steps along the garden of poisonous plants. The pools were empty, their lights dimmed. Only the magnetic barriers keeping the fauna away were active, with small sparks and the odor of burnt chitinous bodies. At least the horny brother would have retired for the night and Lami would be safe.

Using his light pod, the questor cursed under his breath. The main door of the house had been sealed shut, its sides faint lines on the wall.

"Koudriss' turd!" The young man said.

"Using my laser on that lock will raise alarms," the questor said.

He looked up at the stalwart youngster.

"However, this door should recognize a son of the household."

"If my bio signature hasn't been erased," Dolmo said.

Sirius made an elaborate court wave that pulled at his bruised shoulder.

"There's only—ouch!—one way to find out."

The broad-shouldered youth casually presented himself at a portion of the door, and tapped. The door shuddered from the wall and swiveled open.

"Well met. Let's find your friend," Sirius said.

They got inside and crept up the stairs without encountering anyone. Apparently security had been relaxed now that they thought the troublemakers were imprisoned in a dark cellar.

Dolmo had no more difficulty opening the door to the prisoner's chamber. Equally confident, the family had not moved Lami nor her basket. They hadn't taken the pains to rehang the basket, but the young musician had made the best of it.

Her tousled head peeked out of a nest of pillows on the ground. Sirius envied how she came instantly alert at their approach. She had wrapped a gauze band around her waist to replace the lost shield. Her face beamed when she laid eyes on her visitors.

"Dolmo!"

“My dear Lami!” he said. “I was so worried!”

Sirius half-turned from their embrace, scanning the stairs under their landing. Had he been that young once?

“Now’s not the time for tears. We’re getting out of here.”

Dolmo pushed the sundeck door, his cells still recognized by the Lazy Gardeners’ lock. They inched out, the fresh wind buffeting their clothes and hair. A faint violet line across the eastern horizon told the questor that morning was coming.

The flitter looked like an open shoe with a pointed toe. Much lighter than a hovercar, the flitter was made for speed and exuberance, as powerful twin burners complemented the rotors. The first-rate vehicle was also horribly noisy, going all for the *hey-look-at-me* feature instead of stealth. Sirius almost groaned aloud, but he was out of options.

“We need this flitter,” he said.

Dolmo pointed to a silhouette sitting against the hull.

“Yeah, but Calimon from the kitchen is keeping watch. He was one of those who shut me in the cellar,” Dolmo said in a low voice.

“He’s positioned to see anyone passing the door,” Sirius whispered.

Lami came in.

“I can help with that,” she said.

She slipped out and stepped to the sundeck’s outer railing, in full view of the guard.

She put her instrument to her lips. The reedy notes floated under the slow-changing stars. The lone guard who had been slumped jerked awake. For a moment, he stood rooted by the apparition and the melody, then he shook himself and stepped to her.

“Go back to your room, soft belly!” he said.

His attention focused on the girl, he had no time to avoid Dolmo’s fist. The young man struck with his heart. Sirius caught the limp body, dragged him against the door.

“Well done,” Sirius said. “Now let’s start this thing.”

As Dolmo helped the young flute player aboard, Sirius studied the controls. A flitter was purely a recreational craft, without the safety features of a hovercar. In moments, he had found the handles, and a low whirring of engines rose.

He toggled the rotors on. As a whining rose in intensity, the flitter lurched forward, off the ramp, the pointed nose dipping. Lami let out a strangled cry. Sirius pulled the handle to him, toggling the carburant intake. The flashy burners roared to life with relish, tearing through the tranquility of the compound.

Gravitational forces pressed Sirius against the seat as the flitter soared up. He needed to get enough distance between them and Lar Murlon’s anger.

Sirius leveled the craft over the tufty heads of the parasol trees, then cast an eye over his shoulder. Dolmo was cradling Lami and her silver flute in his strong arms. Nothing short of a Linju beast would separate them.

He had not found the elegant solution that would solve the friends’ or, rather, lovers’ problem. He was orienting the flitter’s nose toward the distant capital’s lights when Lami gasped.

“Did you hear that?”

The questor turned.

“Don’t fret,” he said, “there’s nothing to be afr—”

Slim fingers dug into the questor’s bruised shoulder.

“I have a fine-tuned ear,” Lami said. “I just know something’s wrong.”

Never dismiss a woman’s intuition, Sirius reminded himself, cradling his poor shoulder.

Dolmo piped in from behind.

"Never saw that craft," he said. But the burners are out of whack."

Just as Sirius said it, the engine hiccupped, jostling the occupants, bruising Sirius's other shoulder against the rim. The flare of pain shook his mind as well. The rotors were holding for now. He cut the burner switch. To no effect. Once the fuel induction had begun, he couldn't shut the feed lines.

It had been too easy, he thought.

He could see the hidden hand of the emperor behind the events. The flitter, its controls unprotected, left on the sundeck. Sabotaged by a shady agent, maybe even by the guard they'd subdued.

If Sirius had freed the young girl alone, as the agreed-upon plan had been, the two of them would have perished in an accident, making a further alliance impossible.

And eliminating Sirius's prestige in one fell swoop.

His lips formed a thin line. He could hide the lovers in his own abode at the northern part of the capital, but the Umbrella net would identify his guests.

Another shudder of the shoe-shaped craft sent a loose strand across his face.

He tapped a corner of the board. A thin radar screen flopped up, showing a vehicle in hot pursuit.

Sirius groaned as he recognized the signature of a hovercar. Lar Murlon, hot on his heels, eager to punish his disobedient son and those with him.

Lar Murlon must be fuming at his access to the throne escaping his grasp. No other houses would ally with his own. The pursuers from Lar Murlon's house had no problem following Sirius. With the burner's orange flames spouting off, illuminating the jungle, the flitter would be quite visible.

Of course, the flitter was too fast for the hovercar to catch up with it, but its hungry burners were draining carburant like a dry ground drank the rain.

Then another blip appeared on the flitter's control board. Another, heavier ship was lying in wait near the wall.

"Sweet Silene!" Sirius cursed.

The Murlon clan had commandeered a bulky transport that was keeping position close to the wall, to prevent the fugitives from flying out.

He veered in the opposite direction, toward the heart of the preserve, away from the capital's lights. The hard turn pushed all passengers against one side. Lami gasped aloud under the restraints.

"Change of plan," he said.

He dived to a lower height, the belly of the flitter grazing the treetops.

The emperor's nature preserve covered much more than the beautiful Wisdom Lake, and Sirius knew of a stand of very old Bota trees. Botas were less abundant than other tree species, but their crowns rose higher than the surrounding forest, a feature the primitive Gardeners had used to their advantage.

"How long does this flitter have?" he asked.

"Three pikrels, tops, before the burners overheat," the young man said.

Not a lot of time to pick and choose.

"Give me your medals. You too, Lami."

"What?" both echoed.

"I need something from you. One or two will suffice. Quick!"

"But they took my medals with my shield," Lami said.

"Your wrap, then. Your flute. Anything!"

While Dolmo fumbled with his braid and Lami ripped off a band of sandy fabric from her dress, Sirius scanned the dark green canopies flowing under them. At last, the gentle Silene smiled on them: a thick dome of foliage, etched with the candle-like flowers of a Bota tree, rose in their path.

"Here," the young man said, putting two copper squares in the questor's palm.

He received something in exchange.

“Hang on to this, you two,” Sirius said, talking over the noise. “I’ll leave you on this Bota. You’ll wait for me, and don’t go down.”

Sirius had to incline the flitter at a steep angle to keep it aloft, praying the Gardener he did not set the tree aflame. The flitter’s back burners were not designed for hovering, and the punishing vibrations were killing his back. So his patience was wearing thin when Lami protested.

“But, my flute . . .”

“Jump!” Sirius said, the thin tube and a length of fabric in one hand.

Dolmo helped the slim musician over the rim. The questor felt the craft shudder as it unloaded the extra weight. Pulling off, he had the satisfaction of seeing the couple grabbing the thick branch. He had left his special lighting tool with the young man, so he could find him later. For now, he had to get as far as he could, preferably before the cascade reaction burnt up the whole flitter and its bruised pilot.

A crime to sacrifice such a fine craft, he thought, struggling to keep the pointed nose up.

As Sirius was putting more *sious* between the lovers and himself, a loud whistle rose from the board. This time, all lights were blinking.

He noted that Lar Murlon’s hovercar had gotten closer. Of course they had to have gained on him during his short stop.

Sirius dipped lower, weaving in and out of the trees to obscure the glow of the flitter’s burners, but his maneuverability was limited. A lake appeared in front of him, reflecting the moonlight in silvery tones.

Any time now . . .

The control panel went out in a fountain of sparks that nearly ignited Sirius’s hair. The afterburners were radiating a fierce heat on his back, his skin burning under the coarse fibers. The glow from the back turned a bright yellow. . . . The lake zoomed past under him.

A second one was coming, fast, its silvery sheen partially obscured by a layer of leathery plants.

Sirius used his remaining strength to manually push the lever, dipping the flitter toward the silvery waters of the lake. The heat became intolerable. When he estimated the craft low enough, he raised the flitter’s nose and jammed the lever in place with one of Dolmo’s medals.

Then he jumped as far from the flitter as his knees permitted, missing the jutting afterburners by a handsbreadth, and rolled himself in a compact ball.

The shock of cold water against his burnt skin almost made him swoon, but he bobbed to the surface, brushing by the familiar waxy leaves of the lilies.

The receding jets of the afterburners turned yellow, then a fierce white. The flitter exploded in an orange ball, illuminating the jungle over a two-*sious* radius.

Sirius winced. He had timed it almost to the last beat.

When his sight adjusted, he caught a shower of fragments raining over the trees and the lake, flaming pieces of the cabin and afterburners hitting the shore. A beat later, a loud report reached his sensitive ears.

Camouflaged among the leaves, he heard the whine of a hovercar slowing down, then landing on the shore. The cockpit was open, letting the conversation flow out. The fire lit the occupants’ faces up in orange.

The young pilot, his braid solidly tucked under his vest, turned to his passenger.

“What do we do, Lar? Search for survivors?”

Lar Murlon was speechless, probably seeing all his years of scheming dying off with the fire.

He shook his head.

"Advise the Palace's grounds and the preserve caretakers about the accident," he said, his voice thick. "We'll conduct a search tomorrow."

"But there are dangerous beasts here," the pilot said. "Shouldn't we . . ."

"Tomorrow," he said, "we'll search for the pieces of my son and that snooping questor!"

The hovercar roared up, then fled off, its whine diminishing in the paling sky.

Sirius winced as his braid was painfully snagged by a protruding limb. He grabbed whatever plant material grew there to help him over the tangle of moss and elbow-hard roots lining the shore. He counted himself lucky not to get too many more bruises.

Nothing that eight days of rest under the Root World's benevolent sun wouldn't heal.

Speaking of light, the floor under the three layers of foliage was too dark to see well. Nevertheless, he crouched and cupped his ears, listening, but not even the noisy monkeys were awake. Not a good sign: every being stood still to evade more dangerous creatures.

He had roamed this forest in a more dangerous game.

During the trials, he had come upon an unlucky candidate's decaying corpse. After he had lost the content of both stomachs, the experience had filled him with a healthy respect for the fauna specimens dwelling here.

His hand cupped the bulge in his pocket, with the hard metal tube and the medals. Regretfully, he discarded the lovers' tokens.

He breathed in, to get a feel for the threat; a deeply satisfying Bota bark smell, honeyed and spicy, reached his nostrils. Some felines rubbed their hide against a Bota to lure their prey with the smell of the protective tree. However, he saw the faint outline of a mid-sized tree emerging from the tangle of roots.

He got up, feeling around him until he touched the spice-scented, rugged bark of a young Bota.

Thank you, Great Gardener, he thought.

The tree was smaller than his tall siblings; its bark would gradually acquire the thick and scarred aspect that had always helped so many feet climb it to reach its crown. The Bota tree had been the protector of their race for millennia. Even long past their primitive, low-tech stage, Gardener pioneers carried seeds from this tree to plant on the new worlds.

His fingers sliding into the bark's hollows, Sirius climbed the tree, repeating moves that had been easier four years ago.

A monkey's loud shriek exploded, then the beat of a thousand wings filled the forest as birds flew elsewhere. The monkeys themselves had been prone to pelt any unlucky candidate with hard nuts or rocks.

When he reached the slender branches of the top, the eastern horizon was sending glimmers of pink on the dark blue sky. He got a glimpse of the huge Bota crown where the lovers would be perched. (*If* they had listened to him. *If* they hadn't, someone would find their scattered bones years from now).

If he reached them, Sirius would guide the couple through the hidden path that each candidate had prepared those four years ago. They would reach a point in the north wall and send a signal with the small light to a waiting young Imperial Preserve caretaker, who owed Sirius a favor.

Nothing complicated. He just had to survive encounters with the nasty guests kept in the preserve.

With a sigh of melancholy, he set out, keeping his senses alert.

The Emperor's Court, four days later

Sirius kho Delsi bowed as low as his sore back would let him. A copper band hitched together his multiple braids to prevent them from spilling forward.

Rare were those allowed on the emperor's personal balcony overlooking the roofs of the capital and the wall enclosing the preserve. He regretted not having enjoyed a longer rest at the delicate hands of the palace's head physician, but the fine lady doctor had declared the questor "as good as new."

However, he felt older than his scant decades as Pallan walked to him, white robes flowing like clouds around his trim figure.

The emperor's pleasant voice soared over the balcony.

"No need to break your back again, my friend," he said.

Sirius kept his head low.

"I am sorry to report that I couldn't achieve the mission you gave me," he said.

He was almost alone, in the presence of the ruler of the Empire, his counsel (who elected to recede into the background of the *khuimsi* trees), and two trusted guards. A well-laden table had been prepared.

"I am mourning for my niece," Pallan said, sipping from his tumbler. "Her bio signature has been identified on a scrap of fabric in a Sinju feline's lair. Along with this."

One bronze-clad guard stepped up, bearing a tray. On it lay a metal tube, covered with dirt, with a double set of finger holes.

The emperor picked it up and frowned at the dirt. Then he proffered the flute to Sirius.

"You can keep it," he said. "Too many memories for me."

"I— I am honored," Sirius said, accepting the object.

"As usual, I have heeded your advice. Young Malli will be sent away to Luurdu, for her safety."

So she won't ever be in position to usurp power from you, Sirius thought. He knew the emperor's real feelings about his "failed" mission.

Luurdu was a mid-level world, well away from the Empire's first Root. Any dalliance of an older Malli there would not threaten Pallan's prestige. The place would be best suited for the young girl to pursue a musical career, not least because he still had family in that place who could watch over her.

A rustle of fronds from the trees reached Sirius' ears.

"And, you, Sirius kho Delsi, will accompany her."

The questor kept his features in place to avoid displaying his shock.

Dismissing me as well, Pallan?

"Did you find fault with my service?" he asked.

The dark-haired ruler sipped from his tumbler. Sirius could smell the divine aroma of a well-aged Bourbi.

"Not at all, Questor. But now that Lar Murlon's anger at his son's death has abated, I will have need of your keen intellect abroad."

Sirius wondered if the ruler of eight hundred worlds had guessed his double play. But then, Pallan's remarkable green eyes lit on the lady sailing toward them in a flow of white and blue robes held in front by a golden shield. Her own merit insignias, linked together, hung in a long line that only an emperor's wife could boast.

Behind her, small Malli trotted, carrying two travel bags.

"Now, begone, my friend," the emperor said. "Arrangements have been made for your passage to Luurdu. You'll find the roots of corruption quite active there."

Sirius bowed and walked away with Malli.

As they passed the serving table, he took one step aside to swipe a thin glass of Bourbi wine standing all alone there.

As he led the young, shieldless girl out of the inner court's gateway, Sirius slipped the metal flute out of his sleeve.

"Malli, your sister had time to tell me how proud she was of you," he said.

He brushed off the dirt with his sleeve before proffering the instrument.

"Lami wants . . . I mean, she *would* have wanted you to have this."

That Bourbi blend was a tad potent, he thought.

"I'll miss her," she sniffed as they rounded a large bronze statue.

"Maybe," he said, thinking of the complex last-pikrel arrangements made while evading the Umbrella's surveillance. "However, Malli kha Sonni, where we are going, you will meet two remote cousins of mine, most fascinating."

"You think?" the young girl asked, her eyes liquid with tears.

Sirius sensed a presence at his back. Malli let out a surprised gasp.

He looked up, and up, at the bronze statue. A perfect spy, the silent counsel was able to erase his presence . . . or to project it.

Sirius couldn't guess the thought patterns flowing behind the multi-pupiled eyes. Would the emperor call him back someday?

He got no answer to that question, but a quiet sense of *well done!* washed through him, along with a spicy smell that reminded Sirius of a very old, wise Bota tree. ○

Matter/Antimatter

atoms, magnetism
the solid stuff of sturdy
matter. touched, seen.

antimatter. gaps between
annihilation
opposed, yet still electric.

—Lynne Sargent