

94/11/22

STREET CRED

Val Con yos'Phelium leaned back in his chair and sighed.

It was his day to address such business as demanded attention from Delm Korval, while Miri his lifemate minded the Road Boss's office in Surebleak Port, answering what questions and concerns as citizens might have regarding the Port Road and its keeping.

The Surebleak Port Road having only recently acquired a boss, they were yet an object of curiosity, and the office on-port was busy enough. It might be, later, that the presence of the boss her-or-himself could be dispensed with, in favor of a proxy. He could find it in himself to hope so. His thoughts lately had been turning to ships, and lifts, the simplicity of Jump, and the charms of planets which were not Surebleak, Clan Korval's new home.

He was a pilot from a long line of pilots, trained as a scout, and far better suited to flying courier than administration. It would be . . . a pity if he were never to lift again.

Which was, of course, boredom speaking, or self-pity. Or, more likely, an aversion to duty. Courier pilot had *never* been his destiny; and he would fly again, soon enough. But first, Surebleak required finer sorting; and Korval needed to find its feet on their strange new homeworld.

Which meant, among other matters, revisioning Clan Korval. The bonds of kinship were as strong as they had been in his lifetime, though the individual clan members numbered so few that it seemed they must, eventually, marry into another situation, in order to survive. In fact, such an offer had only recently been made to him, as the Delm Genetic. He had . . . *not quite* said no, which was only prudence. Now was not a time to close doors suddenly found open, nor for relying too heavily upon the wisdoms of the past.

More pressing than kin-ties at the moment, however, were the clan's finances.

Clan Korval did business under half-a-dozen trade names, and while it was true that they remained a force in the markets, it was also true that they were a *lesser* force. Formal banishment from Liad, their previous homeworld, had cost them trade partners, allies, and goodwill. It had been expensive to remove all of their goods, and themselves, to Surebleak; nor was their new home port nearly so conveniently situated as their former address.

Shan yos'Galan, the clan's master trader, was off-planet even now, seeking to establish a new main route, and coincidentally, reverse Korval's fairering finances. No small task—perhaps, indeed, an impossible task—but when Val Con had tried to express his regret at placing such a burden upon Shan's knees, his *chaleket* had laughed aloud.

"You've asked me to develop new outlets, negotiate partnerships, build viable routes, and earn us a profit! Tell me, *dentubia*, what is it that you think master traders *do*?"

So, Shan was off-planet even now, doing those things that master traders did, for the good of clan and kin.

In the meantime, Shan's delm wrestled with various knotty problems of their own, such as Korval's relationship with Liaden society; specifically, the Liaden Council of Clans.

As part of the Contract of Banishment, the Council, speaking for all Liaden clans, had agreed that expulsion from the planet would constitute full and complete Balance for Korval's crimes against the homeworld. The contract had stipulated that there would be no personal Balances launched against individual members of the clan, or against Korval Entire.

The Council of Clans had agreed to this; and each one of its member delms had signed the contract, which included a guarantee that they would educate the members of their clans regarding the contract, and its terms, and make it clear that no further Balance was appropriate.

Unfortunately, it seemed that the delms, or the Council, had not been as assiduous in education as they might have been. Balance had been brought against one of Korval, in violation of the terms of the contract. Young Quin had escaped harm, though the person who had sought to Balance the death of her heir had sustained a wound to her shoulder.

And all involved were fortunate that the attempt had not met with success.

Failure though it had been, it had also been against the terms of the contract, which stipulated that any breach, or seeming breach, be met with a formal inquiry.

Therefore, Korval's *qe'andra*, Ms. dea'Gauss, had contacted her firm's headquarters on Liad. The formal inquiry had been drafted by the senior partners there, and reviewed by the Accountants Guild's protocol committee. The *qe'andra*, and Korval, wished to know if the Council was aware of the violation, and, now that it had been informed, what its next step would be.

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Instead of immediately taking up this rather straightforward matter, the Council had—not tabled it: No, the Council had not even entered the inquiry into the agenda.

That they would refuse to even discuss the matter; that they risked offending the Accountant's Guild, one of the most powerful on Liad.

These things were not comforting to the delm of a small clan seeking to establish itself upon a new homeworld.

Korval yet had friends on Liad; if they had not, those on the Council who had wished to see Korval Themselves executed for crimes against the homeworld, and Clan Korval's assets—including its surviving members—distributed among the remaining clans at Council, would have prevailed.

That banishment had been the final Balance spoke directly to Korval's *melant'i* and its place in Liaden history.

In retrospect, had the Council indeed made a formal ruling against the Contract of Banishment, Val Con was certain that he would have had been in receipt of a dozen or more pinbeams warning that he and his were now targets.

No such pinbeams had arrived, which led one, rather inescapably, to the conclusion that there was something more subtle, and perhaps more deadly, underway.

He had written letters to a few staunch allies, and to his mother's sister, the delm of Mizel. His sister Nova had written to Korval's old friend and ally, Lady yo'Lanna.

Unsurprisingly, to those who knew her, Lady yo'Lanna had replied first, and Nova had only this morning forwarded that answer to him.

The news... was mixed.

The Administrative Board of the Council of Clans, wrote Lady yo'Lanna, recently published a Point of Order, directing the standing committee of ge'andra to study the question of whether the Contract of Banishment remains binding upon it, now that one of the parties has ceased to exist.

Well, of course, they're idiots, and so I said to Justus when he mentioned it to me. Even if the Delm of Korval has seen fit to dissolve the clan—which I trust they have not—the standard paragraph regarding heirs, assigns, and direct descendants is present in the Contract of Banishment.

In light of your letter, and the unfortunate attempt to Balance against Quin—one enters entirely into Pat Rin's feelings on that head, I assure you!—I can only suppose that the whole purpose of this so-called study is to open Korval to such mischief as may be brought against it by aggrieved persons. The longer the study goes on, the weaker the contract becomes, even if the committee eventually returns the opinion that both parties still exist.

One wonders, in fact, what keeps them so long at the matter? An hour, out of respect for the past melant'i of the Administrative Board, ought to have been enough to have produced the rational answer in the approved form.

Be assured that I shall make further inquiries, dear Lady Nova, and will write again when I have more information. In the meanwhile, please guard yourself closely. I really must travel to Surebleak some day soon. My grandson does not wish to move the clan's seat, nor do I think that he ought to do so, but a bored old woman who has outlived her life-mate and her nearest friends may perhaps be forgiven a bit of wistful wanderlust.

Please recall me to Korval Themselves, and to Kareen, as well as to your delightful siblings. Maelin and Wal Ter desire, also, to be recalled

to Syl Vor, and to assure him of their continued regard. They ask, respectfully of course, that he be permitted to visit. If you think it wise, yo'Lanna would naturally care for him as one of our own.

I remain your friend and ally,

Ithoria yo'Lanna Clan Justus

Val Con reached for the cup sitting by the screen; found it empty, and sighed. Had Korval still been seated upon Liad—

But, of course, matters would have fallen out very differently, after the strike which had neutralized the Department of Interior's headquarters under Liad's capital city, if Korval had remained unbanished.

In fact, they were exiles; Clan Korval had been written out of the Book of Clans kept by the Council.

However, contrary to what seemed to be a growing belief in larger Lieden society, and in direct opposition to what was set forth in the Code of Proper Conduct, being written out of the Book of Clans did not constitute the dissolution of a clan. The Book was an administrative tool, used by the Council to track its membership.

The formalized kin-group which was recognized as a *clan* could only be dissolved by the action of the *delm*—which he and Miri had, as Lady yo'Lanna had correctly supposed, *not* taken.

Clan Korval existed: it stood by its charter; it sheltered and protected its members; supplied itself; negotiated new contracts, and honored its existing agreements. Thus, the *qe'andras'* most basic definition of a viable clan was satisfied.

The business entity known as *Clan Korval* likewise kept its contracts, paid its bills, invoiced its clients, nurtured its partnerships, and supported its allies. Such was the complexity of trade, that it would require far more than the word of a mere *delm* to dissolve *that*

web. It would require a team of geandra-speakers a dozen years and more, so he very much feared, to shut down the business of Korval.

Clearly then, Clan Korval existed, across several species of reality. To suggest otherwise was, as Lady yo Lanna had so eloquently proposed, idiotic.

The Council of Clans—*someone* on the Council of Clans, or, indeed, someone from the Department of the Interior, which had appointed itself Korval's exterminator, and which was known to have infiltrated the Council—*someone* wished to place Korval in increased peril.

And, sadly, the one resource Korval was lately richer in—
Was enemies.

"I wish you wouldn't keep doing this," Miri said. "At least take back-up."

They were in the breakfast parlor, sharing the morning meal before parting for the day — she to the delin's office, and he, first, to the city, thence to duty at the Road Boss' office.

"Taking back-up will invalidate the results," he answered. This was not a new argument — in fact, it was so well-worn it was no longer an argument at all, merely a restating of their relative positions.

"I take back-up when I go down to the city, and the port," Miri said, which was her usual second move; however, she then tipped her head and produced a vary.

"Guess you think I soft."

He grinned, and raised his tea cup in salute.