

# The Silverglass Quartet

Silverglass , Web of Wind, Witch of Rhostshyl, Mistress of Ambiguities  
J.F. Rivkin

## Silverglass

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### CHAMBER OF DEATH

The window was only a few feet to her left, and in a moment Corson had made up her mind and clambered over the sill. If she was going to die anyway, maybe she could at least kill Lord Thierran first.

But Lady Nyctasia was alone. There was blood on her mouth, and her shirt was torn at the shoulder. She gave no sign of seeing Corson, though her eyes were open and staring.

Corson hurried past her and flattened herself against the wall by the doorway. Lord Thierran was coming up the corridor, still shouting orders to his retainers. "I want guards at every entrance! Search the stables and the gatehouse!"

He strode across the room to the window and looked out anxiously over the grounds, watching for any movement.

Corson kicked the door shut. At the sound, Lord Thierran wheeled around and stared at her in disbelief. She was coming towards him, smiling, a dagger in her left hand.

"I didn't plan to read *Silverglass* all in one night—I had to, because it's such fun and so darned good!"

—Andrew Offutt

"Filled with colorful characters, fast-paced excitement and plenty of bed-hopping. J.F. Rivkin is a writer to watch!"

—Phyllis Ann Karr, Author of the *Frostflower* books

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### 1

THOUGH CORSON BRENN Torisk had not often been to Rhostshyl, she remembered just where The Lame Fox Tavern was. For some things she had an infallible memory. The Lame Fox was a disreputable den shunned by the respectable people of the city. There was a place like it in every town on the coast,

and Corson was familiar with them all.

The crowded alehouse was all one room, filled with trestle-tables and benches. The only light came from smoky torches and the great hearth where joints of meat roasted and charred. On every side men and women were drinking and dicing, arguing loudly, cursing and bragging. A singer with a small lap-harp was perched on a table, trying to make herself heard above the din.

The crowd eyed Corson curiously as she entered, but she was accustomed to that. Her height alone usually drew stares, since people so tall were rare in the north—but no one had ever found her ungainly. She moved with an athlete's grace and power, and her beauty was not hidden by her travel-worn tunic and breeches. She had large blue eyes, and skin of a warm, rich gold. After her release from the army, she had let her chestnut hair grow long as a mark of her independence. She usually kept it plaited in a braid and bound like a crown around her brow, but when she let it down, it fell over her broad shoulders and straight, tapered back in a rippling tawny wave.

Corson's only ornament was a pair of small golden earrings—the trophy of an early exploit. She'd been hired by a merchant guild to rid the roads of a certain dangerous bandit. The earrings had been his.

She met all stares at The Lame Fox with a look of deliberate challenge that made the curious drop their eyes hastily, or turn away. Her confident manner declared that she was well able to use the battered broadsword that hung at her hip. She took a seat near the singer and ordered a tankard of the best ale. Everyone knew that the ale all came from the same barrel, but the more you paid the less water they added to your portion.

Corson was feeling very well pleased with herself. She had just been hired by both the leading families of Rhostshyl to assassinate the same person. And neither party knew of her dealings with the other. The rival houses of Edonaris and Teiryn had been lethal political enemies for generations, and the city was on the brink of civil war. It seemed they could only agree on this one thing—both were willing to pay a high price for the death of the sorceress. Lady Nyctasia ar'n Edonaris. The Teiryns accused her of causing a fatal sickness among them, and even her own kin were afraid of her. Corson found the situation amusing as well as profitable, and she meant to celebrate her stroke of good fortune by getting prodigiously drunk.

The girl with the harp was singing:

*“Oh, I could complain  
That my life is a curse—  
The wind and the rain  
And the hole in my purse!  
But what would I gain?  
Things could always be worse!”*

Corson laughed and tossed a coin to the singer, who caught it in her hand and winked.

Seeing that Corson had money, every gambler, pickpocket and charlatan in the tavern took a renewed interest in her, and she was at once invited to join in a game of death's head.

Corson loved to gamble, but she'd learned from bitter experience that it was fool's sport. “No thanks, I've no luck with dice.”

“But tonight your luck may change.”

“Ah, but why trust to luck when you can learn fortune's secrets?” A slender young man dressed in bright motley leaned toward her across the table. Around his neck hung a string of medallions stamped with mysterious symbols.

“As well toss your money in the gutter as give it to fortunetellers,” sneered the gambler, who felt that she had established her right to swindle Corson first.

Though she had no faith in soothsayers, Corson wanted some amusement and paid the youth what he asked. With a grand gesture, he pushed aside the pitcher and mugs, and drew an eight-pointed star on the table with a stump of charcoal. From a leather pouch he took a handful of polished gemstones and handed them to Corson.

“Will you first hear of the present?” he inquired. At Corson’s nod, he drew a circle around the star. “The mirror,” he explained, “that shows things as they are. Shake the stones in your hand and throw them on the star. Their pattern will tell the tale.”

When Corson had done so, he studied the scattered stones intently, murmuring to himself, “Green at three!” and, “Just on the line, there.”

“You are placed at a perilous juncture,” he said at last. “The whole course of your fate depends on a choice you will soon make. If you choose ill ...” He shook his head solemnly. “No fortune awaits you at all.”

“That’s an old story,” said Corson. “And what if I choose well?”

“To answer that, I must consider the future—thus!” He gathered up the colored stones, then drew a square around the circle. “The window,” he proclaimed, “that shows things far off.”

Corson threw the stones again, and the fortuneteller contemplated their pattern with evident satisfaction. “Should you choose this way, a dangerous journey lies before you, but at its end fortune will favor you. You will win wealth and honors and become a lady of title and influence.”

“Oh yes, very likely,” laughed Corson. “And what is this fateful choice I must make?”

“You will know it when the time comes. If you wish for surer knowledge now, I can only try—but such secrets are not so easily come by ...” He paused expectantly. A further payment from Corson would no doubt have eased the difficulty, but at that moment they were interrupted by a shout of indignation from the singer. One of the customers had accused her of picking his pocket.

“I wouldn’t go near enough to you to steal your purse! I don’t want to get fleas!”

“Give it back, you thieving slut!” He seized the girl by the arm, but she broke away and dodged behind Corson.

“Ask *her* if I took it,” she insisted, appealing to Corson. “She was watching me all the while.”

“She’s in league with you, then, but I’ll have it out of you anyway!” He turned on Corson. “Just you try to stop me if you dare!”

“It’s nothing to do with me!” Corson protested. “She’s no friend of mine.”

“You’re a coward as well as a thief,” he goaded. By now, all other pastimes at The Lane Fox had been abandoned, as people gathered ’round in hopes of a fight.

Corson was furious. Why did that little chit have to single her out to be her champion? Corson did not for a moment doubt that the girl was a pickpocket, but she was too proud to refuse a public challenge. Reluctantly, she got to her feet and faced her accuser.

“You’ve no sword,” she said, and unsheathed her dagger instead. Though Corson was left-handed, she took the weapon in her right hand and wrapped her cloak carefully around her sword-arm.

He grinned and drew his own blade, also winding his cloak around his free arm as a shield. The crowd made room for them and there was a murmur of excited speculation. The wagering favored Corson.

The fighters circled warily, taking the measure of one another’s speed and agility. Corson realized that her opponent was no mere tavern brawler—he handled himself too skillfully and responded too swiftly to her feints. He was in earnest, and she knew that she must either disarm him or kill him. But she couldn’t risk coming before the city magistrates now.

For a moment she seemed to drop her guard, uncertain, and he lunged forward at once to press his advantage. But even as he closed in, Corson flung out her lowered left arm, freeing the furled cloak, and whipped it up across his face, blinding him. Without a pause she seized his wrist and twisted his arm back, kicking sharply into the side of his knee at the same time.

When he let his knife fall, Corson stepped on it firmly, then helped him to his feet. “Perhaps you’ve changed your mind,” she suggested. He backed away, then turned and made for the door, shouldering his way through the jeering onlookers.

Corson kicked the knife away and the tavernkeeper picked it up, scowling at her. “Put up your blade,” he ordered gruffly. “I won’t have bloodshed in here.”

Corson shrugged and sheathed her dagger. “It wasn’t of my seeking. Why don’t you keep a better watch on that harper of yours?”

He looked puzzled." I keep no harper here."

"The singer," Corson insisted angrily, but the girl was nowhere to be seen. Corson felt she'd been made a fool of after all. She hurried out to the street, looking around for the singer. "When I find that little ...!"

"I'm here," called a voice from across the way. Corson could just make out a slight figure, half hidden in the shadows of an alley. As she approached, the girl drew back out of sight and waited in a dark doorway.

"If you're that clumsy a pickpocket you'd better keep to your singing, curse you! I should wring your neck for dragging me into a fight with that madman. You owe me a share of the spoils for chasing him off."

The harper smiled. "I've a better offer to make you."

"I thought you might. But I don't need to take up with bungling pickpockets."

"I'm no thief, but I'm not a minstrel either. Come with me and I'll explain. I've a place not far from here."

"So you say. If you've anything to tell me you can say it right here."

"I don't arrange my affairs in the street. Follow me if you choose—I can give you a better meal than you'd get at the Fox." She started down the dark alleyway alone.

Corson hesitated, but her curiosity got the better of her suspicions. And the prospect of a good meal was hard to resist. She caught up with the girl and made her a mocking bow. "Corson brenn Torisk is at your service, milady!"

"And I'm Nick, of this city. Come, we're wasting time." She led the way quickly through the narrow backstreets, but before they'd gone far, Corson stopped and motioned her to wait.

"He's following us, that fool! Whatever you stole from him, he means to have it back."

"No matter, we're almost there—hurry!" She pulled Corson around a corner and unlocked the iron gate to a narrow, two-story house.

Once they were safely inside, she lit two candles and offered one to Corson, "Wait for me upstairs. I'll bring us some supper."

Corson was disappointed. So it was only a trick to rob her, after all. No doubt there would be two or three of the girl's confederates waiting upstairs. She shook her head and turned back to the door. "I'll do without supper, thanks. The night's yet young, you'll find another gull."

"It's no trap. Come, it's not likely I'd try that game with you after seeing your skill at The Lame Fox. Shall I go up ahead of you?"

"I'll see for myself," Corson muttered, unable as ever to resist a dare. She climbed the stairs warily, ready for any sudden attack, but when she reached the top she found herself alone in a long, low-ceilinged room, dimly lit by a guttering fire. She laid on another log, then lit the heavy silver candelabra that stood on the mantle and carried it with her as she explored her surroundings. This was not the lodging of a petty thief. A thickly woven, patterned carpet covered the floor, and brocaded couches surrounded a table of dark, polished wood inlaid with tiles. An open bookchest held several volumes, and others lay about on the floor, the table and shelves.

The far wall was hidden by draperies, and Corson approached them suspiciously to see if they concealed a door. She pushed aside the hangings quickly and found herself face to face with a tall, menacing figure that reached out to seize her arm. Corson had her sword in her hand before she realized that the enemy was her own reflection.

She gazed at it in wonder. Mirrors were a luxury for the wealthy, and Corson had never seen such a large sheet of unlatticed glass. She was still marveling at the mirror's ghostly mimicry when Nick's reflection appeared in the glass, entering the doorway behind her. She was carrying a tray of food, and a lantern hung from her arm. Reluctantly, Corson turned from the mirror to join her at the table.

The meal was as good as promised. Her hostess set out a cold roast chicken and a round loaf of fresh white bread with a comb of honey. There was also a wedge of sharp cheese, some small yellow apples and a very costly wine.

As she ate, Corson was able to study her companion closely for the first time. She had changed her

shabby clothing for a fur-trimmed robe, and she seemed a different person from the common tavern singer at The Lame Fox. She was very pale of complexion, with grey eyes and delicate, fine-boned features. Her black hair was close-cropped, revealing a high forehead and arched brows. Though a young woman, she was not the girl Corson had taken her for.

Corson gestured at her with a piece of bread. "If you're not a thief and you're not a minstrel, what are you? A whore?"

The woman laughed. "I told you I don't arrange my affairs in the street. I'm a scholar."

Corson looked about at the rich fittings of the chamber. "I see," she said in open disbelief. "And what would a scholar want with the likes of me?"

"I admired the way you dealt with that troublesome fellow at the Fox. A most impressive display of competence. It happens that I've need of a bodyguard just now."

Corson helped herself to more wine. "If you stayed away from places like The Lame Fox you wouldn't need a bodyguard, lady."

"But I only went there to hire a mercenary, you see. It's hardly a place I'd visit for amusement's sake. No, what troubles me is that my enemies are trying to have me murdered."

Corson stared at her for a moment. "Oh no," she said softly. "It's not fair; something like this always happens to me."

"You ... ?"

"What did you say your name was? Nick? *Nyc*? Like *Nyctasia*?"

The woman rose hastily and backed a few paces towards the door. "Lady Nyctasia Selescq Rhaicime brenn Rhostshyl ar'n Edonaris," she said with a bow. "But we needn't be formal. *Please* don't get up."

Corson surveyed her defenseless quarry with contempt. "*You're* the dread sorceress who's slaughtered half the city with her spells?" She settled back more comfortably and finished her glass of wine.

"Unfortunately, my reputation for witchcraft is quite undeserved," Lady Nyctasia said wistfully. "If I'd half the powers folk credit me with, I'd not be in hiding now."

"There must be something to it. Do you know," Corson said with a winning smile, "that two different parties have hired me to kill you? Isn't that funny?"

"An amusing coincidence. My esteemed relations, no doubt, and the Teiryn clan?" She came over to the table and coolly refilled Corson's glass.

"They say that some of the Teiryns have died of a mysterious ailment lately ..."

"Mysterious! If the Teiryn didn't constantly intermarry, they could rid their line of that sickness for good and all, but they insist on keeping their estates within the family! This malady has been among them for centuries—it's all there in the city history. Anyone could have predicted that it would reappear. I *tried* to warn—" She paused. "This is the sort of thing that wins one a reputation for sorcery," she admitted.

"What of your own kin?" Corson demanded. "They'd like to be rid of you, too. And they paid handsomely for it." She had drawn her sword and was idly tracing patterns with it on the rug.

"Have a care, that carpet is valuable," Lady Nyctasia complained. She paced back and forth across the narrow room. "It's just a faction of my family that's after my blood, but a most powerful faction, led by the matriarch, Mhairestri. You see, I stand to inherit important titles and estates, and I've pledged my support to those who want a treaty with the Teiryns. That alone makes me a threat to Edonaris ambitions. Mhairestri would like to see my properties fall into more reliable hands."

"There's no more to it than that?" asked Corson, who was casually slicing pieces from an apple with her dagger. Her sword now lay close at her left hand.

"Oh, the list of my iniquities is endless, I assure you. I refused to marry my cousin Thierran though we'd been betrothed since childhood—that was an outrage. But the really unpardonable offense, I believe, was my treasonous view of the ancestral sovereignty of the Edonaris line. The city records show that the Teiryns' claims to power are at least as legitimate as our own." She paused in her pacing and picked up a brass candlestick. "Nobody appreciates a historian."

"I've been planning to make a long journey," she continued, "and I need an expert fighter like you as escort. You'd not lose by it—I'm one of the wealthiest people in the city." She waited for Corson's reply, armed only with the heavy candlestick.

Corson sighed. "You're a terrible disappointment to me, Lady. I was expecting something challenging, not a helpless little bookworm."

"Scholar."

"And I did need the money ...." Corson mused. "I want a better saddle. And a new pair of boots. I could make my fortune just by killing you."

"I daresay. But you'd not live to enjoy it. Mhairestri would never be so careless as to leave a living witness to my murder."

"She'd not be the first to try that trick," Corson said offhandedly. "But I appreciate the warning." She nibbled thoughtfully at a piece of cheese. "Do you suppose you're wealthy enough to better her offer *and* the Teiryns?"

Lady Nyctasia relaxed visibly. She came up to Corson and fixed her with a critical gaze. "Oh, I think I can afford you a new pair of boots. And some decent clothing. A bath would not be amiss, either. I don't intend to travel with an unkempt sloven."

Corson grinned. "Don't forget the saddle. Your Ladyship."

"I forget very little, you'll find. I'm sure we can come to an agreement."

Corson raised her glass in a salute. "Your humble servant," she said, but Lady Nyctasia caught hold of her arm before she could take a drink.

"Corson, if you mean to remain in my service, you must really be more careful. You should have watched very closely when I poured your wine."

Corson stared at the goblet. "You viper! You tried to poison me!"

"I can't afford to leave anything to chance. *You* should understand that. What's more, I've had a guard just outside the door all this while."

"Only one?" Corson scoffed. "I'd have killed the both of you."

"I know. That's why I didn't summon him before. Sandor!" she called. "Come in here!"

The guard entered at once, sword drawn. Then, seeing that Nyctasia was in no danger, he sheathed the weapon and bowed. "Yes, my lady ...?"

Corson started to her feet, speechless with outrage and disbelief. "You—!" she choked. It was the same man who'd fought with her at The Lame Fox.

## 2

NYCTASIA WAS SATISFIED with her arrangements. She'd provided for those of her servants whom she trusted, and the rest believed that she'd long since fled the city. That night she and Corson would slip out of Rhostshyl by a postern gate in the city walls. The sentry had been well paid to let them pass unchallenged. If it were another rainy, moonless night, all might yet be well.

She appeared confident and self-possessed, but inwardly Nyctasia was torn by warring passions. That she, an Edonaris, should be forced to slink through her own city like a common criminal, sneak out a back gate like a fugitive—! Though she opposed her family's pretensions to sole rule of Rhostshyl, yet strong ties of duty and heritage bound her to the ancestral home of the Edonaris. The city-state of Rhostshyl was governed by those members of the ruling families of the rank of Rhaicime, and Nyctasia should have been a strong voice on that council. Instead, she was an outcast, hunted from her home.

Though it was not by her own choice that she went into exile, she doubted the honesty of her own decision at times. Other duties claimed her—other desires drew her. She had long ago promised that someday she would join her lover, Erystalben ar'n Shiastred, in far-off Hlasven and there was no longer anything to be gained by waiting.

It was on her account he'd been driven from the city. Her family had been furious when she'd taken a lover from among the minor nobility and refused the husband chosen for her.

At first they had all but encouraged the connection, hoping that the Shiastred family would therefore

take their part against the Teiryngs, for Erystalben would one day be head of the House of Shiastred. Nyctasia's rebelliousness had not posed a serious threat until the unlooked-for death of her mother raised her suddenly to the rank of Rhaicime. It was then that the Edonaris became more insistent that she honor the marriage agreement that promised her to her cousin Thierran. They blamed Erystalben for her continued refusal, and he at last fled Rhostshyl rather than see his people incur the enmity of the most powerful family in the city. He had wanted Nyctasia to come with him, but while she had yet hoped to effect a conciliation between the rival families, she felt duty-bound to remain. Those hopes were shattered now and she would deny herself no longer.

Her reverie was broken by the shrill cry of a young beggar-child at her elbow, urging, "Alms, kind lady!"

She dropped a few coppers into his waiting hand, and looked him straight in the face. Accustomed to indifference even from charitable folk, the child was put on his guard at once.

"Who's following me?" Nyctasia asked.

Without seeming to look, the child gave a creditable description of Sandor.

"Is there no other behind him?"

"Oh, a younger one, lady? He's just come round the corner."

"Good. Now be off with you." Surprising the urchin with another coin worth more than the rest, she slipped into a narrow alleyway and let herself in to a dilapidated row-house. Nyctasia had rented houses in every quarter of the city, though she took care that the owners did not learn who their tenant was.

Sandor waited near the mouth of the alley. Before long, the other man passed by and hesitated, glancing down the passageway before he moved on.

"You won't find her that way, friend."

The stranger whirled round to face Sandor, who grinned knowingly and beckoned to him. "You're following the Lady Nyctasia," said Sandor. "Don't trouble to deny it. I've been after her all day myself, haven't you noticed? She came down this way and I know where she is now. I think we can be of help to each other, don't you?"

"What do you want of me?"

"Nothing more than you've been hired to do. It's two against one this way, easier for both of us. Once she's dead who's to say which of us did the deed? We'll both collect our pay."

"That's a bargain. Where is she?"

Sandor led him down the alley past the building Nyctasia had entered and stopped before an old, boarded-up house. "We've only to wait. There's no other way out."

They hid in a doorway across from the house. When Nyctasia did not appear, the youth grew more and more uneasy. "Where is she? What does she want in there? Are you sure—"

"Patience, my friend." Sandor took out a flask and tilted it to his lips. "Still green at this, eh?"

His companion flushed. "Give me some of that!"

Sandor laughed and passed the flask to him. "No need for haste, she's bound to come out soon. If you mean to live long at this trade you'd best learn to bide your time. Here, you've had enough of that—it's no drink for babes." He took back the flask and corked it, then caught the young man as he folded and fell.

### 3

"I'VE SEEN HIM before, but I can't think where," Nyctasia mused, looking down in some perplexity at the drugged youth. "Well, we'll soon find out." She crushed a few pungent leaves between her fingers and held them to his nose. After a moment he opened his eyes, choking.

"Teiryng or Edonaris?" Nyctasia demanded.

"Wha—?"

"Who sent you to kill me—the Teiryng or the Edonaris!"

He looked about him, still groggy, realizing that he was lying on a bench in a strange room. When he saw who it was who questioned him, he gasped and groped for his knife.

Sandor strode up, holding the missing knife as if it were a toy. “Her Ladyship asked you a question, man!”

The young man stared at him, then broke into a feeble laugh. “I should have heeded your advice, friend.”

“What advice was that?” said Nyctasia.

“I told him he was too hasty by half, my lady. He’s a raw one and no mistake.”

“He must belong to the Teiryn, then. Only they’d hire such a bungler.”

“I’m no hireling killer! I came to avenge Lord Rhavor on my own.”

“Of course!” Nyctasia exclaimed. “Rhavor’s servant—you were often with him of late.” So that was how he’d known where she was likely to be found. She cursed herself for her carelessness. When she and Rhavor ar’n Teiryn had met in secret, this fellow had been in attendance on him, yet she’d never given him a thought.

He was glaring at her. “I was with him the day you set your curse on him—just before he died! I heard you!”

“Then you merely heard me speaking to him. You must have heard any number of people speak to him that day. Why don’t you kill all of them while you’re about it?”

“You’re the one did it. Everyone says so.”

Nyctasia laughed. “My nurse used to say, ‘If everyone tells you the sun’s the moon, it will still be the sun.’”

“He died of the same curse as the rest of them!”

“Yes, he did. And Teiryns were dying of it long before I was born.” She paused and said sadly, “Though your master might have lived years longer, if he’d not weakened himself with drink. Many’s the time I tried to tell him it would be the death of him.”

Rhavor’s servant was puzzled by Lady Nyctasia’s manner. Why should she deny the deed when she had him in her power? The words came back to him: “Rhavor, you’ll be dead by first frost!” Could they have been meant, not as a threat, but a warning? He didn’t believe her, yet somehow he was no longer afraid of her.

“You bewitched him,” he muttered sullenly.

“Why is it,” Nyctasia sighed, “that everyone believes my lies, but I can never persuade people of the truth?”

“Lady, if you let him go, he’ll only come after you again,” said Sandor.

Nyctasia looked defeated. Motioning Sandor aside, she said, “Lock him up downstairs and see that someone fetches him away after dark. Once I’ve reached safety, I’ll send orders for his release. If you’ve anything to report, I’ll be at the corner house till midnight. Stay at your post else.”

“Very good, my lady.” He bowed. “Good fortune await you. Lady Nyctasia.”

“Farewell, Sandor.” She crossed to the threshold of the next room, then paused. “Be careful,” she said.

Nyctasia pushed aside the dark drapery curtaining the window and looked out across the city to where the last rays of the sun gilded the western towers of the Edonaris palace. For hundreds of years, its walls had witnessed the proud history of the Edonaris line. Ever since they had come to power in the city, the Edonaris had been known for their liberality and benevolence. They had been responsible for the elimination of slavery in Rhostshyl, and had tempered the harshness of the city laws in other ways as well. Thieves were no longer put to death in Rhostshyl, and many cities along the coast had followed this example. It was while the Edonaris dominated the Rhaicimate that Rhostshyl had entered the Maritime Alliance, benefiting from treaties of trade and mutual defense. The city had prospered and grown under their rule.

Nyctasia had always been proud of her name, but now she feared that this heritage had been betrayed. Though the Edonaris had come to power by lawful means, there were now those among them who would use any means to keep that power in their own hands. She was sure that it would not be the enmity of the Teiryn that destroyed her House, but the ruthless ambition of the matriarch Mhairestri and her supporters.



And yet she herself was not guiltless—she had been forced to take measures that repelled her, in order to counter her enemies. It had sickened her to learn what callousness she was capable of, what deceptions she would use, for her own ends. She had never thought to find herself taking prisoner a young fool like that—yet that was not the worst thing of which she accused herself.

Nyctasia leaned her head in her hands. She was resolved to put all that behind her and leave Rhostshyl while her spirit was still her own. She would be free of this madness! Erystalben needed her, and she could now do no good by remaining. With Rhavor's help, some compromise with the Teiryn might have been possible. But there was no one else among them who would listen to reason.

Rhavor had made no secret of his belief that his family's fanatical rivalry with the Edonaris was absolute folly. He had often held the feud up to ridicule. Nyctasia half smiled, remembering an encounter with the drunken Rhavor in Market Street. He had accosted her with a cheerful, "Ho! An Edonaris in my way! Cut her down, cut her down!" in blatant parody of his kinfolk.

Nyctasia had joined in the game: "A foul, Teiryn! Have at you, miscreant!"

Waving their rapiers with exaggerated menace, they'd engaged in a ridiculous duel, parting with mock threats and laughter. How ironic that she was accused of his murder, when in truth she missed him sorely.

It was probably his own kin who killed him, she thought bitterly, though he'd plainly been set on destroying himself ever since the death of his wife. He had seemed to welcome the onset of the wasting sickness which cursed the Teiryn line, and had refused to husband his strength by abstaining from drink.

Lord Rhavor was already familiar to Nyctasia by reputation, when she'd first contrived to meet him at a tavern he was known to frequent. He'd not been long a widower, but Nyctasia was still a girl, and he'd been more amused than offended when she'd blurted out her plans for a marriage-alliance between them.

"My dear girl, not only am I twice your age, but I'm an ailing man as well. I'd soon make a widow of you."

Nyctasia flushed. "But, my lord, think what it could mean! If a Teiryn and an Edonaris should wed, there might be an end to this senseless feuding. Our families would be forced to come to terms!"

"Or to murder us both," he suggested with a smile. "You know as well as I that they're too caught up in their game to let a dying man and a child stand in their way." In truth, Lord Rhavor was not yet gravely ill. He spoke thus to discourage Nyctasia, but she would not be swayed from her purpose.

"Then you've nothing to lose, have you? And for my part, I am willing to take the risk."

"I believe you. But you're surely not of an age to marry without your family's consent, and I very much doubt that the Edonaris would think me a suitable match for you."

"I know all that," said Nyctasia impatiently. "I shall come of age in due course. But till then you must not take another wife—that's the gist of the matter!"

The mask of frivolity fell from Lord Rhavor's countenance. "I have no mind to marry again," he said coldly.

"That is all I ask," said Nyctasia, rising. "Forgive me. If the affair were not of such consequence, I should not intrude upon your grief." She tugged awkwardly at her sleeve for a moment. "Naturally I don't mean to take her place," she said stiffly, "I propose a political alliance. At least give some thought to my plan."

"Just as you like, Lady Nyctasia," he said indulgently. "We shall speak of it again when you come of age, if I live to see the day."

Lord Rhavor had many years yet to live, but when Nyctasia had reached her adulthood, he continued to oppose her plan. By then the illness had taken its toll and, though the remnants of his days meant little to him, he was reluctant to let Nyctasia risk her life for such a doubtful venture.

They continued to meet, however, and she'd still had hopes of persuading him, up to the time of his death. Now even that hope was gone.

Nyctasia let the curtain fall back, covering the window. Darkness had descended on the city, and the towers of the palace were lost from view.

NYCTASIA WAS ALARMED to see someone standing at the gate of the corner house. None of her people knew of this place save Sandor, and he wouldn't wait about outside; She was to meet Corson here soon, but it was a man who waited there—she could tell little more than that in the darkness.

She walked past the house without a glance or the slightest change in her stride. She was dressed in the shabby clothes and hooded cloak of a student, but the stranger was not fooled, "Lady Nyctasia!" he called after her, his voice low and urgent.

She immediately whirled around, crouched, her arms crossed over her chest, but the other made no move to throw a knife. He only stood in the shadows, waiting, watching her, motionless.

Nyctasia slowly stood and drew her sword. "Edonaris or Teiryn?" she said wearily. It was getting to be a habit.

"Neither the one nor the other, milady. A messenger. I bring you a letter."

"And why do you faring it here?"

"Such were the directions, my lady."

"Who gave you those directions?" she demanded.

"Milord Shiasfred," was the answer.

Nyctasia's heart raced. She expected a letter at any time from Erystalben, and he could well have sent such a messenger as this. Yet her family knew about him. This letter might be a trap to draw her within arm's reach of a killer. Nyctasia considered her own kinfolk much more dangerous than the Teiryns.

"Is an answer expected?" she said.

"A token, my lady, that His Lordship may know you received his message. A lock of milady's hair."

Nyctasia laughed. "Ben doesn't know I've cut it. You'll have to take him this." Still keeping her distance, she tossed one of her gloves to the messenger.

"I'll leave this here, shall I, my lady?" he said quietly, reaching into his jacket. Nyctasia prepared to throw herself fiat to the ground at the first glint of steel, but he drew out only a roll of paper and laid it on the gatepost, then bowed and walked off without waiting to be paid.

Nyctasia examined the letter by the dim starlight. The seal was indeed that of Shiasfred and she tucked it inside her shirt, smiling at her own fears. Only Erystalben could have known to send a messenger here.

But then she heard footsteps close behind her and she hastily unlocked the gate and slipped inside the yard.

Someone peered at her through the palings. "Lady ... ?"

"Corson! Good, come in." She hurried Corson inside and led the way upstairs.

Corson sprawled on a couch without waiting for permission to sit. She knew that there was nothing Lady Nyctasia could do about her impertinence and she meant to take full advantage of her position. "Are you ready to go?" she asked curtly.

Nyctasia paced the room restlessly. "I've been ready to leave for a long time."

"You know, if the gate sentries have guessed who you are, it may yet come to a fight. Are you of any use with that sword?" She eyed Nyctasia's rapier doubtfully.

"I'm not a professional murderer, of course, but I've trained with the best fencers at court."

Corson groaned. "Fencing! This isn't a duel, Your Ladyship. I only hope your horses are as good as you claim. Our best chance is in surprise and speed."

"My stables have the fastest horses in the city," she said proudly. "Most people don't understand the principles of breeding. But it's simply—"

"Can you *ride* them?" Corson interrupted.

"There are not many beside myself who can," Nyctasia said with dignity.

Corson looked glum. It was hard to picture the Lady Nyctasia doing anything more strenuous than plucking a harp. It would be so much simpler just to kill her and collect the blood money.

Nyctasia leaned against the back of a chair and looked searchingly at Corson. "I hope you've no weakness for gambling. Your face betrays your every thought."

"I always lose," Corson admitted. "And this looks to be a losing game as well." She badly wanted a drink.

"Maybe so. But you'll find me a safer wager than Lady Mharestri."

Wine and water had been set out, but Corson was wary of Lady Nyctasia's hospitality. "We'll just have to trust one another, then. Let's drink a toast to that, shall we?" She poured out the wine and handed a cup to Nyctasia. "After you, my lady."

"I don't drink spirits," Nyctasia demurred.

"Please. I insist," said Corson grimly, her hand on her sword hilt.

Nyctasia laughed. "Well, perhaps the occasion does warrant some special observation." She raised her glass. "To the success of our venture."

Corson watched her swallow the wine before reaching for her own cup. "To trust and good faith," she said.

Nyctasia sat down across from her and drew out the unopened letter. As she broke the seal, she thought again of the unknown messenger, "Corson, did you pass anyone at the corner?"

"No, but I saw Sandor crossing the thoroughfare. I don't think he saw me."

"Sandor? He should be in Westgate Street by now."

"He was coming this way."

Nyctasia frowned. Something must be wrong. Her suspicions grew sharper—was Corson herself the danger? "I'll go down to meet him."

"By yourself?"

"He may want to speak to me alone." She stood. "I'll be back directly. We have to start out soon, it's nearly midnight."

As soon as she heard Nyctasia leave the house, Corson hurried to the far wall and drew back the heavy draperies. Ever since she'd discovered the great mirror she'd been longing for another chance to study her reflection.

Nyctasia could see Sandor lying in the street, not far from the gate. Pulling back the bolt at once she hastened to him, and knelt over the still form, searching for any sign of life—but the man was dead. Before she could rise she was seized roughly from behind and dragged into an alleyway, a knife at her throat.

A second assailant stood before her, smiling, his sword ready. "I don't believe I've ever seen you at such a loss for words, 'Tasia," he said. "You needn't feel abashed. It took me some time to find you out, though of course I never believed the rumors that you'd already fled the city. Rumors which you no doubt encouraged."

"I started them," Nyctasia whispered. "But I can be gone by morning. Let me go and the family will not be troubled by me again, I swear it!"

He laughed. "I intend to see that the family is not troubled further by you, my dear cousin. I'm well aware of your plans, but I'm afraid they'll have to be altered. Think yourself fortunate that I found you before the Teiryns."

"Listen to me, Thierran—" Nyctasia began.

"Don't waste words with her!" the other man broke in, and Nyctasia recognized the voice of Mescrisdan, Lord Thierran's brother. "She'll keep us talking here 'til dawn. I say kill her and have done with it." Suddenly he gasped, and Nyctasia felt his grip slacken. She broke free, dodging to the side, and saw him fall as Corson wrenched her broadsword from his back.

Corson met the other man's attack with cold precision. She turned aside his blade and followed through with a thrust that tore his arm to the bone. The sword dropped from his grasp and he made a frantic lunge to retrieve it, but Corson dealt him a sharp blow across the back of his neck with her free hand. As he fell to the ground Nyctasia snatched the sword from his reach.

Dazed, he tried to crawl toward Nyctasia, his wounded arm hanging limp and useless. Corson kicked him onto his back, looming over him in the narrow alleyway. "No!" he cried. "Please—"

“Corson, don’t!” gasped Nyctasia.

Corson put up her sword. “Next time remember to guard against attack from the *left* hand,” she advised him. Her boot caught him under the jaw and he lay as still as his companion.

They carried the bodies into the courtyard, and for the first time Corson could see that the two men who’d attacked Nyctasia were identical. “There have always been twins in my family,” Nyctasia said, noticing Corson’s stare.

“Do you have a double, too?” Corson asked suspiciously. Perhaps this wasn’t the singer after all.

“I’ve often wished I did—it might have been useful. But there won’t even be one of me if we’re not gone from here soon.”

Nyctasia paused for a moment to look down at the still form of Thierran ar’n Edonaris. “He’s hated me ever since I refused to marry him,” she remarked.

## 5

AT THAT HOUR of the night the streets were usually empty, save for noisy drunkards and silent thieves. Yet they soon realized that someone was following them on horseback.

“Do you have any of your people behind us?” Corson asked.

“Yes, but they’re on foot,” Nyctasia said worriedly.

They passed a group of shouting roisterers, and Corson suddenly joined in the uproar, singing as loudly as any of them:

*“I once knew a soldier  
so skilled with his sword  
That they sued for his service,  
both lady and lord!”*

Nyctasia clutched at her arm. “Are you mad?!”

“I’m being inconspicuous. Sober folk wouldn’t ride out this late.

*“I once knew a fisher  
so skilled with her net  
There was nary a fish  
that the wench couldn’t get!”*

she roared.

Nyctasia had to acknowledge the sense in this. Silence might be suspect. She resigned herself to Corson’s performance.

Without warning, a figure lunged at them from a nearby doorway, and they both reached for their weapons in alarm. “Get out of here, you sotted curs!” screamed a large man in a nightshirt. “Decent folk are trying to sleep!”

“All right, we’ll go,” Corson said hastily, but he had already seen their half-drawn swords.

“Threaten an unarmed citizen, will you, you vermin,” he shouted after them. “Warder! Arrest those cutthroats!”

The rider behind them broke into a trot, and they realized that they’d been followed by an officer of the night watch. Nyctasia suddenly turned her horse and started back before Corson could stop her. “I’ll show you who’s vermin,” she muttered.

Corson was aghast. She caught up with Nyctasia and grabbed her bridle. “What are you doing?!”

“I’m being inconspicuous. Do you want the City Guard chasing us through the streets?”

The watchman rode up to them. “What’s the matter here?”

“We—” Corson began, but her horse suddenly swerved to the side and reared, as Nyctasia surreptitiously jabbed her spur into its flank.

“Good evening, warder,” she said in her haughtiest tone. “I’m afraid my servant has had too much to drink,” She sounded bored and annoyed, and her bearing proclaimed her a personage of the highest station. It was too dark for him to see how poorly she was dressed, and she kept her face well back in her hood.

“Ah, forgive me, Your Ladyship,” the guardsman said anxiously. “There was a complaint, but I’m sure ...”

“I’m not drunk,” Corson protested, swaying in her saddle.

“Be still!” Nyctasia ordered. “I’ll see that she doesn’t bother anyone else, warder. I don’t recall the fine for causing a public disturbance, but I’m sure this will suffice.” She pressed a few heavy coins into his hand.

He bowed. “Certainly—thank you, Your Ladyship. If you should require an escort ...”

“No need,” said Nyctasia indifferently. “I assure you she’ll be disciplined for this.” She turned away, leading Corson’s horse by the bridle.

“Come along,” she snapped.

Corson swayed again and leaned in closer to Nyctasia. “As soon as I have the chance, I’m going to slit your throat.”

“Wits may be a sharper weapon than any sword,” said Nyctasia with a smug smile.

As they approached the gate, Nyctasia hugged the wall, keeping to the shadow of the watchtower. She watched the quiet streets for signs of danger as Corson rode ahead to meet the sentry.

Corson dismounted and handed the woman a pouch, then helped her to pull back the heavy bolts. They both pushed their weight against the gate, and the guard in the watchtower paid no heed as the portal slowly swung outward.

Only then did Nyctasia emerge from the shadows and follow Corson through the narrow gap that opened onto a rough pasture track. By the time the gate had been shut behind them, they were halfway across the field.

Looking over her shoulder, Corson was not surprised to see the bright flash of a lantern from the sentry tower. “Arm yourself!” she shouted to Nyctasia. “They’ve signaled someone—make for the forest!”

Soon they heard hoofbeats behind them, echoing their own. But Nyctasia’s horses were all she’d claimed, and they’d put a good distance between themselves and their pursuers when a second band of riders broke from the cover of the forest just in front of them.

“Ride that way,” Corson called, “divide them.” Nyctasia swerved to the right, spurring her mount to even greater efforts. Corson fell back, trying to draw the enemy after her, but two of them broke away and followed Nyctasia.

For a time, Nyctasia led them a hard chase, but they were too close upon her to be outdistanced. The ground was uneven, broken by small hills and ravines—good grazing land but unsuited for galloping horses. Her mount plunged down a slope and easily leapt the swollen stream, but as it tried to scramble up the steep embankment on the other side, it could find no footing in the slippery mud. It slid back twice, then balked at a third attempt. Nyctasia had no time to urge it on before one of her pursuers was upon her.

She turned to attack, but her blow glanced harmlessly off the other’s shield. He quickly thrust in beneath her upraised arm to pierce the light chain mail over her ribs. Doubling over with a cry, she fell from the saddle onto the soft mud of the bank and lay motionless as her horse nuzzled her shoulder, nickering softly.

The man dismounted and approached her cautiously. Her sword lay unsought by her open hand, and he stepped firmly on the haft as he bent down to look at her.

Nyctasia’s dagger lashed out wildly, barely scratching his hand, but a burning pain seared through his arm, leaving it numb. In moments, the poison reached his heart, and he was dead before he fell to the ground.

Nyctasia dragged herself into the stream, hoping the cold water would slow her bleeding. On the crest of the slope above her, two riders clashed and she saw one of them knock the sword from the

other's grip. As the disarmed warrior turned to flee, Nyctasia raised herself on one elbow and screamed, "Corson! This way!"

Corson hesitated, anxious to give chase, but instead she leapt from her horse and clambered down the embankment. Nyctasia struggled to rise, clutching at her side. She gave a hiss of pain as Corson grabbed her under the arm and pulled her upright.

"Can you ride?" Corson demanded brusquely. Without waiting for an answer, she led over Nyctasia's horse and helped her to mount. "No matter. Just keep your seat. I'm warning you. If you fall off, I'll leave you behind."

Nyctasia leaned against the animal's neck and moaned. "Vicious bitch," she said faintly, but she held on as Corson seized the reins and led the way to level ground.

They reached the forest unchallenged and rode in stony silence for some time before Nyctasia sat up and took the reins. "Corson, you must be a demon in battle. There were at least a score of swords after us—how many of them did you kill?"

Corson considered. "It's hard to say to a certainty, but not more than four, I should think."

"But what became of the rest?"

"The sentry must have taken her story to both parties. Don't you see?" Corson started to laugh. "The Teiryms and the Edonaris *both* had their henchmen waiting to waylay you—and when they met, they started warring between themselves. They're so busy slaughtering each other back there that they've forgotten about us. Isn't that funny?"

"It is indeed," said Nyctasia. But it hurt to laugh.

## 6

"HLANN ASYE, BUT that hurts!" They had ridden till dawn, then made camp by a stream where Nyctasia was bathing her wounded side.

"You were lucky. I thought it was worse than that."

"I'm known for my luck," Nyctasia said with a grimace. She cut a strip of cloth from the hem of her shirt and bound the wound tightly, cursing like a peasant.

Corson was surprised to hear her swear by the name of Asye, the deity of the common people. Most of the nobility and the educated considered the worship of Asye a vulgar superstition, and professed belief only in the Indwelling Spirit—the *vahn*.

"You're a follower of the Hlann?" Corson asked curiously. It was an old word meaning either "Lady" or "Lord," but it was used now only for the androgynous Asye.

The Lady Nyctasia looked embarrassed. "Oh, when I was younger, mainly to annoy my family. Oaths are just habit. Folk wouldn't use the name of Asye so freely if they really believed." As if to herself, she added, "and it's not always those who swear by the *vahn* who believe in it.

"But aren't you hungry, Corson?" Nyctasia changed the subject deliberately. "Feed the flesh and the spirit thrives, you know."

This was one proverb with which Corson wholeheartedly agreed. Their saddlebags were packed with smoked meat, bread, dried fruit, and cheese. "I brought along a flask of wine for you, since you have such a taste for it," Nyctasia said. "It's in my satchel, there."

Corson pulled over the bag and rummaged through it impatiently, pushing aside some leatherbound books which were locked with clasps.

"Be careful with those books! No, that's ink—the *other* flask." Corson uncorked the wine, but then hesitated. "It's not poisoned," laughed Nyctasia.

"It might make me sleepy. I have to keep watch."

"Do you want me to drink some first?" Nyctasia asked provokingly.

Scowling, Corson shoved the flask back into the satchel, dislodging the clasp on one of the books. To spite Nyctasia, she picked it up and opened it, but the writing baffled her. "This is gibberish!"

"It's Old Eswraine, a dead language—the mother tongue of the languages of the coastal countries. That's why they're all so much alike, and—" she paused in her explanation. "But do you know how to

read?”

Corson was not insulted by the question. People of her station were rarely literate. “I traveled about with a student when I was first out of the army. We traded lessons in sword-play for lessons in letters, but I think I got the better of the bargain—he’d never made a swordsman. I’ve never met a scholar yet who was good for anything much,” she added pointedly.

“What a shame that you didn’t learn any manners while you were about it,” Nyctasia remarked with a yawn. She pillowed her head on a saddlebag and pulled her cloak over her. “Good night ... if you still want to cut my throat, this is your chance.” She did not really expect to sleep, oppressed as she was with fear and uncertainty, but her weariness soon overcame her.

She dreamt that Lady Mharestri had sent for her. The matriarch had refused to see her for months, and Nyctasia was certain that at least one of the attempts on her life had been carried out at Mharestri’s behest, yet she did not hesitate to obey the old woman’s summons. Though Nyctasia might defy her wishes, she would never show her the slightest disrespect.

Lady Mharestri rarely left her own apartments. She received Nyctasia in her bedchamber, seated stiffly upright by the fire, her face hard and forbidding. Nyctasia dropped to one knee before her and formally kissed her hand, but when she raised her head she found herself facing a stranger. This aged lady only resembled the matriarch.

She looked down at Nyctasia kindly and said, “Truly it is remarkable, child. You could be one of my own daughters.”

Bewildered and grateful, Nyctasia leaned her forehead against the old woman’s knee, “I wish that I could,” she said earnestly.

“But you must not stay here. You are in danger.”

Nyctasia realized suddenly that this was so. She had to get away at once, yet she did not rise. “You will give me your blessing. Mother, before I go?” she whispered, bowing her head again, humbly.

The old woman touched Nyctasia’s hair lightly with one frail hand, murmuring a ceremonial phrase, then said, “Now you must be gone, child,” and pushed her away with surprising strength.

Nyctasia looked up, startled, and it was Mharestri she saw glaring at her, furious, hand raised to strike again. “Get out!” said the matriarch in a low, harsh voice. She hit at Nyctasia’s face and arms, “Get out of here!”

Corson was shaking her. “Get up! We have to get out of here!”

## 7

“WAKE UP!” CORSON whispered. “There’s someone coming.”

“Who ...?” Nyctasia peered around vaguely, yawning. She sneezed.

“Be quiet, they’ll find us—hurry!” But before they could reach their horses, an arrow flew past them. Corson dropped to the ground at once, pulling Nyctasia down with her.

“They’ve found us.”

A group of ragged figures, with daggers and shorts words drawn, came from among the trees and formed a circle around them. Corson and Nyctasia slowly got to their feet, looking around for any avenue of escape. They were trapped.

But as Nyctasia hopelessly surveyed their captors, she found not a Teiryne or an Edonaris crest among them, and she suddenly laughed aloud, almost giddy with relief. These were not the hirelings of her enemies, but only common robbers!

One of the thieves stepped forward and looked at her quizzically. “Do we amuse you?”

“Please forgive my incivility,” Nyctasia said, “I was only thinking of the old saying, you know, that the penniless don’t fear thieves.” She gestured at her own shabby garments. “I certainly have nothing to fear.”

The thief looked them over scornfully. With her patched cloak and satchel of books, Nyctasia was the picture of a wandering student, and Corson looked the vagabond soldier that she was.

“Yet you have such fine horses—stolen I’d say from the look of you two.” He shook his head

disapprovingly. “Get their weapons,” he ordered.

“You’d better decide how badly you want them,” Corson said grimly. “How many of your people can you spare?” She held her broadsword ready. Corson would give up her goods if she must, but would not let herself be disarmed without a fight. “Our swords aren’t worth what they’ll cost you.”

“She’s in a terrible humor,” Nyctasia remarked. “She killed four people in a skirmish outside Rhostshyl last night. As a matter of fact, that’s how we got the horses.”

“This city’s getting too dangerous,” said the thief. He shrugged. “All right, don’t get their weapons—but you’ll put up that sword if you want to keep it.” When Corson had reluctantly obeyed, he walked over to inspect the saddlebags. “Books,” he muttered, tossing them out on the ground.

Nyctasia winced. “Is there no respect for learning anymore?” she asked plaintively.

“Students are thieves’ bane,” he sneered. “They never have anything worth stealing.” He turned to Corson. “But *you* might have picked up some loot. Throw that pouch over here.”

Corson cursed. “Someday I’ll make you pay for this. I swear it.” She tossed her purse at the robber’s feet.

He shook it with satisfaction. “We’ll have the jewelry, too. You, Nessa—”

One of his followers approached them, hand outstretched. Nyctasia surrendered her belongings with indifference. She was carrying nothing of value.

“Copper,” complained Nessa, pocketing Nyctasia’s earrings. “Ho, but look at *these* now—gold, or I’m a fishmonger!”

Corson seethed with frustrated rage. Her golden earrings were her most treasured possession. The ringleader held them up and peered at them, delighted. “You’re right. These will fetch a good price. And soldiers are usually such poor game, too. What they don’t spend on drink they throw away at dicing. You give me new respect for the breed,” he said to Corson.

Suddenly her sword was in her hand again. She gripped the hilt so tightly that her arm shook. “Get out of here, you scum, before I forget what the odds are!”

The thieves laughed, “We don’t want to tangle with her,” one of them shouted, “she killed four people at Rhostshyl!”

“I don’t see any of you bravos trying to disarm her,” Nyctasia said quietly. “Bear-baiting is cowards’ sport,” She turned to the leader. “Why don’t you call them off before it’s too late? You have what you want.”

The robber grinned and casually put on Corson’s earrings. “We’d better go while we still can, eh?” He made a sign for his people to withdraw. “Come on, bravos,” he said.

Corson slowly lowered her sword. Her whole body was trembling. She watched as Nyctasia gathered up her books, inspecting them for damage. “What do you want with those useless things now?” she shouted. “They took everything—our horses, our money ... I’ll kill someone for this! *Me*, robbed!”

Nyctasia looked at her warily. “Never mind, I’ll make good your losses. I have a fortune in keeping at Chiastelm.”

“And how do you think we’ll get there without horses?”

Nyctasia shrugged. “We’ll get there, don’t worry.”

“Well, what do you mean to do?!”

“To begin with, I think I’ll take a bath. I’m filthy.”

“A bath!”

But Nyctasia was already walking downstream towards a pool that was hidden among the trees. Best to leave Corson alone to nurse her wounded pride. “That’s right, a bath,” she called back. “It’s a habit among civilized people. I won’t be long.”

Uneasily, Corson watched her move out of sight. She knew that she should stay with Lady Nyctasia, but she was glad of a chance to recover her temper alone. “Stay within earshot,” she called, and leaned back against a tree, clenching and unclenching her fists. She felt more exhausted than after an actual fight.

She could hear the Lady Nyctasia singing to herself as she bathed. She’d just lost her horses and goods, and the silly bitch was singing!



*“So beware, my Lady Alys,  
This is a haunted palace ...”*

Her voice was high and pure and serene.

Corson liked the Ballad of Mad Alys. When it ended, she called to Nyctasia, “You’re crazy, Lady, you really are!”

“All the Edonaris are crazy,” Nyctasia answered, amused. “And all the Teiryn are stupid. That’s what folk say in Rhostshyl, among themselves. Do you know what I most regret leaving behind? My harp.”

“If you’d brought it, those rutting bandits would have stolen it.”

“That’s true.” She began to sing “The Queen of Barre.”

A bath would feel good at that, Corson reflected.

Nyctasia was kneeling by the water, half-dressed, drying her hair with the corner of her cloak. She did not hear Corson’s step on the soft moss bordering the pool. By the time she realized that Corson was standing over her, it was too late to conceal her side, smoothly healed, where there had been a vicious wound the night before. For a moment they stared at one another, frozen.

“So your reputation for witchcraft is quite undeserved,” Corson said coldly. “You heal quickly for someone who’s not a witch!”

“I lied. I’m an excellent liar.”

“I’ve noticed that about you. What other lies have you told me, sorceress?”

Nyctasia began rubbing at her hair again, trying to appear calm. “I don’t really remember,” she said carelessly. “No doubt I said whatever was necessary. I always do.” She did not rise to her feet, hoping that Corson would not kill someone who was unarmed and on her knees.

“You *did* put a curse on the Teiryns. You brought the sickness on them!”

“Don’t be a fool!”

“If you can heal with magic, you can kill with it.”

“That isn’t so!” Nyctasia exclaimed earnestly. “Healing is much simpler. I can explain—”

“Liar! I should just bring your head back to Rhostshyl and collect my wages!”

“You can’t be stupid enough to believe that I could be driven out of my own city if I had that kind of power! Why would I need to lie to you—why would I need you at all—if I could defend myself with spells?!”

“You make everything sound true, but you’ll not get around me again with your clever words. If I see you again, you’d better have some spells to defend yourself with!” She turned and strode off furiously, without a backward glance at the dread sorceress of Rhostshyl.

When Corson was out of sight, Nyctasia slowly stood and finished dressing, her hands trembling at the memory of Corson’s barely restrained fury. The danger just passed made her think of an experience she had long tried to forget. Years ago, she had led the hunt for a savage wildcat which had killed a herdsman on one of her estates. In the end, it had broken free of the hounds and tried to spring at her—but she had only been waiting for a clear shot and she sent an arrow cleanly through its throat.

Nyctasia had been in at the kill on many dangerous hunts since then, but she still sometimes dreamt of the cat at bay, and the wild hatred in its eyes as it crouched to spring at her. Corson had turned on her with the same look of desperate rage.

“But it’s my own carelessness that will kill me,” Nyctasia thought. She was furious with herself for allowing Corson to learn the truth just then, while still smarting from her humiliating defeat by the thieves. Nyctasia could not afford to be careless, and she never forgave herself for a mistake.

She doubted that she could reach Chiasm alone, but there was nothing to do now but wait. Corson might return when she’d come to her senses. If she hadn’t carried out her threats then, at the height of her fury, she wouldn’t do so later in cold blood. Corson was no fool, thank Asye!

Nyctasia gathered some dry twigs for kindling and began to stir up the dying campfire. She was at home in the woods. Like any aristocrat, she’d been thoroughly trained in the hunt as well as the other courtly arts of fencing, dancing, harping, and etiquette. Hunting and harping she enjoyed; she was adequate at the rest.

If only she had her bow now, she could at least hunt some small game for dinner—but it was hanging from the saddle of her stolen horse. With a sigh, she settled herself comfortably at the foot of a tree and drew out the letter from Erystalben ar'n Shiasfred, still unread.

"... So I've the Teiryn to thank that you remember your word to me at last. If I could not draw you from your beloved city,, at least those fools can drive you from it. 'Tasia, that adder's nest is not worth your regrets. Let it look to its own destruction. Your place is here. I have carried out much of our purpose, but it will go for nothing unless you soon join your power to mine.

"I've seen no further sign of Vhar Kastenid, though I do not believe he has given up the battle. But together we will be able to hold this place against any enemy. Come to me quickly, 'Tasia. At times I do fear that you have forgotten. And then I do not see my way clearly ...."

Nyctasia read on to the end of the letter, then put it away, smiling to herself. She had never forgotten, not for a moment. It was true that she could not leave the city as easily as Erystalben had—an Edonaris had duties which could not be abandoned lightly. And she had left behind much that she loved. But she did not regret.

Corson walked blindly for a time, trying not to think of the way she'd been shamed before the Lady Nyctasia. But again and again she saw the thieves gloating over their spoils, laughing at her. The thought of her own helplessness sickened her, and she finally stopped in a small clearing to rest. Her hands were scratched from heedlessly pushing her way through thorn bushes, and twigs and brambles clung to her sleeves.

She sat with her knees drawn up to her chin and brooded over her past defeats and present losses. Painful memories assailed her of every time she'd been beaten, outnumbered, humiliated. Unwillingly, she remembered being captured in battle and led through the streets with the other prisoners, her hands tied behind her. The wounds from that war had long since been healed, but Corson had never recovered from the disgrace.

She lay her head on her arms, cursing wearily. If she could only get drunk, she thought, she could forget everything. She licked her lips. "I don't even have any water. I should have kept to the stream. It's that witch's fault—I hope they find her and butcher her!"

Corson frowned. She couldn't decide what to make of the Lady Nyctasia. The woman had admitted to practicing magic, but she'd fled from Rhostshyl nevertheless, and Corson had seen her defenseless before swords. Clearly she had no power to strike down her enemies at will, but could she cast spells to waste them with a sickness? And was she even now working magic against Corson herself?

"Spells!" she spat. "I'll go back and settle this affair with her one way or another!" She'd agreed to escort Lady Nyctasia to Chiasstelm and it might after all be the wiser course to keep her in sight. And then perhaps she could still collect the rest of her fee ....

Yet Corson remained where she was, uncertain, as the dusk gradually deepened around her. She still had made no move to rise when she suddenly heard the sound of approaching horses. In a moment she had leapt to her feet and hidden herself in the shadows.

"If they're robbers they're too late," she thought, gripping her sword hilt, "and if they're not, maybe I can rob them and get myself a horse." She waited, sword in hand, till a rider came into view, but then she only stood where she was, open-mouthed and staring.

Nyctasia was riding her own horse and leading Corson's. "I told you we'd get to Chiasstelm somehow," she said.

## 8

"HOW DID YOU get those horses back?!"

Nyctasia grinned. "I destroyed the entire band of thieves with my murderous magic arts, of course. Have you forgotten that I'm an all-powerful enchantress?"

Corson sheathed her sword, not trusting to her own temper. "Answer me!"

"Take care you don't arouse my wrath, woman. You know I might change you into a mushroom and

eat you.”

Corson started towards her. If she had to beat an answer out of this lying witch, she was quite prepared to do it. “You cursed, japing—”

Nyctasia backed her horse away a few paces into the brush. “Very well, I’ll explain about the horses,” she laughed, “but you won’t like it.”

“I know,” said Corson, grabbing for Nyctasia’s bridle. The horse shied back suddenly, kicking out, and Corson pitched forward into the brambles. They tore at her neck as she tried to rise, and thorns caught fast in her hair.

“Corson? Are you hurt?” Nyctasia dismounted and pushed her way through the thicket.

Corson glared at her and tried to pull free from the entangling branches, cursing as the briars raked her fingers, Nyctasia could see that she would have to be handled carefully. She was in no temper to be reasoned with—but reason was not the only form of persuasion.

She smiled to herself. “You’re making it worse. Here, let me help.” She knelt beside Corson and began to unsnarl her hair. There was a great deal more of it than she’d expected. “The braid’s come down. I think I’ll have to cut it off,” she teased.

Corson struck at her halfheartedly. “If you *dare* ... !”

“Hold still.” Nyctasia carefully undid the thick braid, freeing loose strands of hair from around the thorns. “There, now.”

“Are you finished?”

“Not quite.” She combed her fingers through the heavy waves of waist-length hair. “I wish I had a brush.”

“I’ll do it,” said Corson. She pulled her hair over one shoulder to braid it.

Nyctasia touched a finger lightly to the back of her neck. “You’re bleeding.”

“I suppose you’re a vampire as well as a witch.”

Nyctasia leaned over and nibbled at Corson’s throat. “Mmm—hmm.”

“What are you doing?!”

“I’m casting a spell on you. Don’t be afraid.” She laughed softly and brushed her lips along Corson’s jaw.

Corson was stunned. Lady Nyctasia was a client, an aristocrat, an arrogant, lying, sorcerous—

Nyctasia kissed her again, on the mouth, and started unlacing her tunic.

“But you ... you ...” stammered Corson, “I ...”

“What’s wrong?” Nyctasia breathed, close to her ear.

Corson couldn’t remember. She would worry about it later, she decided. Abandoning her misgivings, she let Nyctasia push her to the ground.

Nyctasia straddled her, laughing. She spread open the tunic and slowly slid it down over Corson’s shoulders, then stretched her body over Corson’s and gently kissed her eyelids and the corners of her mouth.

Corson raised her shoulders and tried to shrug out of the sleeves. “I can’t move.”

“Good,” said Nyctasia, sliding her small scholar’s hands up beneath the loose chain-mail.

“Oh,” Corson said faintly, and fell back onto the grass. Nyctasia lay over her and buried her face in the deep mass of hair at the base of Corson’s neck. She nuzzled her ear. “Now aren’t you glad you didn’t kill me?” she whispered.

Corson was ordinarily a light sleeper, but it was well into the next morning before she woke, and then she lay for some time with one arm flung over her eyes, trying to think of something to say to Lady Nyctasia. She could hear her moving about the clearing, building up the fire.

Then Nyctasia stood over her. “Ho, bodyguard, wake up! You’re supposed to be protecting me from the dangers of the forest, aren’t you? Wild beasts. Enemies. And robbers,” she added maliciously.

Corson sat up quickly and glowered at her. “What chance did I have against twenty people?”

“None at all, but you’re almost foolhardy enough to try it. You certainly had me worried.” She shook her head and wandered back to the fire to check on the spitted bird she’d shot that morning.

Corson shook the twigs and leaves from her hair then hastily braided it and bound it up before joining her companion. She was ravenous. “All right,” she said, “how *did* you get the horses back?”

Nyctasia looked up from turning the makeshift spit, “I once told you that I bred those horses myself. Well, I didn’t breed them just for swiftness. If they’re taken they’ll return to me—you can see how they’ve chewed through their ropes. If any of those thieves tried to stop them they were probably trampled to death. Thoroughbreds can be quite vicious.”

Corson smiled, cheered at the thought of the bandits’ undoing. “That bird smells good.”

Nyctasia had slit the skin and stuck in pieces of wild garlic, then stuffed the cavity around the spit with aromatic grasses. “When I took up the study of herb lore, I little thought of such homely arts as this,” she said, “but I’ve found it most useful for seasoning game.”

“I can guess why you studied such things, Lady,” Corson muttered. “You breed horses no one can steal, you heal wounds overnight, why can’t you use your powers to defend yourself?”

“Corson, it took me years to breed those horses. I had to lay spells on four generations of the bloodline before it produced the traits I wanted. Most magic requires long, painstaking preparation, like anything else—it’s of no use for felling one’s enemies at a moment’s notice. There isn’t time!”

“But you had time enough to lay spells on the Teirynd family.”

Nyctasia laughed. “I suppose I *could* breed a fatal disease into the Teirynd line, but, don’t you see, I’d need their complete cooperation to do it. The Teirynd may be stupid, but they’re not horses. Besides, I tried to tell you before—it’s far more difficult to kill with magic than to heal. The reason is perfectly plain if you consider the matter ...” Nyctasia’s voice had taken on an ardent, lecturing tone which Corson was beginning to recognize.

“I knew I’d be sorry I asked for this explanation,” she said, yawning.

Nyctasia ignored her. “The body naturally desires to mend itself. A healing spell only has to enhance inclinations that are already present—there’s no *resistance*. Whereas, in order to *afflict*—”

“Enough! I see!” Corson interrupted. “And I’ll wager you could tell me the contrary and make it seem just as convincing.” Her opinion was more or less that if Lady Nyctasia were telling the whole truth, then she, Corson, was Empress of Liruvath. “What I want to know,” she continued, “is, were you lying about that money of yours in Chiastelm?”

For a moment. Nyctasia was profoundly shocked and outraged. To be accused of murder and sorcerous evildoing was unfortunate, but to be suspected of a vulgar and base deception was an insufferable affront to her honor. An Edonaris might poison an enemy, if it were expedient, but would never stoop to cheating on a debt. Nyctasia had fought duels over lesser insults, but there was no way to demand satisfaction from a professional swordswoman like Corson.

She gazed into the fire, silent, until she had mastered her indignation, then said reprovingly, “I am an Edonaris.”

“You are a liar! An excellent liar, if I remember rightly.”

“Not where my honor is concerned. You’ll be paid for your services, never fear.”

Corson bowed. “Pray forgive my offense, Your Ladyship, but I’ve never before served a noblewoman who played the minstrel in a tavern, or cursed by Asye, either. If you don’t respect your own rank, how should I?”

Despite herself, Nyctasia could not keep back a smile. “*I’ve* never before had a guard as ready with her tongue as with her sword. Consider yourself fortunate that a lady doesn’t lower herself to duel with a social inferior!”

“Oh, I do,” snorted Corson, “very fortunate. Let’s eat.”

\* \* \*

They concluded their plans as they approached the port town of Chiastelm, “We’d best settle our accounts first,” said Nyctasia. “I know you’re anxious about your money. I do business with a reliable moneychanger on Market Street—we can go there straightaway,” She paused. “I want to take a cargo ship out of port tonight, but I’d rather the crew didn’t see me before we sail. Can you arrange passage for me?”

“Gladly. But how will I get word to you? Where will you be hiding?”

“I own property just outside of town, an old house overlooking the sea. It’s been closed up for years—it’s supposed to be haunted. I’d thought of going there.”

“I know the place, the old Smugglers’ House. But mightn’t your family look for you there?”

“I doubt they’re so determined to find me that they’ll search every town on the coast. They’ll think themselves well rid of me ... still, perhaps I should just take a room in a cheap sailors’ inn—someplace out of the way where they don’t ask questions.”

“It’s The Crow’s Nest you want. No one there wishes to be recognized.”

“It sounds charming.”

“It will be a new experience for you, milady. I’ll meet you there after I’ve seen to your passage. Do you want to take the first ship out of port, wherever it’s bound?”

Nyctasia hesitated. She was not accustomed to revealing her plans to anyone, but she would have to trust Corson this far. “Get me passage to Lhestreq, if you can. What are your plans now?” she asked, turning the subject as she always did when questioned about her own affairs.

Corson smiled. “The first thing I mean to do is get flaming drunk at The Jugged Hare—the owner is an old friend of mine. He’s a darling man, big as a giant and handsome as they come ... with green eyes and a bushy black beard,” she added dreamily.

Nyctasia shrugged. “I prefer them clean-shaven, myself. I like to be able to see their faces.”

“Have you got a pretty face waiting in Lhestreq?”

“Inland from Lhestreq,” Nyctasia admitted. “And very pretty indeed.”

“What does he look like?”

“Well, he’s very dark, all except for his eyes—sapphire blue eyes. And he has long, black hair. I like long hair,” she teased.

Corson looked away, blushing.

“He’s lean,” Nyctasia continued, “no taller than most, but he has long, muscled legs ... hollowed hips ...”

“Mmm,” said Corson appreciatively.

“... and a fine prominent collarbone, all ridge and shadow—I’ve missed that collarbone.”

“I can see why you didn’t marry your cousin.”

“There was no lack of reasons for refusing him.”

“Do you mean to marry the one with the collarbone?”

Nyctasia shook her head. Among families of the highest nobility, marriage was purely a matter of political convenience—a way of confirming an alliance or establishing a dynasty. As far as Nyctasia was concerned, love was a matter quite unrelated to wedlock. “I see no reason for it. Do you mean to marry that bearded giant of yours?”

“I don’t know—maybe someday. But I couldn’t spend all my life in Chiastelm. I get restless. And I’m dangerous when I’m bored,” she said, only half joking.

Nyctasia smiled. “Perhaps you’ll grow bored with wandering, someday.”

“That’s what Steifann says. He had his fill of traveling when he was a boy on the boats, and now he has his own place he means to stick to it.” Corson gazed absently into the distance. “He’s been right about most things,” she admitted.

They rode in silence for a time, each lost in her own thoughts.

When they were within a few miles of the city gates, Nyctasia turned the horses loose and drove them off. “I want to enter the city on foot. A poor student doesn’t own horses like these.”

Before she’d learned of their strange pedigree, Corson had hoped to have the fine horses in fee, but now she watched them trot off without much regret. “But won’t they come back to you again?”

“Not if I send them away myself. They’ll return to my stables, and I pity anyone who tries to stop them.” She looked down at her stained and bedraggled attire. “I suppose I look as though I’ve been walking for days,” she said, scuffing her boots in the dust of the road. “I certainly feel like it.” She cut herself a stout branch for a staff and blunted one end against a rock to make it look travel-worn.

Corson watched her with distrust and a certain grudging admiration. “Lady, you have the cunning of a

sneak-thief.”

“And that’s another thing—take care you don’t call me ‘Lady’ once we’re in the city. Only one person in all Chiastelm knows who I am.”

“The moneychanger.”

“Well, no, in point of fact, I—”

“No?!” shouted Corson. She advanced on Nyctasia menacingly. “Was anything you told me the truth? What about my money? What about your ruttin’ honor?”

“Now Corson, don’t be hasty—listen to me,” said Nyctasia quickly. “I can explain!”

## 9

NYCTASIA WAS WELL-KNOWN at the humble establishment of Vroehin the Moneychanger. But she was known as an impertinent messenger-boy from the household of the Lord Heirond, an elderly, bedridden nobleman who had never laid eyes on her. He would have been most surprised to learn that large sums had been deposited in his name with one of the lesser-known banking houses on lower Market Street.

As they approached the entrance, Nyctasia held her shoulders straighter and put a jaunty swagger into her walk. Her grey eyes were bright with amusement as she surveyed the shop. It hadn’t changed. Thin, middle-aged Vroehin still bent over his table of measuring rods and scales, his young daughter perched on her tall stool behind the counter, ready to record the day’s transactions.

Nyctasia flashed them her cockiest grin. “Good luck to this house!” she said in a voice both louder and mellower than usual.

“Well, *wait*. Master Rastwin—we’ve not seen you here in some time. Mellis has been pining away for you.”

“Father!” chirped the girl, “I have not!”

“Why not?” Nyctasia demanded, drifting in the direction of the comely young bookkeeper. “Still hard-hearted as ever, and me dreaming of you by night and day?”

Vroehin snagged her by the belt and pulled her back. “Let’s hear your business, youngster.”

“My lord’s instructions are, you’re to pay this ruffian what she asks. Asye knows what she’s done to earn it. Cut someone’s throat, I shouldn’t wonder.” She winked at Mellis. “Nice company for a gentle lad like me!”

Corson gestured threateningly at her, “Keep a civil tongue in your head, boy, if you value that pretty face of yours!” She joined Vroehin at the counting table.

Nyctasia backed away, laughing insolently, and leaned over Mellis’s counter. “Mellis wouldn’t let you touch me—she’d scratch your eyes out first, wouldn’t you, Song of my Heart?”

“Someone ought to give you a good beating, you pest. Maybe that would teach you some manners.” She surveyed Nyctasia critically. “And how did you lose your earrings? Gambling again?”

“Cards,” said Nyctasia promptly, “are my only weakness, aside from beautiful, cruel, passionate girls. But next time I’ll win, and buy you a gold locket, honeycomb.” She hoisted herself lightly up on the counter and tugged at one of Mellis’s yellow braids.

The girl tossed her head. “Oh, I’ve heard about you,” she lied. “It’s not just for your insolence that Lord Heirond keeps you!”

“Well, and what’s the harm to you if I warm an old man’s bed for him now and then, you selfish wench? There’s plenty of me left for you.” She snatched the girl’s hand and kissed it. Mellis swatted her.

“Father!”

Without looking up from his counting, Vroehin snapped. “Get off of there!”

“Just as you say,” said Nyctasia, and leaped down on Mellis’s side of the counter.

Corson heard scuffling and Mellis giggling, “Behave!” She was torn between watching Nyctasia’s performance and watching the moneychanger count out her pay. The money won.

“Quite the young rake,” she said, after Vroehin had collared Nyctasia and shown them both the door. They walked up Market Street. “What if that girl decides to marry you?”

Nyctasia smiled. “Oh, Mellis may flirt with a good-looking rascal, but she’s not fool enough to marry one. She’s engaged to a steady, hardworking apprentice at one of the best financial houses.” Her voice was warm with affection and respect. “That one’s sharp as a spur! Only fourteen, and she’s been keeping Vroehin’s accounts for two years.”

Corson walked on in moody silence. “Do you use magic to make them think you a boy?” she said at last.

“No need for that. I don’t make them think it, I let them think it. People see what they expect,” She threw back her head with a sudden boyish grin that made Corson want to cuff her. When she looked at Nyctasia now she could see the mocking youth who had been there all the time. She spat.

“No wonder everyone in Rhostshyl wants you dead!”

“Don’t be jealous, my sweeting,” Nyctasia said smugly, “why, the girl means nothing to me!” She dodged out of Corson’s reach, laughing, then suddenly resumed her usual stance and manner. They had come to the market square. “This is where we part company. You’ll get the rest of your money tonight.”

Corson stared at her, exasperated. This was like snatching at a gadfly. “I’m going this way,” she growled, pointing to the busy thoroughfare. “I’ll meet you tonight at The Crow’s Nest and take you to the docks. All I want is to see the last of you.”

Nyctasia bowed. “Until tonight, then. Don’t keep me waiting—I’ll be counting the moments till we meet!”

## 10

NYCTASIA TOOK A roundabout route to the home of Maegor the Herbalist, circling back erratically through the tangled side streets till she was satisfied that no one followed. When she entered the apothecary’s shop, Maegor merely glanced up and waved her into the back room without a word. Then, when her customer had gone, she locked the front door and joined Nyctasia among the shelves of jars and mortars.

Maegor was a handsome, hill-bred woman, serene and thoughtful, and not much given to talk. She was one of the few people Nyctasia trusted.

“I love the way it smells in here, Maeg. It makes me feel calm, and that’s not easily done.”

Nyctasia had already fetched her belongings from their hiding place beneath a loose flagstone. She slid a chest back over the cache and perched on top of it.

The herbalist embraced her. “Tasia, I thought you’d been killed! There were all sorts of rumors—”

“Good,” said Nyctasia. “Don’t let it be known that I’m alive. So many people would be disappointed.” She took some dried fruit from a bin and nibbled at it.

“You mean to leave for good, then. Is there no other way?”

“Maeg, my life isn’t worth a copper in Rhostshyl! It’s not only that my Great-Uncle Brethald tried to poison me—”

“Is he the one who died recently?”

Nyctasia did not seem to hear the question. “But,” she continued, “the Teiryms are howling for my blood, the stupid swine, and when I engaged a mercenary escort, I found she’d already been hired to kill me. By both Edonaris and Teiryms.”

“Nyctasia! You’re making that up.”

“You know me better than that, Maeg. As if I’d invent a story so improbable!”

Maegor sighed. “Yes, your lies are always more convincing than the truth. And what became of this mercenary?”

“Oh, I kept her, of course. She seemed to consider it a professional triumph to cheat two employers at once.” Nyctasia laughed. “I like her.”

“You would. A hired killer! Was there no one you could trust among your own guard?”

“I’d be long dead if there weren’t. But my people are Rhostshylid—how could I ask them to go into exile with me?” She began to pace about the narrow storeroom. “If they ever returned to the city after that they’d be condemned as traitors.” Nyctasia kept her doubts to herself. Her own people would have

been a constant reminder to her of the duties she was abandoning, the responsibilities of her rank. Better to travel with someone like Corson, whose lack of respect for her was rather a relief. “At least a hired killer can be bribed,” she remarked to Maegor. “It’s the sort with a personal grievance that’s really dangerous.”

“Tasia, I think I’d rather not hear these things.” She took Nyctasia’s hand, which was sticky from the dried fruit. “Come wash up, and I’ll give you a meal. You look scruffy as a vagabond student.”

“I can’t stay that long, Maeg,” Nyctasia said regretfully. There was nothing she would have preferred to a bath. “I’m supposed to look like a vagabond student, anyway. Maybe I should put a few more patches on this cloak.”

Maegor shook her head. “I’ll fetch you some scraps of cloth.”

Nyctasia looked through the valuables she’d left with Maegor, picked out those she wanted, and replaced the rest under the floorstone.

Maegor returned with the cloth. “What are you doing?”

“The rest of this is yours. I can’t take all of it with me.”

“I’ll keep it for you then. You may need it. You’ll be back one day.”

“I’d be crazy to come back!”

“You are crazy. All the Edonaris are crazy.”

Nyctasia smiled sadly. “Maeg—”

“If I need the money I’ll use it, Tasia,” Maegor said firmly. She held out needle and thread.

Nyctasia could sew neatly enough for a noblewoman who rarely did such things for herself. But now she added the extra patches with a student’s stitches, hasty-looking and irregular.

“How do I look?”

“Disreputable.”

“I’m ready, then,” She took out a letter sealed with plain, unstamped wax. It was an order for the release of certain prisoners, Rhavor’s young servant among them. “Will you see that this is sent, next week when I’m well away from here? Give it to a traveler, someone who doesn’t know you, and if you’re asked—”

“I know, my dear. Say a stranger gave it me.”

“Yes, isn’t it exhausting? This sort of thing leaves me no time for my studies. Imagine what it will mean to be someplace safe, where I needn’t constantly scheme to stay alive.”

Maegor appreciated the vagueness of Nyctasia’s “someplace.” Nyctasia never gave herself away. The *vahn* alone knew what this devious existence was making of her. The herbalist feared for her friend’s life, but she feared more for her spirit.

“Lie if you think best, Tasia, but I’d like to know—are you going to join Erystalben?”

Nyctasia hesitated over her answer, which would of course be something ambiguous like “If I can,” or “I’d like to.”

“Yes, I am,” she said, breaking into a smile.

“I’m glad.” She walked Nyctasia to the door. “I’ll miss you, but you’re right to go. You’ve learned the ways of your enemies too well, Tasia. You might forget that there are other ways.”

Nyctasia shrugged. “People learn what they must, to survive.”

“I wonder. If you must destroy yourself to defend yourself, have you truly survived? Be careful, Tasia.”

For answer, Nyctasia only turned to Maegor and hugged her as hard as she could. For once she had nothing to say. She never told people she loved them.

## 11

CORSON PUSHED HER way into the crowds thronging the busy marketplace. “Hlann take her,” she muttered, “misbegotten witch!”

She wandered through the square, fingering the heavy pouch at her side, and the weight of the coins soon restored her good temper. On every side were merchants’ stalls piled high with all manner of



goods. Corson admired velvets and rich brocades, brass lanterns and stout carved chests. She passed a potter at his wheel, shaping a graceful bowl.

Further on, a woman had set up a brazier and was cooking meat and vegetables spitted on wooden sticks. Fat dripped down onto the coals, and the smoke was fragrant with thyme and rosemary. Corson bought a skewer and walked along eating it. Across the way, a gypsy child with a draggled peacock on a leash was offering the feathers to passersby, two for a silver penny.

She would ordinarily have lingered in the marketplace, but today Corson was eager to get to The Jugged Hare. And there was still the matter of Lady Nyctasia's passage out of Chiastelm to take care of. She threw the stick to the ground and wiped her mouth on her sleeve. Steifann might know of a trustworthy cargo-runner—he'd once worked on the docks, and many sailors frequented his tavern. She should be able to find out what she wanted to know without mentioning Lady Nyctasia.

But as she set off in the direction of The Jugged Hare, her attention was drawn by the faint sound of bells and a heady fragrance of incense, both wafting from a small striped tent in a far corner of the marketplace. As she came nearer, she could see wind-chimes and silver bells hanging from the awning, with prisms and pendants of crystal strung among them.

Corson hesitated. Like most soldiers, she was a reckless spendthrift, and the more outlandish and costly the merchandise, the more it appealed to her. She was itching to spend some of her hard-won gold, but if she went right to The Jugged Hare, Steifann would insist that she put most of it aside for safekeeping. That decided her.

She had to stoop to pass the curtained entranceway, but inside the tent there was room enough to stand straight. The ground was covered with a scarlet carpet, strewn with a tantalizing array of candlesticks and vases, bright scarves, bowls of beaten brass and figurines of jade. Strings of glass beads spilled from an open chest. Corson stepped through the haze of perfumed smoke, lit only by hanging oil-lamps, and examined in turn a damask sash and an ivory-handled knife. Kneeling by the chest, she fingered pearl necklaces and brooches of nacre in silver filigree.

The proprietor, who had paid no attention to her at first, now came up and made her a deep bow.

"Good day to you, Star of Warriors. Which of my humble trinkets has pleased you?"

Corson shrugged disdainfully. "These are pretty toys, but I've no use for such things."

He spread his hands in resignation. "Ah, no doubt your many lovers have showered you with treasures. It is no wonder you are indifferent to my poor baubles. And, in truth, a woman as fair as yourself has no need of further adornment. But if you permit me, I will show you the one thing that such beauty requires." He invited Corson to sit on a tasseled cushion while he fetched a coffer of rosewood from a corner of the tent. From this he drew forth something swathed in cream-colored silk, and Corson watched in amusement as he ceremoniously unwound the wrappings.

"Perfection is not to be enhanced, but enjoyed," he said, and held up before her an ornate silver hand mirror.

She took it from the merchant carefully, almost reverently, and studied the delicate molding of the frame and the intricate chased patterns on the back and handle. Her fascination was plain to see.

"It is a good piece," the man said casually. "You understand that I do not show it to you to sell, but only because I know that you will appreciate the artistry of the work. I would not insult you by mentioning money."

"A gold crescent for it," said Corson.

He laughed. "My dear child, those engravings were three years in the making. It is a gift at five."

"Sir, I am only a poor soldier—but I do admire genius. A gold crescent and six in silver."

"Poverty is a widespread disease. I myself," he sighed, "have devoted my life to beauty. It is not a lucrative profession. Four gold crescents."

Corson got up to leave, shaking her head. "It grieves me, but ...." She held out her hands to demonstrate their emptiness.

"I defame the artist who made this his life's work," he murmured, as if to himself. "Three gold crescents."

"Done," said Corson, and they both smiled. After a further exchange of compliments, she took her

leave and stepped out into the sunlight, blinking. "What an old thief!" she thought. "Star of Warriors!"

She had not gone far before she took the mirror from her pack and lovingly examined it again, grinning in anticipation of the scolding she'd get from Steifann for her extravagance.

In Corson's rootless existence, Steifann was the one steadying influence. The Jugged Hare was her only home, and Steifann and his people her family. He kept her money and belongings for her, worried about her, argued with her, and had a lecherous nature that equaled her own. Though she never stayed in one place for long, Corson came back to the Hare whenever she could.

She'd first strayed into the tavern on a rainy night some years back, already half-drunk, and in a foul temper. Not only was she tired, wet and hungry, but she'd lost all her money gambling at The Pelican.

"Pelicans!" she muttered, and sat down at a table in a dark corner. "Vultures—all of them! They cheated me." She looked around the room miserably. It was late and the place was nearly empty. "And I'm lonely."

A serving-woman came over and asked if she wanted something to eat or drink. "Both," said Corson promptly. She took the woman's hand and kissed it. "What's your name, pretty one?" But the woman only gave her an arch smile and walked away, hips swaying.

"What's the difference?" Corson thought. "I can't pay for anything anyway."

She was served a cold supper of roast beef, cheese and a loaf of bread, which she tried to gulp down as quickly as possible, since she expected to be thrown out at any moment.

Then the serving-woman put a mug of ale before her, and held out her hand for payment. "A silver crescent, please."

Corson stuffed some meat into her mouth and shrugged. The woman waited.

"Go to The Pelican," Corson growled. "I left all my money there." She yawned and leaned her head on her hand.

"Steifann!" the woman called.

"Asye take them all," thought Corson. "I want to go to sleep."

Then a tall, broad-chested man with thick black hair and beard came out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on his pants. "What's the matter, Annin?"

The woman pointed to Corson.

"You, get out of here," he said, advancing on her threateningly. He had green eyes and fair skin.

Corson was in love.

She looked up at him with a ravishing smile. She rarely met anyone as tall as herself. "I like green eyes," she said.

Steifann jerked his head towards the door. "Up!"

Corson could have wept. She was still hungry, she had no place to sleep, she had no money, it was raining, and now a man she found overwhelmingly attractive was trying to throw her out into the street. "It's not fair," she mumbled. "Go away."

She watched him from the corner of her eye, and when he bent over to grab her arm she shoved the table into his stomach and sprang to her feet, leaving him doubled over and gasping.

When he'd recovered his breath, he leaned on the table and told Corson in a tense, quiet voice precisely what manner of lice-ridden bitch he, Steifann, considered her to be. Then he vividly described how she might amuse herself after he had thrown her into the gutter where she belonged.

But Corson wasn't listening. When he came at her again, she backed away, laughing. "I think you're beautiful," she said, and hit him on the jaw. Steifann staggered against the table, lost his balance and fell, dragging Corson down with him. He rolled on top of her and tried to pound her head against the floor.

Corson didn't even try to fight him off. Instead, she wrapped her legs around his hips and pulled him closer, sliding her hands under his clothing. "Don't go," she protested, as he leaped up, gasping, his face red. Annin and the few remaining customers stood staring, while a cook and serving-boy watched from the kitchen doorway.

"Get her out of here!" Steifann shouted at them. "Call the watch if you have to, but get rid of her!" He strode into another room and slammed the door behind him.

Heartbroken, Corson got to her feet, gazing at the sturdy oak door. She towered over everyone in

the room.

Annin and the cook looked at each other. "You heard him," said Annin. "Get her out of here."

"I'm the father of children! You get rid of her!"

"What's back there?" demanded Corson.

"That's Steifann's quarters!" the kitchen-boy said gleefully, before the others could stop him.

Corson made up her mind, crossed to the door and kicked it open. From within, they heard Steifann yell furiously, "You rutting cur, get out of here! I'll kill you!"

"No!" The door slammed again. "Don't be a fool!" Sounds of struggling and cursing ensued, followed by a crash of falling furniture.

"Stop that, you—"

"Why?"

"... uhh ...." The room became very quiet.

"Maybe they've killed each other," Annin whispered.

"Do you want to go in and find out?"

"Not I." They shooed out the last customers and began gathering the dirty platters and righting the overturned table and chairs. Annin bolted the shutters. A scullion started sweeping the floor.

Suddenly, the silence was punctuated by a series of deep, staccato cries. The kitchen-boy giggled. "That's the way I want to die," he sang, snatching up the broom and dancing around with it.

"Put out the lamps, *Trask!*" Annin ordered. "You useless brat!"

## 12

THE SIGN AT Steifann's tavern showed a large, leering hare drunkenly embracing a jug of ale, Corson looked up at it fondly, remembering how the hare had seemed to wink at her the first time she'd seen it, inviting her to enter.

She went around to the back entrance, hoping to find everyone together in the kitchen. She'd been away longer than usual and her friends would fuss over her and scold her. Walden, the head cook, would complain that she was too thin, Annin would make her take a bath, and Trask would flirt with her—but then, Trask flirted with everyone. And Steifann would hug her so hard he'd lift her off the ground, all the while demanding to know where she'd been, what she'd been doing, and with whom she'd been doing it—but without really expecting any answers. Corson hurried through the courtyard to the kitchen.

Walden was scowling over a huge stewpot when Corson came up from behind and hugged him. "I'm starving," she said.

"Corson, you rutting idiot! What are you doing here? They'll find you!" he looked around anxiously. "Trask, get Steifann."

The serving-boy gave Corson a horrified look and rushed from the room.

Bewildered, she drew her sword and backed towards the door. "Who'll find me? Where are they, out front?"

"Not yet, but they're bound to come sooner or later—you're well-known around here."

"Asye's Blood, man! Who are you talking about?" Steifann came in from the front room, bolting the door behind him. "What are you all gaping at? Corson's not here, everyone knows she's left town. Corson, put that sword away before you kill somebody." He pushed the hair back from his forehead distractedly. "We'd better go to my room," he said at last, "and make some plans." He led Corson out the back way. "Get back to work," said the cook. "Nothing's happened here. Get that spit turning before the birds burn!"

Corson dropped onto the bed and slapped the space beside her. "Steifann, what is this all about?"

He sat down and put his arm around her. "You stupid ass, don't you know there's a price on your head? Two hundred crescents in gold for the capture of a tall, left-handed swordswoman called Corson. Or one hundred for killing her. There's a lot of people in this city who'd sell you for half that."

"But who offered the money? Who wants me that badly?"

"They say he's some great nobleman from Rhostshyl. And there are other rumors about him, Corson

..." Steifann hesitated. "I don't think he has an easy death planned for you."

Corson looked away. "Threats," she said carelessly. "Well, is there anything else I should know?"

"He's looking for someone else as well—a small, dark-haired woman. And there's five hundred crescents to be had for her. His servants have gone to every rat hole on the docks, and every ship in port." Steifann felt Corson's shoulders suddenly tense, and he looked at her sharply. "She's down there, isn't she?"

Corson didn't answer. Instead, she threw her arms around Steifann and kissed him hard, then stood up and shouldered her pack.

"Corson, don't be a fool! What are you going to do?"

"Run! Run like a hare from the hounds!" There was a knock at the door, and Corson's hand dropped to her sword hilt.

"Steifann, let me in," said a woman's voice impatiently. Corson laughed with relief and shot back the bolt to admit a short, stocky woman of forty with broad hips and an ample bosom. Annin had been head serving-woman at The Jugged Hare for years, and was firmly convinced that only her common sense and good judgment kept the tavern from ruin. The fact that Steifann was the owner did not prevent her from treating him as one of her underlings.

"Corson, my lamb, you oughtn't to be here, it's too dangerous. Have you no sense at all?" she scolded.

Corson bent down and kissed her. "I'm not here, I'm leaving. You take care of Steifann for me."

"You're not going anywhere till dark," Annin said firmly. "You'd be seen. How do you think you'd get out of the city?"

"I think she means to go straight to the docks and warn that woman," Steifann broke in.

"Rubbish," snapped Annin, and pushed Corson back onto the bed. "Sit down."

"I don't have time to argue, Annin, I—"

"Then don't. If you want to warn someone, you can send a message."

"That's right," said Steifann. "I know my way around the waterfront. When I was working on the wharves—"

"No. Not you," said Annin. "You're so rutting big, folk take note of you. I'll go myself, tonight. With a shawl over my head, no one will notice me."

Corson shook her head. "This is my affair, Annin. I know what I'm doing."

"You don't know your left hand from your right. Every informer on the docks is looking for you. You won't do yourself or anyone else any good by getting caught." Hands on hips, she fixed Corson with a fierce, protective glare. "You'll stay out of sight until we can get you safely away from here."

"Destiver's ship is in port," said Steifann. "If we take the wagon down to the wharf before dawn, maybe we can smuggle her aboard. There'll be plenty of carts unloading supplies and cargo."

"Who's Destiver?" Corson protested. "I'm not—"

"Good idea. I could arrange that now. Both of you wait here till I get back. Is that understood?"

Corson was silent.

"She's right, you know," said Steifann. "You can't go down there. You might as well walk into their arms."

"Where is she, Corson?" Annin demanded.

Corson got up and paced the room restlessly. She'd never involved her friends in this kind of thing before, but she knew that she had no choice. She couldn't protect Lady Nyctasia by walking into a trap. A feeling of helplessness swept over her, and to Corson it seemed, as always, a foretaste of death. She clenched her fists. "I don't like it."

"I know," said Steifann. "You'd rather get yourself and that other woman killed than admit you need help." He waited.

Corson looked at the floor. "She's at The Crow's Nest. I'm supposed to get her on a ship tonight."

Annin nodded. "I'll see about passage for both of you then. I can take her straight to the ship after dark, but meanwhile I'd better go talk to Destiver. And, Steifann," she added sternly, "don't let her out of here!"

Steifann raised Corson's head and kissed her. "Now what can I do to keep you here till Anmin gets back?"

She put her arms around him and pulled him close. "I thought I'd be able to stay with you awhile," she sighed, leaning her head on his shoulder.

"I don't want you to go."

There was nothing more to say. He held her against him and stroked her back gently, then reached up to loosen her long braid. Corson tilted back her head and shook free the bronze cascade of her hair. His lips brushed along her throat, and he began to kiss her on the mouth and eyes. Corson pressed against him and slid her hand between his legs. She heard his breathing change and he held her even tighter.

"Corson ..."

"Mmro ... ?"

"Will you take off that rutting sword, or do you want to make a gelding of me?"

"Asye forbid!" laughed Corson, letting her sword belt slip to the floor, and pulling him down onto the bed.

## 13

NO ONE LOOKED up as Nyctasia entered The Crow's Nest, or offered to assist her in any way. She went up to a group of idlers gathered around the fire and slammed her stick down across a bench. "Ho, the house! Who keeps this vipers' den?"

A man and woman glanced askance at each other. The man shrugged. "What do you want?"

"What do I *want*?" echoed Nyctasia. "I want accommodations fit for a queen, of course. I want splendor, gaiety, and lordly fare. Spiced delicacies and ruby wine! That's what I want!"

Shouts of agreement arose from the other guests. This was the best entertainment they'd seen in some time.

"I could do with some of that myself!"

"Tell us more, woman!"

"I want decent lodgings," Nyctasia concluded, "but I'll settle for what you've got to offer."

This sally too was met with cheers. "Best lodgings this side of the gutter, right here!"

"If you happen to be a rat or a roach—"

"Most of you are," said the landlady, and spat into the fire. She stood and walked from the room, giving Nyctasia a hard look as she pushed past her. Nyctasia bowed elaborately, sweeping her shabby cloak out of the woman's way with an ironic flourish.

The group made room for her on the bench, hoping for more sport. "Do you have any money?" said the landlord. "We don't take clever speeches in payment."

"Oh, of course I'm carrying a fortune in gold and jewels," sneered Nyctasia. She tossed him a small silver coin. "Two nights," she said. She did not intend to stay for a single night, but it might be safer to mislead her listeners.

He examined the coin carefully, then nodded. "Any bed upstairs?"

Nyctasia repressed a shudder. She was prepared to face danger and hardship, but nothing could reconcile her to the prospect of bed-lice. After joking with the other guests for a time, she made her way upstairs, claiming to be exhausted from a day's hard walking. She entered a large, slant-ceilinged room at the head of the stairs, noting that it had no other door and only one small window high on the far wall. There were several straw pallets in the room, but none that Nyctasia would have lain or even sat upon under any circumstances.

The other two rooms were similar, and she returned to the first, satisfied that she was alone. When she'd latched the door, she pulled a small leather bag from her shirt and took from it a pair of exquisite golden earrings. The lustrous red-gold shone softly, even in the dim light from the gable window. Edonaris heirlooms, they were part of the legacy from her late, unlamented Great-Uncle Brethald.

She smiled grimly. How it must have galled him to know that Nyctasia, a traitor to the name of

Edonaris, would inherit the better part of his goods and properties. But he was childless, and inflexible tradition decreed that family property follow very specific lines of descent. It was no wonder he'd tried to ensure that Nyctasia would die before him.

Now she brooded over the beautiful golden earrings and thought how outraged he would have been to know that she considered giving family treasure to a base-born hireling. But Corson had surely earned them. She'd lost her own in Nyctasia's service, and it would be most appropriate to reward her with a new pair. Nyctasia herself wore only adornments of silver, to accentuate her grey eyes and fair complexion—gold was for honey-skinned Corson, or dark Erystalben.

But still Nyctasia's blood reproached her at the thought of thus estranging ancient Edonaris property. She weighed the jewelry in her hand thoughtfully. After all, had she not broken with her family? Why not celebrate her freedom with this gesture, if only to spite the memory of Great-Uncle Brethald?

Suddenly she leapt to her feet, hastily concealing the earrings. She could hear people climbing the stairs. The door was forced open before she could unlatch it, and three armed guards entered the room.

"We have orders not to harm you, my lady, unless you resist us. Will you surrender your weapons?"

Nyctasia at once resorted to the most convincing lie of all: she laughed. "My lady?" she cried, in seeming delight. "Oh, I like that! What would a lady be doing here, you imbeciles?" She minced up to the guard who had spoken, with the affected grandeur of an ill-bred student imitating a noblewoman. "Pray enter my ancestral halls," she invited. "Lady Maggot of Vermin Hall bids you welcome!"

The guards looked at one another, uncertain. "Maybe—" one of them began.

"Well?" demanded Nyctasia. "Here I am, arrest me! Her Ladyship of Quills and Patches!" She seemed to be having a wonderful time. "Ho, friends!" she shouted, for the benefit of the listeners downstairs, "you people didn't know you had a great lady in your midst, did you?"

But the laughter that answered her from the stairway was not that of her fellow lodgers. "Forgive me if I fail to applaud such a fine performance, cousin, but you see that I have the use of only one arm." The guards moved aside, and Lord Thierran ar'n Edonaris entered, smiling. His right arm was bound in a bandage and sling, "Be sure to gag her," he ordered. "She'll convince you that no one's here at all if she isn't silenced."

Nyctasia passed from desperation to despair. No one would come to her rescue now, for no one knew where to find her. She had been careful about that, as always. "But not careful enough," she thought bitterly. Only Corson had known where she was hiding. It must have amused her to be paid for changing sides once again. She must be very well pleased with herself.

## 14

STEIFANN ENTERED THE room quietly. Corson was still asleep, her hair spread loose on the pillows. He stood over her a moment and then placed his hand on her back. Without opening her eyes she grabbed his wrist and tried to pull him down on top of her.

"Stop that, woman," he said, sitting down beside her. "Get up." He slid his arms under her and lifted her up beside him. She leaned against him and mumbled something into his neck.

"What?"

"I'm cold."

He pulled her closer, cupping her breast in his hand. "Better?"

She nodded, then raised her head and kissed him.

"Will you listen to me? Some madman's got half the city hunting for you, and all you can think of is screwing."

"I'm thinking of food, too. I'm hungry."

"Corson—!"

"Yes. I'm listening."

"The *Windhover* leaves with the morning tide. Destiver's agreed to take the two of you."

"Oh," said Corson dispiritedly. "How much will it cost?"

Steifann cleared his throat and mentioned a sum. Corson gasped.

“If you don’t have the money, Corson, I’ll get it for you.”

She was disgusted. The price would take most of what Nyctasia had paid her. All that hard-earned money gone—and for what? Curse Lady Nyctasia and her stinking family! “No, I can pay it. But what about the captain, Steifann, and the crew? Can they be trusted? What’s to keep them from trying to collect the passage money and the reward too?”

“Don’t worry, I know Destiver. She’ll keep her word.”

“She?” said Corson, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. “How well *do* you know her?”

“We’re old friends,” he grinned. “She’d do anything for me.”

“Old friends? I know what that—”

They were interrupted by the arrival of Annin. “Corson, keep your voice down! And put your clothes on. There’s no time to lose.”

“What happened?” Corson demanded. “Did you find her?”

“I’m sorry, Corson, she’s been taken. It’s all over the docks.”

Corson cursed softly. “What have you heard?” she said, pulling on her breeches.

“Wild rumors, mostly. This woman’s a spy. A faithless wife. A foreign princess—or a prince, for that matter. They took her asleep, or, if you like, she fought like a demon and killed three guards.” Annin shrugged. “But all the tales agree that they found her at The Crow’s Nest and took her prisoner.”

“Where did they go?”

“To Rhostshyl. Or to Liruvath. To a mansion in the center of town! Nobody knows. The question is, has she told them where *you* are? They might be here at any moment—we have to get you to the ship now! I’ll fetch the cart. You lovebirds say your farewells, and don’t be long about it.”

As soon as she was gone, Corson belted on her sword. “They won’t be after me, now that they’ve found her. They probably thought I could lead them to her. I’ll be safe enough.”

Steifann caught her in a bear hug and kissed her. “Why don’t you take up some sort of honest work, you worthless wretch?”

Corson broke away reluctantly. “I’ll be careful. Tell Annin not to worry.”

He followed her to the door, trying to bar her way. “Corson, you can’t go after that woman—you don’t even know where she is! Or do you?”

“I might. If I’m wrong, I’ll go to the ship without her.”

“And if you’re right?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I’ll probably go to the ship without her anyway. I’m not about to try anything foolish. I’ll be back in a month or two, when this affair’s forgotten.” She kissed Steifann on the ear. “And if I find out you’ve been sleeping with this Destiver,” she whispered, “when I come back, I’ll kill you!”

Steifann cuffed her gently and let her go. “Send me word that you’re safe,” he said.

“I will—soon. Nothing will happen to me.”

He watched her cross the courtyard. At the gate she turned and waved to him, then disappeared into the alleyway.

“I must be out of my mind,” she thought. “I’m going to get myself killed!”

## 15

NYCTASIA HAD LET herself be taken prisoner without resisting. She was no match for three swords, and it better suited her dignity to surrender than to be seized by force. The one gesture of defiance left to her was to die in her own way, as befitted a devotee of the Indwelling Spirit.

She had known herself for dead the moment she’d heard Thierran’s voice, and she wasted no time on flip replies or futile struggles. Even as he gave his orders, while the guards bound her wrists behind her, she had begun the spell that would end her own life. She had spoken the truth when she told Corson that it was harder to kill with spells than to heal, but magic is always easier to work upon one’s self than upon another. And death itself may sometimes be a healing.

Nyctasia was hardly aware of where she was taken, or how. She did not notice the landlady’s

satisfied smirk, or the wondering stares of the others, as she was led out of The Crow's Nest. She heeded nothing but the voice of the *vahn* within her as it ceaselessly repeated her name. By the time she found herself alone with her captor, she had already achieved the trance known as the First Consolation—her name no longer held the slightest meaning for her.

Lord Thierran removed the gag from her mouth. "Well, 'Tasia, surely by now you've prepared some fabulous lie to persuade me to release you. Perhaps you can convince me that I died along with Mescrisdan."

His words came to Nyctasia from a vast distance. She considered them dispassionately, judged them unworthy of her attention, and forgot them at once. In a vague way, she knew that she was bound to a chair, that Thierran stood over her, but she no longer took an interest. She had begun to move towards the Second Consolation.

"Answer me, fool, while you have the chance. I have you and I can break you!"

Threats could not reach Nyctasia now, but the hard slap across her face did disturb her concentration for a moment. She looked up at Thierran without recognition and said the only thing that was in her mind, repeating it over in a flat, lifeless voice.

"Nyctasia ar'n Edonaris nyctasia arnedonaris nyctasiarnedonaris nycta ..."

"Stop that!" Lord Thierran struck her again and again, infuriated by her indifference. It was precisely Nyctasia's indifference that had always enraged him. The blows stopped her chanting, but pain was only another Influence to hasten her towards death. Her eyes slowly closed, and Thierran could sense her calm conviction that he did not exist. For a moment it frightened him.

Like most of the aristocracy, Lord Thierran had been raised as a Vahnite in name only. He had never practiced the Influences, Balances, or Consolations, but he knew of them, and he knew that Nyctasia took the Discipline seriously. She rarely drank spirits. She never wept. There was no doubt in his mind that she was capable of dying from sheer willfulness.

"Nyctasia!" But it was useless to call her by name. He seized her shoulder, shook her. "Listen to me, curse you! I want you alive!"

Though shielded by the profound apathy of the Second Consolation, Nyctasia could not dismiss Thierran's promises as easily as she had his threats. The *vahn* would destroy itself only if the alternative were a less desirable death. If Thierran offered her life, she would have to listen.

"Do you hear me? You throw away your life to no purpose, witch! I have no mind to kill you!"

Without allowing a shadow of emotion to disturb the even surface of her impassivity, Nyctasia decided on her response. Eyes still closed, and with the same toneless, unnatural voice, she said, "You tried to kill me only days ago."

He smiled, triumphant. "No, cousin—I tried to capture you. If I had tried to kill you, you would be dead."

She considered this with detached impartiality. True, he could have killed her easily enough before Corson arrived, while Mescrisdan still pinioned her arms. But instead he'd toyed with her, taunted her....

She would hear more. She allowed herself to look at him, but her face remained as expressionless as her voice. "What do you want of me, then?"

"Only two things, my dear 'Tasia. The first, of course, is your hand in marriage." He leaned toward her. "You know that the family thinks it my duty to take a hand in the management of your affairs. Scholars are a fanciful lot, after all, ill-suited for governing. When we're wed, you'll be able to devote yourself to your studies and leave such things to me."

Reluctantly, Nyctasia accepted the burden of hope. She would have to make an effort after all. "I see. You stand to inherit much more if I die as your wife."

He had wanted to make her look at him, but now he found her even gaze unnerving. He walked around behind her, "You might live longer as my wife than as my cousin, 'Tasia," he murmured, laying his hand lightly against her throat.

Nyctasia controlled her urge to pull away from his touch. Instead, she only stiffened her shoulders slightly, enough resistance to flatter his pride, but not enough to provoke him. If she pretended to consent *too* easily, he would not be fooled. "And how long do you think you'd live as my husband, Thierran?"



she asked coldly.

He laughed. "Oh, 'Tasia, you'll have to hope that nothing happens to me. While you're under my protection the family will tolerate you, but if I should meet with an untimely death, my grieving widow would bear the blame, guilty or not. You wouldn't live through the funeral, my dear."

"That would be a pity," said Nyctasia, "I look ravishing in black."

She understood, now. She'd be forced to sign a marriage-alliance ceding control of her major estates to Thierran. Then, if she were not killed at once, she'd be held under guard in her own household. She would stay alive as long as it amused Thierran to keep her. "And what is the second thing you want?" she asked, without agreeing to the first.

His hand tightened on her shoulder. "The mercenary."

"What do you mean?"

"You know very well. Your hireling, who killed Mescrisdan and crippled my arm. It may never heal! Where is she?"

Nyctasia gave no sign of her astonishment. It was not Corson who had betrayed her, then .... This meant more to her than she would have expected.

"She could be anywhere on the coast by now," she said, with a slight shrug. "I sent her away long before I came to Chiastelm. She'd have told my whereabouts to anyone who paid the price. For that matter, how did *you* know where to find me?"

"I did not know, I suspected. When Shiasfred left these parts he took ship from here. Others may have forgotten your upstart lover, but I was sure you'd follow after him. My people have combed the docks between here and Ochram, offering a large reward for you."

"Of course," thought Nyctasia wearily, "I betrayed myself." Aloud, she said, "I see I've underestimated you, cousin." He'd like that, the gloating snake. "I'll have to be more careful of that in the future, if I have a future."

"We'll discuss your future after you've told me where to find the mercenary."

"For *vahn*'s sake, Thierran, forget about her! I told you I got rid of her days ago. She rode north on the border road and that was the last I saw of her. I don't know where she is now!"

"And will you pretend that you don't know who she is, either? Her name?"

"Well, she called herself Brendal, but—"

He chuckled. "'Tasia, I've known you all your life. Do you think I still believe your ridiculous lies? You called her Corson that night, have you forgotten? I mean to find her, and I'll have the truth from you one way or another, I promise you."

Nyctasia shook her head. "An Edonaris does not take revenge on an inferior. She acted on my orders, and only I am accountable, you know that. If you want vengeance so badly, you have me—and you can strangle me with only one hand!"

"I have other plans for you, but you will not shield my brother's killer from me, Nyctasia. You dare speak of the honor of an Edonaris, who have done everything in your power to disgrace our house!" He gripped Nyctasia's hair, pulling her head back. "This assassin is only part of the price you'll pay for your life, do you understand me?"

It was useless, Nyctasia realized. Nothing but Corson's blood would satisfy him. "No," she said simply. "I do not understand you. I never have."

"What does that mean?" he demanded, coming around to face her, furious. "You're in no position to—"

"It means that you can kill me any way you choose, Thierran, except one. I can still prevent you from boring me to death."

The way was still open to her, and she followed it easily now, meeting no resistance. She did not even have to close her eyes this time—past the Second Consolation, it made no difference.

*Peace was within her reach at last, and life and death were reconciled. To cease to be part was to become one with the whole, to be not merely a life, but Life itself.*

Nyctasia was content.

"I'M GOING TO get myself killed," Corson thought. "He probably has a dozen guards in there." From where she crouched behind a broken-down section of wall, Corson could see a light from one of the windows on the topmost story. The house was supposed to be deserted.

Corson knew she'd guessed right, and she hated herself for it. The last thing she wanted to do was to risk her life looking for Lady Nyctasia, but the Smugglers' House was the obvious place for Lord Thierran to bring her. It was Edonaris property, and it stood empty on an isolated stretch of cliffs.

She watched as two guards made a leisurely circuit of the house. "This is madness," she thought. "If I'm caught here that bastard will feed me to the seagulls. And Lady Nyctasia is probably dead already, there's nothing I can do. I'd better get away from here while I still can."

As the two sentries came around the corner into view again, Corson stood. "Ho, you there!" she shouted. "What are you doing here?" She scrambled over the wall and stepped out of the shadows. "I'm caretaker here and you'd best explain your presence before I summon the watch!"

The guards came up to her, swords drawn. "You'll have to speak with Lord Thierran," one of them said. "The house was opened at his orders."

Corson stepped back. "I've had no word of this. You're a couple of thieves and smugglers!" She continued to back away, drawing them further from the house.

"Don't be a fool. Come back here!"

Corson let him get within arm's reach, then swiftly brought up her sword. The sentry clutched at his stomach and crumpled to the ground. As the other ran to give the alarm, she bent and pulled the knife from its sheath on her boot, then sent it into the back of the fleeing figure.

Corson dragged the bodies out of sight behind the wall, then dashed for the house. The lighted window seemed to be miles above her, but she found a foothold in the uneven masonry and started to climb, cursing under her breath. She felt sick. She was sure that she would either be discovered, or fall and break her neck.

There were plenty of holds in the stonework, but heights made Corson dizzy, and she felt exposed and vulnerable, an easy target for anyone below. Sweat ran down her back and between her breasts. She knew better than to look down.

"Steifann is right," she thought with disgust. "Only a halfwit would do this sort of thing. With my looks, I could have been a royal courtesan, I could have had a palace. Silks. Satins. Ropes of pearls." She continued to climb.

Soon she was near enough to hear shouting from the open window. "I mean to find her, and I'll have the truth from you—"

Corson had to move up closer before she could hear Nyctasia's reply. "She acted on my orders, and only I am accountable."

Corson slowly climbed up alongside the window and edged over to peer around the casement. Lord Thierran stood with his back to her, hiding Nyctasia from view, and there was no one else in sight. Corson smiled and reached for her knife. It would be an easy throw.

"Simm! Danin! Where are you two?" someone shouted. The patrol had not reported on time, and some of the other guards had been sent to find their missing cohorts. "What are you doing out there, screwing in the bushes?"

For a moment, Corson froze. Then, shaking off her panic, she swarmed up the last few feet to the roof and threw herself flat behind a chimney. Soon she heard shouting and confusion, and she knew that the bodies had been discovered. Her one chance had been to get in unobserved, and now a whole company of guards was alerted to her presence.

When the noise had died away, Corson inched forward carefully to look over the edge of the roof. She could see no one in the yard, but they'd soon be searching the grounds for her, and her escape would be cut off completely. If she could reach the ground without being seen, she might be able to save herself, but it was too late to help Lady Nyctasia. By now Lord Thierran must have been warned. There

was no time for duty or pride or sentiment.

But she had barely begun her descent when she heard footsteps approaching from the front of the house. Her last hope of escape was lost, and she felt a chill tingling between her shoulder blades where the arrow would strike.

The window was only a few feet to her left, and in a moment Corson had made up her mind and clambered over the sill. If she was going to die anyway, maybe she could at least kill Lord Thierran first.

But Lady Nyctasia was alone. There was blood on her mouth, and her shirt was torn at the shoulder. She gave no sign of seeing Corson, though her eyes were open and staring.

Corson hurried past her and flattened herself against the wall by the doorway. Lord Thierran was coming up the corridor, still shouting orders to his retainers. "I want guards at every entrance! Search the stables and the gatehouse!"

He strode across the room to the window and looked out anxiously over the grounds, watching for any movement.

Corson kicked the door shut. At the sound, Lord Thierran wheeled around and stared at her in disbelief. She was coming towards him, smiling, a dagger in her left hand.

## 17

NYCTASIA WAS DISTURBED by a faint impression that she had once, long ago, seen something that she should remember. She drifted in lazy indifference, beyond reach of thought or time. As easy to admit illusions as to dismiss them, now, for illusion and substance were the same. Calmly, incuriously, she enveloped the distant memory.

*Two people crossed in front of her, going in opposite ways. Then they turned to face one another, and came together. One held out a hand, and the other bowed.*

This dance did not interest Nyctasia. Memory was for the living. She withdrew, but the images continued to haunt her. Patiently, passively, she followed the vision again.

*A woman passed before her and turned, then a man crossed to the other side, and turned. The woman went to him and reached for him. He bowed before her, fell at her feet.*

Nyctasia became aware that she had witnessed a dance of death. Still she was unmoved. Life and death were one. Composed, remote, she waited.

*Corson hurried past her, hid herself, drew her dagger. Thierran entered, crossing at once to the window. These shadows began to seem familiar to Nyctasia. She remembered Carson's smile when Thierran had turned and seen her waiting for him. Paralyzed with fear, he in turn had waited for her. She pushed him against the wall, forcing back his head, then slashed his throat with one smooth sweep of her blade. Her smile was as rapt and brilliant as a lover's.*

\* \* \*

Nyctasia knew a certain confusion. Had she dreamed these things while she was among the living ... or had she seen them, unheeding, as she followed the ebb tide of her life? Was not dream reality, and reality dream? Surely this vision could not affect her now.

But other images took its place—Corson cutting her bonds with a bloody dagger, rubbing her wrists, trying urgently to tell her something ....

"He's dead, look! Nyctasia, wake up!"

She herself must be Nyctasia, then. But who was Nyctasia? With the name came other memories, vague and confused. Who was dead, herself or another?

It seemed to Nyctasia that she pondered endlessly over events from the distant past, but as she moved from timelessness to the present, Corson still stood over her, trying to rouse her.

"Nyctasia, wake up, please wake up! If I have to carry you—"

Her deliberations had lasted less than a moment, then. She laughed. "Do you know," she said to Corson, with genuine interest, "that's the first time you've ever called me by name?"

CORSON HAD ONLY hoped for a chance to take vengeance on Lord Thierran, and now that it was done she was almost surprised to find herself still alive. The house was still, and she realized that it might yet be possible to escape unseen, but precious time passed before she could rouse Nyctasia from her indifference.

Peering out the window, Corson saw lanterns moving below as guards searched the grounds for her. “We’ll not get out this way.”

Nyctasia looked down at Thierran’s body curiously. “Ah,” she said with satisfaction, “that really happened, then.”

“Stop dreaming! They’ll come to report to him soon—we’ve no time to waste. Do you understand?”

Nyctasia picked up her satchel and slipped the strap over her shoulder. “I’m ready.”

Corson didn’t believe her, but this was their only chance. She listened at the door, then opened it cautiously. “Is there another stairway?”

“The servants’ stairs, through the room at the end of the hail.” Taking a torch from the wall, Nyctasia led the way, moving as calmly as a sleepwalker.

It seemed to Corson that they had been descending the narrow staircase forever. “Where are we?” she demanded in a whisper.

“Almost down to the kitchen. But there’s—”

Corson clutched her arm. “Quiet! Listen ... they’ve found him,” They raced down the remaining steps to the scullery, but Nyctasia continued down the dark stairway to the cellars.

“Come back! We’ll be trapped down there!” Corson followed, cursing softly. She was going to die like a rat in a hole because of this witless witch! Already there were footsteps on the stairs behind her.

When she reached the bottom the door to the cellars stood open, but before she could enter, Nyctasia called from somewhere behind her. A faint light showed from the crawlspace beneath the stairs.

Corson crouched and squeezed herself into the angular opening, nearly falling headlong through a gaping hole in the floor. Nyctasia had already descended to an underground chamber and stood waiting at the foot of the ladder, her white face peering up anxiously in the torchlight.

Halfway down the steps, Corson let the flagstone drop gently back into place over her. She could hear the guards on the stairs just above her head.

“They can search the cellars for hours,” Nyctasia whispered. “We’re underneath them, so walk softly. There’s a tunnel leading down to the cove.”

Corson nodded. The smugglers’ tunnel was a legend in Chiastelm, but its exact location had remained a mystery. They moved quietly away from the ladder, listening for footsteps overhead.

The chamber narrowed to a low passageway at the far end, and Corson had to stoop as she followed Nyctasia down the dark corridor. “I’ve heard stories of this place,” she said, “but I thought they were all moonshine.”

“So did I, till I bought the house. But then of course I searched for the tunnel. It wasn’t hard to find.”

“Then why haven’t folk found it?”

“I suppose they did—if there was any treasure it was looted long ago. The City Governors secured the house after the owners were hanged.”

“They say it’s haunted,” Corson remembered.

“Very likely it is,” Nyctasia agreed absently. She paused, sniffing the air, and sneezed. A fresh salt scent cut through the dank air of the tunnel. “This is the place, you can smell the sea.” She walked on for a few steps until a wide fissure appeared in the wall to their left. “We have to climb down there and jump.”

Dropping to her knees, she thrust the torch out over the edge, and Corson looked down uneasily, trying to measure the distance.

“I can’t see the ground.”

“It’s about ten feet, I think. But there are holds cut into the rock for part of the way down.” She

dropped the torch over the side and threw her bookbag after it.

"I hate heights," said Corson sadly. "Have you ever done this before?"

"Oh yes, it's simple." Nyctasia lay on her stomach and edged her legs out over the side, feeling for footholds. As she disappeared over the edge, Corson heard her remark, "Of course, we did it with ropes ..." Sounds of scraping and kicking were followed by a loud thud and curses.

Nyctasia held up the torch, rubbing at her hip with the other hand. "Simple!" she said brightly, grinning up at Corson.

"I could have been a royal courtesan," grumbled Corson. "Get out of the way!" She landed on her feet by Nyctasia. They were in a large, natural cavern. "How far are we from the docks? Our ship leaves with the early tide."

"An hour's walk, I'd say. This way." They started off again, Nyctasia limping slightly. "Aren't you staying in Chiastelm. Corson?"

"I'd planned to, but your loving cousin offered a handsome reward for both of us. Now that he's been murdered, I'll be suspected."

Nyctasia considered. "It might be as well for you to stay away for a time, but I doubt that my family is much interested in you—they'll blame me for Thierran's death ... and lay claim to my properties." She drew a breath. "The matter has gotten out of hand, you see. It's one thing for Mhairestri to have me killed secretly, but another to herald it abroad that the Edonaris are at each other's throats. As for you, you'll soon be forgotten if you stay shy of Rhostshyl and keep quiet about this affair."

"Oh well, I have friends in Lhestreq," Corson said resignedly. "I hope you have plenty of money, because we'll have to pay an outrageous sum for our passage."

"Don't worry, you know I can conjure gold from the elements."

Corson stopped in her tracks. "I want an answer," she said in deliberate, measured tones, "not a riddle, not a jibe! Can you pay or can't you?"

"You've no call to doubt—"

Nyctasia was silent. Corson had earned her confidence, but trust had always been a luxury she could ill afford.

Corson faced her, arms folded. "Make an effort," she said drily. "You can answer a question if you try. Out with it!"

Nyctasia succumbed with a laugh. "Of course I can pay. Thierran would have killed me with pleasure and thrown my body off the cliff, but it would never have occurred to him to pick my pockets first."

"Of course. A gentleman."

"An Edonaris," said Nyctasia.

The ground grew uneven, sloping sharply downward, and Nyctasia found it harder to keep up the pace. She abandoned the dying torch and they stumbled on in the darkness until a dim light revealed the mouth of the cave ahead. Corson cleared a way through the barrier of roots and bracken, and helped Nyctasia scramble down the steep outcropping of rock to the beach. It still lacked some two hours to dawn.

But they had not gone far before Nyctasia stopped to lean against a pile of boulders. "Can we rest here awhile?"

"Not for long. We haven't much time."

"It isn't time I need," Nyctasia said obscurely. She pulled off her boots and walked to the ocean's edge, then knelt, motionless, head bowed, her hands in the water.

*It was easier, much easier, than Nyctasia had expected, perhaps simply because she was exhausted. She had often undertaken fasts and vigils to achieve the same end, but now, almost effortlessly, she emptied herself of fear, of pain, of weariness. She allowed sensation and sentiment alike to flow out from her with the waves that caressed her and drew away again. She rested and was renewed.*

Corson sat on a rock and watched her, worried. It was growing lighter. But Nyctasia knelt on the shore for only a moment, then rose and returned to her, ready to go on.

She was transfigured. Her grey eyes were silver in the sea's reflected light. She blazed with a vivid

elation she could barely contain. Pointing out across the waves, she cried, “*There* is power! Why, the reason I bought the Smugglers’ House in the first place—”

“I don’t care! Just put these on and be quiet!” She shoved Nyctasia’s boots at her. “We have to go faster.”

To her relief, Nyctasia obeyed and fell into step beside her. But now she kept pace with Corson’s long stride with seeming ease.

“I suppose that was more of your spell-healing?”

“No, that takes time, as I told you. This is a borrowed power. It’s easy, you see, but therefore fleeting ... Lightly won is lightly lost,” she sang:

*“Lightly won is lightly lost  
Early flower, early frost.  
Wont to wanton, wont to weep,  
What is lent is not to keep,  
What is lent is not to keep!”*

She laughed to herself. “I’ve never tried it before. It’s called a spell of Perilous Threshold. It’s really most interesting.”

“I hate magicians,” said Corson with feeling. “The only thing that keeps you on your feet is that you’re just too crazy to know you can’t go on.”

“There’s something in that,” Nyctasia agreed.

But by the time they reached the clusters of fishermen’s huts scattered along the shore outside of town, Nyctasia had begun to falter again. “No more of your witchery,” Corson warned. “You’ll draw attention to us.” They had already attracted curious glances from the fisherfolk readying their nets in the half-light of early dawn.

“No fear. I’d not survive another attempt at that spell.”

“We’re not far from the docks. Lean on me.”

“For anything one takes, one pays,” Nyctasia sighed. She took Corson’s arm and somehow kept walking. When they reached Merchants’ Wharf, Corson was practically dragging her.

On board the *Windhover*, preparations for sailing were already underway, but some of the crew were still loading cargo from a wagon on the dock. A thin, middle-aged woman came up to Corson. “You’re Steifann’s friend?”

Corson nodded curtly. “Destiver?”

“Yes. You have the money?”

“I have it,” said Nyctasia, before Corson could reply. “All of it.”

“Follow me.” Destiver motioned the sailors aside and led the way up the gangplank.

“You don’t even know how much it is,” Corson said to Nyctasia in an undertone.

“I imagine she’ll tell me ...”

Stopping at an open hatchway, the captain turned to Corson. “Get below and stay out of sight till we cast off. I’ll settle with her now.” Without a word, Corson climbed down the ladder into the cargo hold.

The only cabin below deck was a narrow, airless cubicle walled off from the rest of the hold. Corson had been in dozens of others like it, and every time she’d felt trapped and suffocated. She sat down on the bunk, which was too short for her to stretch out on, and mulled over her situation with resentment.

“Giving me orders!” she muttered. “Scrawny, swaggering, leather-faced bitch!”

Nyctasia entered the cabin and sat down, leaning against Corson. “I feel terrible,” she remarked.

“Do you think she’s good-looking?” Corson demanded.

“Who?”

“That filthy pirate!”

“Her?” Nyctasia yawned. “I don’t know, I suppose so.” She curled up on the end of the bunk and buried her face in her arms.

“She is not!”

“All right, she’s hideous,” Nyctasia mumbled. “Whatever you say.” Her face was battered—a dark bruise had appeared over one cheekbone, and her lip was cut and swollen.

“Nyc...?” said Corson. There was no reply. She sighed, and pulled Nyctasia to the center of the bunk, wrapping the thin blanket around her.

Nyctasia half-opened one eye. “Wha ... ?”

“I decided to cut your throat after all.”

“Oh.” Nyctasia shifted to a more comfortable position, too worn even to object to the dirty pallet and coverings.

Corson sat on the floor, leaning back against the wall—she would not sleep until the ship was safely out of port. To pass the time, she took the precious hand mirror from her pack, and studied her features critically. She looked as tired and grimy as she felt. Her reflection grimaced back at her, and she laid aside the mirror to paw through her pack for something to eat.

“He’s probably screwing Trask right now,” she thought sourly.

## 19

“SHE’S PROBABLY LYING dead in a dungeon by now—I tell you, she’s gone too far this time. She thinks she can treat this like one of her fool escapades, but these are powerful people! Rich nobles, whoever they are—they’ll crush her!” Steifann groaned and reached for the pitcher on the table before him. It was nearly empty.

“No more of that,” the cook said sternly, snatching it away. “You’re drunk enough already.” He turned back to the great mass of dough, kneading it rhythmically. The kitchen was already fragrant with the smell of baking loaves, “Corson knows what she’s about. You fret over her every time like a broody hen and she always comes back whole and hearty.”

“This is different, I tell you—”

“You always say that. I’ve no time for your babbling. And you should be on your way to market by now—it’s almost light. The best’ll be picked over before you get yourself there. If you come back with flyblown meat and rotten cabbage you’ll cook it yourself!”

Steifann got to his feet with a grant. “You’ll see,” he said thickly, “I’ve more to think of than cabbages!”

“That’s right,” said the cook, pushing him out the door, “onions. I want a bushelful, Don’t forget.”

In the courtyard, children of all ages were feeding the hens, gathering eggs, drawing water, and loading their arms with firewood for the kitchen hearth—all in the noisiest possible manner. They were mostly the offspring of the cook and his wife, who lived across the court, but they spent most of the day about the tavern, doing kitchen chores and running errands. Seeing Steifann harnessing the cart-horse, two of the smallest stopped throwing corn at each other and ran up to him shrieking demands to be taken along to market.

Steifann, who was feeling the effects of a sleepless night and too much ale, winced at their clamor and shooed them away. “Not today,” he said absently, pushing the hair back from his face and frowning at nothing. “I shouldn’t have let her go,” he thought for the hundredth time. But he knew full well that the cook had spoken the truth.

When Corson heard the ladder creak under a heavy tread, she got silently to her feet and drew her sword, watching the door anxiously. She would be at a disadvantage in such close quarters, where she could barely stand upright. Surely it was only one of the crew ....

“Corson, are you in there?” Steifann pushed open the cabin door, laughing at her surprise. “Must you always greet me with that sword in your hand? It’s not manners. If I’m not welcome, I’ll take myself off.”

Corson’s eager embrace left no doubt as to his welcome., “What are you doing here? Is something wrong?”

“Oh, I just thought I’d come see you off ... not that I was really worried, I knew you’d be all right.”

“You’re drunk!” laughed Corson. “You must have been up all night fretting, and there was nothing to

it—it was a lark.”

Steifann peered over her shoulder with bloodshot eyes. “Who’s that?” he demanded. “Hlann Asye, Corson, you’ve only just come on board and you’re already in bed with the cabin boy!” He crossed to the berth in two strides and glared down at the sleeping Nyctasia. “Oh ...” he said uneasily, turning away. “Never mind. I don’t want to know.” He stooped to avoid a low beam and leaned back against the wall, fumbling in his pouch. “You must need some money, Corson.”

She pulled his hand away and pressed it to her cheek. “No, she paid our passage,” she said, nodding towards Nyctasia. “That one has no end of money.” She nestled against him and murmured, “but you don’t want to hear about her.” Steifann reached his arm around her waist and drew her close.

“You’ve not changed, I see, Steifann. Stinking drunk and still hot as a buck in *nit*!” Destiver leaned in the doorway, one hand on her hip. “But you’d best get yourself ashore unless you plan to sail with us. The tide won’t wait for you, lover.”

Steifann stifled a yawn. “Well, if it isn’t Black Destiver, the terror of the coast,” he remarked amiably. “No thanks, Destiver. I’ve sailed with you before, and that was enough to sake a landsman of me forever.”

Corson was looking from one to the other with a frown. Steifann gave her a parting squeeze and she kissed him quickly.

Destiver stepped aside to let him through the doorway and slapped him on the backside as he passed her. “You were no rutting good as a sailor, that’s what made a landsman of you.”

“Corson, write and let me know where you are,” he called over his shoulder, and disappeared up the hatchway with Destiver at his heels.

“I’ll see you when I’m back in port,” Corson heard her remark.

Corson spat after them and slammed the door shut. She felt the ship lurch and move out with the tide. Harboring bloody thoughts, she settled herself to sleep.

\* \* \*

Steifann was late getting to market, but nothing could dispel his good humor that morning. He listened with considerable interest to the tales making the rounds of the marketplace. The talk was all of a monstrous demon that had murdered a nobleman and half his guard at the Smugglers’ House the night before.

“Just vanished into the air, it did,” gossiped a cheesemonger. “They say it’s the Witch of Rhostshyl’s doing.”

Steifann nodded sagely. “It sounds like witchery to me,” he agreed. He purchased a packet of gingerbread for the cook’s children and loaded his provisions into the cart. He forgot the onions.

## 20

NYCTASIA SLEPT FOR a day and a night, and woke feeling worse than ever. Not only was she stiff and sore in every limb, but she felt violently ill as well. Spasms of acute nausea racked her, and each slow roll of the boat was an agony. She was sure that she’d been poisoned.

Corson strolled in, chewing on a piece of fresh-cooked fish, “Time enough that you woke up,” she said. “I brought you some breakfast.” She held out a tin plate with half a steaming fish on it.

Nyctasia gasped and rolled to the edge of the berth, her empty stomach contracting painfully, her throat constricted. “Take that away!” she choked.

“Hmm, seasick,” Corson observed. She helpfully ate the rest of the fish.

Nyctasia lay back and shut her eyes. Her face was grey. “Is that all it is? But I’m dying!”

“That’s how it feels. It takes a few days to pass, but you’ll live.”

Nyctasia’s stomach began to heave again. She leaned over the side of the berth and groaned. “I don’t *want* to live.”

“Everyone says that. I’ll get you some water. And a bucket.”

“Days ... ?” whispered Nyctasia faintly. She tried holding her breath but it didn’t help.



“You should try to get some of this down,” Corson suggested. “It’s better to puke up water than your own insides.”

“I know. Leave me alone.”

Corson hesitated at the door. “Why can’t you cure this the way you healed that wound?”

“Must you always ask questions?” said Nyctasia feverishly.

“Must you always tell lies? You said healing was simple.”

“I’ve called on the *vahn* for so much already, Corson—to do it again so soon would violate the Balance ... between the Dwelling and the Indwelling ....”

The ship struck rougher water and Corson could see the sweat break out on Nyctasia’s face. Between fits of retching, the sorceress gasped, “There’s more than enough imbalance aboard this vessel!”

She was bedridden for the next three days and slept as much as she could. There was some relief when the *Windhover* docked at coastal towns to take on or deliver cargo. While they rode at anchor, the rolling of the ship was easier to bear, but the time between ports seemed endless to her.

Corson slept on deck, only coming in now and again to see that Nyctasia drank a mouthful of water, and to complain about her own lot.

“You’re just as well off without the swill they eat on this floating dung heap,” she grumbled, sitting on the edge of the narrow berth and crowding Nyctasia. “If not for you, I could be feasting at the Hare right now. Steifann has the best cook on the coast.”

“Will you please talk about something else, if you must talk?”

“There’s nothing else *to* talk about. I’ve never been so rutting bored.”

“Pity,” said Nyctasia drowsily. “Let me sleep.”

Corson wanted company—she missed Steifann. Nyctasia was an unsympathetic listener, and the crew regarded her with obvious suspicion. They were a close-mouthed lot who rebuffed her friendly advances, and she was certainly not willing to approach the captain. She chafed at the idleness and confinement she was forced to endure aboard ship—fishing was a poor pastime, and it was not yet safe for her to go ashore when they made port.

In desperation, Corson pulled over Nyctasia’s satchel of books and opened one at random. Dead languages! Why couldn’t Nyctasia have something that a person could read? The first passage that was intelligible to her seemed to be a recipe—but for what? What was bloodroot?

Corson hastily turned the page. She leafed through ballads, riddles, and puzzling verses that looked suspiciously like incantations. The rest of the book was blank. She chose another volume and began laboriously to spell out a long poem about a warrior’s encounter with a seductive demon. This was much more to her taste.

Before long, Nyctasia turned over and groaned fitfully.

“Are you awake?” Corson asked.

“Unfortunately.”

“What does *lirihran* mean?”

“It’s an old word for ‘twilight,’” Nyctasia answered dreamily. “But it means ‘half-darkness,’ you see, not ‘half-light’.... It’s only found in poetry nowadays.” She suddenly sat upright, wide awake, “What are you doing? Leave that alone!”

“Why? I’m not reading your foul spells.”

“Well, what are you reading?”

“I’m cursed if I know—it’s about a demon, and it’s nothing I’d have thought a *lady* would write.”

“Oh, that,” said Nyctasia, relieved. “I only translated it. That poem was written centuries ago.”

“Really? Folk haven’t changed much, then.”

“Yes, that’s the lesson of it. Perhaps I’ll make a scholar of you yet.”

Corson snorted. “I could teach you a few things—this chart’s all wrong.” She turned to a map of the southern constellations. “Everyone knows you can only see the Wolf in winter, and the Chalice should be further over here. If you tried to travel by this, you’d never know where you were.”

“It’s hard to make accurate charts from old books and hearsay. Show me the right positions,”

Nyctasia said eagerly.

“Surely,” said Corson, stretching, “As soon as I’ve finished this story.”

Nyctasia hadn’t the strength for an argument. “Please yourself, that’s harmless enough. But be careful how you meddle with my books, Corson. Words can be dangerous.”

“What does *wisranupre* mean?”

“Give me that,” laughed Nyctasia, “I’ll read it to you.” She found that she was feeling much better.

The *Windhover* was a small, single-masted merchantman with a crew of only six, including the captain. It was built for coastal trading but, as Corson soon discovered, the ship was more than a simple cargo-runner.

One night she awoke with the moon still high overhead. Some change that she could not immediately recognize had disturbed her sleep, and after a puzzled moment she realized that the *Windhover* was no longer moving—they must have dropped anchor. She soon heard the ship’s boat being lowered and the crew moving about, talking in low tones.

Surely they weren’t putting into port in the middle of the night? Curious, Corson stood and looked over the rail towards land, but she could see only an occasional flash of light on the beach. The boat was making silently for shore, the oars dipping without a splash.

Corson smiled complacently. Of course, a pack of smugglers! That’s why the crew was so wary of strangers.

“What are you doing here?” Destiver demanded in a harsh whisper. “Get below where you belong and stop your spying!”

Corson rounded on her angrily, keeping her voice low with an effort. “Don’t try me, you slinking water rat! Save your bullying for your crew! What’s it to me if you cheat the trade laws?”

“Listen,” hissed Destiver, “Steifann’s vouched for you, but there’s a fat price on your head—remember that, and forget what you’ve seen tonight.”

“And I remember that they still have gibbets for smugglers in the Maritime cities.”

“Then we understand each other,” said Destiver. “But while you’re on my ship you’ll do as you’re told.”

Before Corson could reply, one of the sailors came over to fetch Destiver, who went off muttering imprecations against Steifann for involving her in this affair.

For once, Corson agreed with her.

## 21

NYCTASIA WAS DISAPPOINTED to learn that the *Windhover* never sailed out of sight of land. She had never been on a ship before, and once she’d recovered from her seasickness she was eager to learn all the workings of the vessel. She drew diagrams of the rigging in her commonplace book, inquiring the name and purpose of every part of the ship.

Corson was far too familiar with ships to share Nyctasia’s enthusiasm, and she was more bored than ever now that Nyctasia was taken up with this new-found interest. The sight of Destiver was a constant goad to her temper, and the crew continued to shun her, taking their lead from the captain. She took to spending more time in the cabin, brooding and trying to puzzle out Nyctasia’s books.

For a time, an illustrated herbal took her fancy, with its detailed drawings of leaves and brightly inked paintings of flower petals. She read: “The leaf of the Wolfhead Yarrow, when seethed in water or wine yields a tisane which may be taken against the catarrh, and when crushed in a mortar is most profitably employed in the preparation of a poultice for staunching of blood and the other humors of the body, for it possesses certain beneficial properties which make the flesh to draw together in such manner as may aid in the closing of wounds and the healing of purulence and suchlike maladies.”

Corson yawned. She passed over the lengthy instructions for the preparation of the poultice, and turned to the next picture, which showed a thick-stemmed plant with large, dark purple blossoms. Here, as elsewhere in the book, a dry, faded cutting was pressed between the pages. This was Royal

Swinebane, Corson learned, and its juice was so deadly that even its touch was dangerous. When it was set afire it gave off evil fumes that burned the eye and choked the throat. It was not safe even to smell the thing.

“Poisonous little witch!” Corson muttered. She closed the herbal, being careful not to touch the flattened Swinebane, and took up the last of the books, which was so small it fit in the palm of her hand. It was closely written in a minute script that Corson read with difficulty in the dim light of the cabin. But, as she began to decipher the text, she found to her dismay that it was a long, ponderous treatise of Vahnite philosophy, even more dull than Wolfhead Yarrow. Corson paged through chapter after incomprehensible chapter of Influences, Reflections, and Balances until she came at last to something that looked like poetry. Here, a note in Nyctasia’s handwriting read, “Debased Version of the Fourth Reflection:”

*See in this enchanted mirror  
All things from afar draw nearer  
Till yond is nigh, and all is here*

*For nothing is lost, as shall appear.  
Pierce if you please the shining’s seeming  
Wake if you will the sleeper’s dreaming  
Learn of lover, reck of foe,  
Find thy friend, thy rival know.*

*Lift, if you like, the veil of distance  
Dare to deny its false Resistance  
Set at naught a thousand paces  
Recall thy steps, erase thy traces.*

Corson read the verse again, then the brief precepts that followed. The spell made no sense, but it seemed simple enough to do—all that was needed was a mirror. “Learn of lover?” she repeated. It would be underhanded of her to spy on Steifann, of course, but no one would be the wiser, and no harm done.

Nyctasia had warned her to leave the books alone, and she herself distrusted magic, but the temptation was a powerful one for someone as jealous as Corson. She looked around guiltily, undecided, then quietly shut the door of the cabin. Fetching the mirror from her pack, she unwrapped it slowly, half hoping that Nyctasia would return and catch her out.

The cabin seemed to grow closer and smaller than ever as she knelt beside the book, clutching the mirror in one clammy hand. Her own voice sounded strange to her while she recited the words of the spell, and the mirror felt suddenly heavier. She glanced down at it, then remembered that she was not to look at it yet, and turned away. Had she seen something move in the glass just then? Corson resolutely shut her eyes, whispering Steifann’s name, then waited for the space of twelve heartbeats. It was time—but Corson still hesitated, seized with nameless forebodings. Then, steeling herself, she opened her eyes wide and stared into the mirror.

## 22

NYCTASIA’S CURIOSITY ABOUT the *Windhover* only served to put the crew on their guard against her. It generally boded no good for them when someone took such an interest in their doings, and Destiver was doubly suspicious of her passengers after her encounter with Corson. When she found Nyctasia seated by the open hatchway making notations in her commonplace book, she was certain that the game was up.

“Give me that!” She snatched the book away, ignoring Nyctasia’s protests. “What are you writing?”

Nyctasia pointed. “A description of those ropes securing the mast, all supporting each other. I find the balance *of forces* most interesting.” She held out her hand for the book, but Destiver paid no heed. “See here,” Nyctasia said coldly, “it merely says that two ropes attach to each side, and one each to the front and back.”

Destiver could not read and she would probably have doubted the truth of this, had the drawings not confirmed Nyctasia’s words. “Front and back!” she snorted, “The stays run fore and aft, and the shrouds run athwartships.” She threw the book down beside Nyctasia, who seized it and immediately began writing again.

“Wait a bit!” she called after Destiver. “Which did you say were the shrouds?”

Destiver lost all patience. “Get out of my sight,” she yelled. “Get below and stay out from underfoot or I’ll have you keelhauled!”

Nyctasia was wise enough to obey, despite her vexation.

How dare a common sailor address an Edonaris in that manner! In Rhostshyl she’d have been pilloried and flogged for such insolence. “Peace, peace!” Nyctasia counseled herself. There were sure to be many more such indignities before her journey’s end.

But these thoughts were driven from her mind at once when she pushed open the cabin door and saw Corson kneeling over the book of spells, staring into the silver mirror. “Corson!” she gasped. “What have you done?”

“Not a rutting thing!” shouted Corson. “I did just as it says, and here I am looking at my own face! I could do that without this crazy nonsense of yours.”

Nyctasia picked up the book and looked at the spell with horror. “*Vahn* help us!” she whispered, sinking onto the bunk. “Corson, you fool—! Be thankful you didn’t understand it. That’s all that saved you.”

“Saved me? From what?”

“From getting what you wanted! You might succeed in working that spell if you could read its meaning, but there’d still be the price to pay. All power has its price.”

Corson had not considered this. “Like the spell you did on the way to the docks?”

“In a way. It’s always dangerous to draw upon a power you don’t possess. But if I use a spell of Reflection, I know what will be demanded of me in return, to restore Balance. When it’s done blindly, without the proper preparation, it’s like a weapon in the hands of a child. More is lost than gained.”

“But I did as the book said. I followed it to the letter.”

“I don’t mean that absurd ritual,” Nyctasia said impatiently. “All that’s mere superstition to deceive the ignorant. Even the words of the spell are only the outward sign of the Principles of Power—power that could destroy you! To learn to wield that power takes years of discipline and study. *That’s* the preparation I speak of. If that is lacking in you, the magic will exact its own sacrifice.”

Corson was trying to find a way through the maze of Nyctasia’s explanation. “Well, what would be taken from me?”

“There’s no saying—I can only tell you what’s happened to others.” She opened the book of spells, turned over a few leaves, and began to read. “It is said that those who’ve seen their loved ones in the glass have never seen them again in life.”

Corson paled.

“There is a tale,” Nyctasia continued, “of a poor student who desired to learn whether he would marry the one he loved. Commanding a Reflection of the future, he saw the maiden lying upon her bier, at which sight he was so stricken with grief that he straightway took his own life. When tidings of this reached his lady, she did in truth perish of sorrow, and thus did the vision of the student come to pass.

“Others have been shown more than they could bear to see, and have lost their reason in consequence. There have been those who tore out their own eyes to escape from the sight—”

Corson had heard enough. “Very well, suppose *you* did it, what then?”

Nyctasia shook her head. “It would be safer for me than for most, but one doesn’t undertake any spell lightly. The Discipline lessens the danger but cannot abolish it. Only the veriest simpleton would squander such hard-won mastery without good cause.”

Corson knew that Nyctasia wouldn't find her jealousy sufficient reason for using the spell. "Oh, no matter," she said, disappointed. "I don't care about it, I was only looking for some amusement."

"For *vahn*'s sake, Corson, you can't toy with such things! Promise you'll not try this again, please!"

"All right, all right, I promise. But the boredom's more deadly than those wretched spells anyway." She kicked fretfully at the side of the bunk. "What do *you* find to do all day on this rat-ridden scow?"

"Well, I was trying to learn something about the ship, but the captain ordered me to stop asking questions and stay below. What a surly-tempered creature she is."

Corson laughed. "You call me a fool, but at least I've the sense not to ask too many questions of a shipful of smugglers."

"Smugglers!" Nyctasia was shocked. Smugglers were the bane of the Maritime cities. As Rhaicime of Rhostshyl it was her duty to see the lot of them arrested, and instead she found herself in league with them.

"Use your sense. Who else would smuggle us out of Chiasm?"

"Small wonder they don't like questions, then," Nyctasia admitted. "Corson, what does it mean to keelhaul someone?"

Corson succinctly described the brutal punishment. "It's murder, really. No one survives it." She grinned at Nyctasia's discomfiture. "But Destiver's all talk and swagger—she's not about to keelhaul anyone. She'd simply cut our throats and throw us overboard. Just keep out of her way. I've not saved your worthless life twice over just so that you could be food for the fish."

"As to that," said Nyctasia, "why did you save my worthless life a second time? You owed me no further service once we'd reached Chiasm."

Corson was taken aback. "Why? Well, because ... you'd not paid the rest of my fee. And you still haven't," she added.

"And I thought," said Nyctasia in wounded tones, "that it was for loyalty and friendship's sake. You like me—admit it!"

Corson flushed. "Like you!" she blustered. "Plague take you! You silly, conceited, devious, high-born witch!"

Nyctasia sat back, helpless with laughter. She was the most irritating person Corson had ever met. You couldn't argue with her, she was too glib. And you couldn't fight with her, she was too small. To get the better of her somehow was a constant challenge to Corson.

"But you're right," Nyctasia said when she'd caught her breath, "I do owe you the rest of your fee." She picked up her cloak from the floor and shook it out, "And an Edonaris always pays her debts." She suddenly ripped one of the patches from the cloak and removed the gemstone concealed beneath it. "Will this suffice?" she asked, tossing the large, brilliant diamond to Corson.

Abashed, Corson stared at the priceless jewel, "Won't you need this? You're a fugitive—how will you pay your way?"

"I only have to go as far as Hlasven. I'll not want for anything with 'Ben."

"Ben?" It was a commoner's name. "I thought he'd have forty names and a score of titles, like you."

"Not quite like me, but you're near the mark. He's the Lord Erystalben Cadon Jhaice brenn Rhostshyl ar'n Shiasm. Unless you care to hear the ancillary distinctions as well?"

"Spare me," said Corson. "But what makes you so free with your answers this morning? It's not like you to give names and destinations."

"I'd have to tell you sooner or later, since I assume you're coming with me."

"Why? You won't need a bodyguard once we've landed in Lhestreq."

Nyctasia shrugged. "You've no other plans at present, and I could profit from a few lessons in sword fighting. Besides, I enjoy your company."

Corson didn't know whether to be flattered or indignant. Nyctasia was probably laughing at her. "I may as well go that way as another," she said finally, pocketing the splendid diamond. "I suppose I owe you that much if I take this in fee."

"Nonsense—you've more than earned it. And there's something more due to you as well." She took the golden earrings from her pouch and pressed them into Corson's hand. "Do try not to lose this pair."

Corson was no longer surprised by anything Nyctasia did. She accepted the gift coolly and put them on.

“I was right,” said Nyctasia, “they do bring out the gold in your hair. Now we’re quits.”

“Not quite. There’s still something I owe you.”

“What’s that?”

For answer, she suddenly caught Nyctasia up in her arms and laid her down on the berth.

“Corson—”

Corson knelt beside the berth, bending over her. “Don’t be afraid,” she teased. “I’m casting a spell on you.”

Nyctasia put her arms around Corson’s neck and started unpinning the long braid. “Don’t you know, a witch whose passions are aroused may turn into a ravening demon?”

“Oh, hold your tongue for once!” Corson exclaimed, and silenced her with a long, fierce kiss.

It was past noon when Nyctasia emerged from below deck, and the midday meal was almost over. She looked suspiciously at a thick grey soup, consisting mainly of lentils and rubbery potatoes, with an occasional shred of meat which she did not attempt to identify. She had found the food on board ship nearly as bad as Corson had described it, but she was too hungry to be particular. Hard bread and dried apples, with a cup of dark ale, completed the meal. Nyctasia took everything and joined Corson on the long bench.

“Now we’re quits,” Corson remarked smugly.

Nyctasia glanced at her, suppressing a smile. “You’re a dangerous woman,” she said, biting off a piece of stale bread.

Corson grinned into her soup. “Especially when I’m bored.” She wolfed down the rest of her food. “By the way, what does *isnathon scraithling* mean?”

“Corson!” Nyctasia choked on her bread.

“What’s the matter?” asked Corson innocently. “You kept saying it to me this morning.”

“I called you *that*?”

“And a lot of other things I’ve never heard before. What does it mean?”

Nyctasia shook her head. “I’m afraid it’s quite impossible to translate—”

“Try.”

“Really, I ...” Nyctasia protested, giggling. Corson couldn’t get another word out of her for the rest of the meal.

## 23

THAT NIGHT NYCTASIA could not fall asleep. The cabin seemed more dank and close than ever, and she understood why most of the crew slept on deck in mild weather. “Why should I suffocate in here?” she asked herself. “Even a lady has to breathe.” She went above and moved about silently, stepping over sleeping sailors, until she found Corson sprawled by the windlass.

“Oh, it’s you,” said Corson sleepily. “What did it mean, what you called me?”

Nyctasia lay down beside her. “Go back to sleep.”

“Rutting bitch,” said Corson. She threw one arm over Nyctasia and promptly fell asleep again.

But Nyctasia was still wakeful. She lay for a long time looking up at the stars and listening to the mysterious creaking and sloshing sounds of the ship. The strong smell of resin and brine was almost as soothing to her as the scent of Maegor’s spices, but sleep did not come, and finally she detached herself from Corson and rose. Corson mumbled an incoherent protest and turned away, sighing in her sleep.

Nyctasia wandered restlessly up to the bow and climbed into the forecabin to look out across the sea. A horizon unbounded by city walls was a novelty she never tired of contemplating.

Someone was there before her, leaning on the rail, watching the water. Nyctasia wondered what the night watch on board ship kept guard against. “A fine night,” she said politely. “May I join you?”

He turned toward her and bowed. “I should be honored, Rhaicime.”

Nyctasia was startled to be addressed by her title of rank—the crew knew who she was, then. But

she had paid well for their silence, and Corson claimed they could be trusted.

She stood her ground but remained wary. "You have the advantage of me, sailor," she said evenly.

"Oh, I am but a passenger like yourself, my lady. We have met once before in Rhostshyl, though you've no doubt forgotten."

She could not see his features clearly in the darkness, but it was this very obscurity which seemed somehow familiar. And his voice ... of course, this was Erystalben's messenger! Now completely at her ease, she joined him at the rail, leaning into the fresh breeze. "Certainly I remember. Have you another letter for me?"

"No, but I bring you a riddle. I am told that you enjoy them." He paused. "Which is the greater power, Lady Nyctasia, the Indwelling or the Invited?"

Nyctasia smiled, thinking of the hours she and 'Ben had spent in arguing this question, trying to reconcile the two. "I will tell you that," she said, "if you can tell me which is the greater—wind or water."

He nodded thoughtfully, "A good answer."

"It is the only answer."

"No question has only one answer. You who are Mistress of Ambiguities must know that."

It was one of 'Ben's nicknames for her. Hearing it, Nyctasia was pierced with longing for him.

"A hand without a weapon may be weak," she said slowly, "but a weapon without a hand is useless."

"Thus, *vahn* is the greater power."

The Mistress of Ambiguities shook her head. "Yet those who are unarmed will fall before swords."

Both were silent for some moments, and Nyctasia suddenly realized how tired she'd become.

"Then there is no answer?" he said at last.

"I have given you two." Nyctasia yawned. "And I fear I'm too weary to devise a third tonight. But I expect we shall meet again."

"I hope so, my lady."

He continued to look out over the dark water. Nyctasia returned to Corson's side and fell asleep at once.

Over the next few days she made certain to speak to every man on board, but none of them sounded like Erystalben's nameless messenger.

Finally, she questioned the captain, who denied having any other passengers on board. "... and the only reason I don't have you two thrown overboard is that we'll reach Lhestreq in two days anyway. And you can tell that rutting friend of yours to stop looking at me like she means to cut my throat!"

Nyctasia was bewildered. "I hadn't noticed that she does. I'll ... er ... speak to her about it."

"You do that," said Destiver and stalked away.

Corson was nowhere on deck, but Nyctasia soon found her in the cabin, sitting on the berth, her head in her hands.

"Feeling bored?" Nyctasia suggested. She sat down and put her arm around Corson's waist, Corson only shook her head without looking up.

"What's the matter with you? The captain says you want to murder her."

"Let me be, can't you?"

Nyctasia began to rub her back and shoulders. Corson shrugged stiffly. "Do that up higher," she said grudgingly. "My head hurts." She hated to admit to any sort of weakness.

"Is that all? Poor thing!" Nyctasia knelt on the berth and started kneading the muscles of Corson's neck. "We'll be in Lhestreq in just two days," she remarked.

"I know."

"Do you know the city well?"

"Of course. I've been there many times."

"And I've never been this far from Rhostshyl in my life."

"Asye! How did you stand it? I left Torisk when I was little more than a child, and I've never been back."

"Where is Torisk? I've never heard of it."

"South," Corson said grimly. "Far south. No one's ever heard of it, it's mostly swamp."

“Ah, that explains it.”

“Explains what?” Corson bristled.

“Did you think I meant your manners? Nothing could explain your manners! I was curious about the name—it’s very like the word for ‘bog’ in Ancient Eswraine. Words for features of the land often stay the same, even when—”

Corson was in no mood for one of Nyctasia’s lectures. “What of your own name?” she interrupted. “They make an Edonaris wine in the valley lands. I’ve never had it, it’s too costly, but it’s famous in the east. They say the same family’s made it for centuries. Are you kin to them?”

“I don’t know ... it’s the first I’ve ever heard of them. But it’s just possible,” Nyctasia mused. “A remote ancestor of mine married into a family of foreign merchants who dealt in fine wines. It was a monstrous scandal, of course. He went with them when they returned to their own country, and they could never trade the coastal markets after that, for fear of the Edonaris. His name was stricken from the family records—I only came upon the story by chance in an old chronicle. If these people are his descendants, they’d be my distant cousins. Perhaps I’ll write them a letter.”

Corson was disappointed. She’d hoped Nyctasia would take offense at the suggestion that these common vintners were her relations. “My manners are good enough for the company of a wine seller’s daughter,” she taunted.

“You malign a respectable trade,” said Nyctasia.

Corson looked back at her over her shoulder. “What does *isnathon scrathling* mean?” she demanded.

## 24

LHESTREQ WAS A good-sized port town with a thriving merchant community. There was nothing to distinguish it from any of a dozen similar cities along the coast, but to Corson and Nyctasia it seemed a haven of comfort and luxury after their stay on the *Windhover*. As they ambled through the marketplace on their way to find lodgings, they were enticed by the odors of pastries and cooking meats.

A child ran up to them holding a tray heaped with dates, figs and dried honeyed apricots, all stuffed with nuts. “Buy a sweet, two for a copper!”

Their hands were soon full of sticky fruit, hot meatcakes and small sausages. They ate oranges, sweet buns and gingerbread. “I haven’t felt this good for days,” Corson said through a mouthful of pastry.

“I thought you must be sick—you’d stopped complaining about the ship’s food.”

“It was the ship’s food making me sick.”

“We’ll both be sick if we keep this up,” said Nyctasia happily. She daintily licked the last sticky crumbs from her fingers. “I have never in my life needed a bath so badly. I stink. So do you, for that matter.”

“What?” said Corson absently. Her attention had been caught by a display of glittering jewelry and trinkets. She wandered over to the stall and began covetously fingering the golden chains and gaudy ornaments. She held up a glass bracelet, admiring the way it sparkled in the sunlight. “What do you think of this?” she asked Nyctasia.

“It’s a vulgar piece of trash, unworthy to adorn your lovely wrist. Stop pawing through that rubbish and let’s find an inn. You know the city, where do you usually stay?”

“Oh, you don’t want to stay *there*,” laughed Corson. “And neither do I, not when I have money.” She reluctantly laid down the bracelet and pointed across the square. “There’s a place up that way, on High Street, that caters to the quality. I’ve never had the price of a room there, but now I want their best.”

She led the way, stopping every few feet, distracted by a new array of tempting wares. Buckles, copper pots, bolts of bright cloth—Corson wanted everything she saw, and it was some time before Nyctasia could pry her away from the marketplace.

When they entered The Crown and Peacock, the patrons, mostly well-to-do merchants, glanced at one another uneasily. Corson and Nyctasia looked more like the class of people who went to the kitchen



door asking for work than those who came to the front door seeking accommodations. They were ragged and filthy and didn't look as though they had a copper between them. Obviously troublemakers.

"We want a room," said Corson, banging her fist on a table.

A portly, well-dressed man approached, regarding them with disapproval. "Our rooms are all taken," he said. "Perhaps down the street ...."

Corson smiled. She opened the pouch at her belt and pulled out a few gold coins, tossing them in her palm. "A large room," she continued. "The best you have."

The owner bowed. He classed Corson as a soldier fresh from a successful campaign. Nyctasia he dismissed as a penniless student whom the other had undoubtedly picked up for the night. Students as a class were notorious whores.

He waved a servant over. "Show them the corner room upstairs. Lay on fresh bedding. Is there anything else you require?" he asked, turning back to Corson.

"I want a bath," Nyctasia put in. "Hot water, and plenty of it. And something clean to wear."

The innkeeper looked at Corson inquiringly.

"It's all right," she said, with a sweeping gesture. "Get her anything she wants." She grinned at Nyctasia, who suddenly flushed as she realized how things appeared. Swallowing her pride, she meekly followed Corson upstairs.

Corson was delighted with the room. It was large and well-aired, with windows looking on the courtyard and the street. Tile bed was wide, with an oaken chest at its foot, and a table and two chairs stood at the hearth. There was even a sheepskin rug. Corson fell onto the bed and sank into the down mattresses, laughing.

"Get your boots off the bed," said Nyctasia.

"A little more respect from you, slut. I'll have you thrown into the street, where you belong, if you don't behave."

Nyctasia sighed. "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

Corson pulled off her boots and dug her toes into the rug. "I've always wanted to have my way in a grand place like this."

Nyctasia did not see fit to remark that, compared with her apartments in the palace of the Edonaris, this place was a kennel. She possessed to a high degree the aristocratic knack of making herself comfortable anywhere. And the room was reasonably clean. "It's a great deal better than the ship," she said.

Two servants soon came in, carrying a large wooden tub. They were followed by a girl with an armload of clothes.

"Sonic of these should fit you," she said to Nyctasia, dropping her bundle on the table. She turned to Corson. "Did you want something to wear as well, mistress? We've nothing to hand really big enough for you, but we can wash your clothes tonight and have them dry by morning. Perhaps you could use this?" She lay out a large, shapeless smock on the bed. "They're heating up the bath water now." The girl curtsied to Corson and withdrew.

"Bring me some ale," Corson called after her. She lay back on the bed and stretched luxuriously. "Let's stay here for a while," she suggested. "I want to visit some friends in town, settle an old debt. Maybe buy a few things."

Nyctasia picked out a grey shift from the pile of clothes and examined it dubiously. "Stay if you like. I'll be off to Mehomne as soon as I can get some decent clothing, and a horse. I hope to be in Hlasven in a fortnight."

"You can't," said Corson. "It takes at least a month to travel around Yth Forest."

"I daresay it does, but I mean to travel through it, not around it."

Corson sat up and stared at her. "No one goes through the Yth without need—it's too dangerous. If you've not seen your blue-eyed friend in all this time, you can wait another few weeks, surely!"

"There's a road running through the forest," Nyctasia protested. "Some merchants take it, to reach the eastern markets ahead of the rest."

"I know that, and the greedy bastards usually lose a few people along the way. Don't you know that

wood is haunted?”

“Corson,” Nyctasia said patiently, “I want to go through the Yth *because* I know it’s haunted.”

“I should have known,” groaned Corson, lying back again. “I hate magicians.” She glared balefully at the ceiling.

“Perhaps you really should stay here,” Nyctasia said hesitantly. “You certainly won’t like—” She stopped abruptly as the servants returned with kettles of steaming water and began to fill the tub. “Tell them to start heating up more,” she instructed. “We’ll want at least another tubful.” She had soon forgotten all else in the soothing luxury of the bath.

Corson dried her hair before the fire, trying to comb out the worst of the snarls. She cursed and yanked at a tangled knot, then gave up and left the comb stuck there while she reached for the mug of ale on the hearthstone.

“Do you want some help?” Nyctasia offered. She was lying across the bed with the contents of her pouch scattered before her. She toyed with a crystal pendant, then picked out a pair of silver, crescent-shaped earrings and put them on. There was a knock on the door.

“Shall we take away the bath now?”

At a nod from Nyctasia, they dragged the tub to the window and tipped it out over the courtyard. The serving-girl came in for their clothes.

“Have these burned,” said Nyctasia imperiously. “And have the best tailors in the city here first thing in the morning to take my measurements.” Her voice had taken on the assured tone of one accustomed to giving orders. Barefoot, and dressed in the plain grey shift, she nevertheless conveyed the air of a great aristocrat.

“Yes ... um ... my lady,” said the girl, bewildered. “Will there be anything else?”

Nyctasia considered. “I’ll give you a letter to deliver to the moneydealer Eisatt on Bow Street, Fetch me paper and sealing wax, child.” She held out a coin. “That will be all.”

“Yes, m’lady. Thank you, m’lady.” The girl had made up her mind about Nyctasia. She could hardly wait to tell them downstairs.

“Bow Street?” Corson asked suspiciously. “I thought you said you’d never been here before.”

“I haven’t, but my agents have. I’ve had this journey planned for a long time, you know.” She came over and stirred up the fire. Plucking the comb from Corson’s unruly hair, she began to gently smooth out the stubborn tangles.

“Even when you play the great lady you don’t mean it,” said Corson. “It’s just another act. You don’t fool me.”

Next morning she watched, fascinated, as Nyctasia matter-of-factly gave instructions to tailors and seamstresses while concluding her business arrangements and eating a large breakfast at the same time.

Corson’s clothes were stiff and uncomfortable from drying before the fire all night. When Nyctasia dismissed the tailors, she beckoned to one of them herself. “You can take *my* measurements now,” she said grandly.

## 25

IT WOULD TAKE at least two days to complete their garments, and Nyctasia spent most of the time pacing and planning, impatient to be on her way. But Corson would have been contented to spend the whole season at Lhestreq. She made the most of the opportunity to renew old acquaintances and flaunt her unwonted wealth. Sauntering into The Wanton Mermaid one afternoon, she threw down a handful of silver and called for ale all around.

There were only a few idlers there to take advantage of her hospitality. The Wanton Mermaid did most of its business after dark.

“Corson!” The host, a small, canny fellow known as Cricket, threw his arms around her enthusiastically, “I’d given up hope of ever seeing you again—my heart was broken. You owe me thirty crescents.”

Cricket owed his success as a taverner to three inviolable rules: He never watered his ale, he never

betrayed a secret, and he never forgot a debt. Eyeing Corson's silver skeptically, he picked up a coin and weighed it in his hand.

"Satisfied?" laughed Corson. "It's not false."

"Ah, the girl's picked a rich pocket," said Dorrit, a dark, thin woman who eked out a living as a petty thief.

"This money's honestly come by, Dorrit. I've come up a good deal since you saw me fast. I know folk in high places nowadays."

"The gallows ... ?" suggested Dorrit. Cricket snorted.

"I'm the traveling companion of a great lady, a Rhaicime!" Corson continued. "She's very elegant, and a scholar too—"

"Who'd you kill, Corson?" Cricket interrupted.

"Here, if you don't believe me, look at these earrings." She bent toward Dorrit. "She gave them to me, just because she enjoys my company."

Dorrit touched one wistfully, "These are really valuable, Corson, They're old."

Cricket whistled. "Sweet Asye! She's killed a Rhaicime! We'll probably all be hung."

Corson hit the table with her fist. "I told you that—"

"Don't be so touchy, pet. Since you're in such favor with the nobility, no doubt you can pay me those thirty crescents, eh?" He winked at Dorrit.

"That's what I've come for." Corson began to count out coins from her pouch.

Cricket leaped to his feet, astonished. "Not here!" he said, looking around anxiously. "Let's go in back."

"Watch out, Cricket." Dorrit called after them. "You don't want to end up owing her. She fetches a high price these days!"

Cricket barred the door behind them and dragged the moneybox out from beneath his cot. Corson sat on a stool and watched him unlock the chest with one of the keys at his belt. When it was safely stored away again she rose to go, but Cricket caught her hand. "Why so hasty, Corson?" he grinned. "No time for old friends now that you're the favorite of Rhaicimes?"

Corson made an insulting gesture with her free hand. "It's true, all the same," she insisted.

"Then let's celebrate your good fortune." He hugged her hard. "I love tall women," he sighed, nuzzling her breasts.

Corson smiled down at him. "But you know I don't like short men."

"Well, I'm not short all over, pet," said Cricket. "Remember ... ?"

## 26

CORSON WAS FLUSHED and rather unsteady on her feet when she returned to The Crown and Peacock that evening. Nyctasia was at the table, reading by candlelight. "You look like you've had a good time," she observed.

Corson sat down, leaning her head on her hand. "I'm not drunk."

"No?"

"I don't know what's wrong with me these days," Corson complained, shaking her head. "One moment I feel fine, then I'm dizzy and my head aches. I must be getting the grippe. I'm going to bed." She sounded quite sober.

"Don't you even want some supper?"

Corson pulled off her boots and climbed into the bed, drawing the covers over her. "I'm not hungry."

"This sounds serious," said Nyctasia. She sat on the bed and leaned over Corson. "You do look feverish."

Corson's forehead was beaded with sweat. "I'm freezing. It's too cold in here."

Nyctasia frowned. If anything, the room was rather too warm. She went to the table and wrote out a list of simples, then summoned a servant. "Take this to an apothecary's immediately," she instructed, wrapping the paper around some coins, "and bring me a pitcher of strong red wine when you return."

Hurry.”

“I know an excellent remedy for fever,” she assured Corson.

“Does it have bloodroot in it?” Corson asked, suspicious.

“No, why?”

Corson mumbled something and turned away.

When the servant returned, Nyctasia measured out small amounts of the dried herbs and mixed them in a cup of wine which she held over the fire with tongs. “Drink this,” she ordered, bringing Corson the hot, fragrant drink.

Corson sipped at it warily. “This is good!” She swallowed it greedily and handed the empty mug back to Nyctasia. “Give me some more.”

Corson slept through the evening and late into the following morning. When the tailors arrived to do a first fitting, she felt quite well again, as hungry as ever, and excited at the prospect of her new clothes. She’d never before had clothing made for her, nor had she possessed any of such fine quality. The garments provided by her employers had generally been plain, sturdy goods, which had already seen much use.

The tailors and apprentices flattered her and called her “madame.” She was draped in new lambskin and linen which they deftly pulled into place, snipping and stitching, as they turned Corson about and fussed with the materials. She twisted and laughed under their prodding, enjoying herself thoroughly. It took half the time to fit Nyctasia.

Though she fretted about the delay all the next day, at the final fitting Nyctasia had to admit that the results were worth the wait. She had commissioned a suit of plain traveling clothes of a serviceable grey stuff, as well as an elegant outfit of black velvet with silver trimmings. She admired her reflection in the tailors’ glass as they made a few final adjustments on the soft, svelte doublet. “Quite satisfactory,” she said, smiling. She was equally at home in fine clothes or in her shabby students’ garb, but the graceful tailored black was undeniably becoming.

But it was Corson who was really transformed. Instead of a bedraggled layabout, she seemed a young noblewoman dressed for the road. In clothing cut to her measure, her naturally proud carriage and statuesque beauty were set off to the fullest advantage. She wore a close-fitting tunic of fine lambskin over a russet linen shirt, open at the throat, with the full sleeves gathered at the wrist. Her leggings were made of a soft, dark suede.

She stretched like a cat and turned before the mirror, trying to see herself from all sides. “Do I look all right?” she asked anxiously.

Nyctasia broke into astonished laughter.

Corson’s face fell. “What’s the matter?”

“Do you look all right? Are you blind? You look like sunrise over the rippling wheat! You look like a pillar of golden flame! You look like a fountain of topaz and amber! Corson—yes, you look all right.”

## 27

NYCTASIA TRAVELED ALONE to Mehomne. On the morning of her departure, Corson did not even get out of bed. “You can get yourself eaten by werewolves if you like,” she said. “Only a fool would cross the Yth without need.”

“Your concern for me is most touching,” Nyctasia said cheerfully, pulling on her traveling clothes. “I’ll be grieved to part with you, but I suppose I must bear it somehow.” In truth, she was rather relieved at Corson’s decision. Where Nyctasia was bound, Corson’s company might well be more of a hazard than a help. The dangers of the Yth could not be met with a sword. “According to the most respected authorities, werewolves do not eat human beings,” she remarked. “They’re said to regard it as a sort of cannibalism.”

“If the werewolves don’t kill you something else will.”

“I never said they don’t kill people, I said they don’t eat them.”

Corson raised herself on one elbow. “Nyc, do you know what you’re doing?”

Nyctasia perched on the edge of the bed and tugged on her boots. After a moment's thought, she said, "*Yth* means magic, did you know that? 'Yth Wood' wasn't really a name at first—it simply meant, 'the enchanted forest.'"

"Interesting," said Corson, "but not an answer to my question."

"Patience, if you please. I can explain. Do you remember when I told you that magic is a difficult art, that it takes time and study to effect the simplest spell ... ?"

"You were lying?" asked Corson without the slightest surprise.

"Well, not altogether. The power of the *vahn* is only won through toil and discipline, as I said, and it is limited by one's own strength. My power is slight because my spirit is weak and undisciplined.

"But, *yth* is that power drawn from outside oneself—from sources so much greater than the paltry human spirit!" She began to pace about the room excitedly, and Corson thought she must be telling the truth. Nyctasia was always quite at her ease when she was lying.

"You remember the sea spell I tried when we walked to the *Windhover*?"

"I remember that you half-killed yourself with it!"

"*Yth* can be dangerous and unpredictable. I tried to take power away, to make it part of myself when I was not part of it.. You see, a spell of Perilous Threshold draws upon the power of *yth* swiftly—there's no chance to prepare oneself. It must be done blindly, without knowing what the cost will be, and one can only hope that the power will be worth the price. It's a reckless measure—I only tried it because I was desperate. Oh, I asked little enough, so the risk was not very great; but if much is demanded, the sacrifice to Balance may be anything—even life itself."

"And the forest?" Corson prompted her.

"The forest was called Yth because it is a source of magic—a source that can be drawn upon if one knows the way."

"And at what price?"

"When nothing is taken away, there is nothing to pay. When nothing is lost what is the cost? What does a mill wheel take from a river? Turn as it may, there is yet as much water as ever"

"Rhymes and riddles!" said Corson with contempt.

"Corson, I am trying to answer you. Don't you see, I have nothing to fear from the Yth because the power belongs to those who belong to it. It cannot be a danger to itself."

"You can't mean to become part of that cursed forest!"

"No one can become one with the Yth itself and remain human ... but there are places near the forest so steeped in its Influence that those who hold them have vast powers at their command."

"So that's where you're going. Not to Hlasven."

"I don't know exactly where I'm going, yet, but Hlasven is the nearest place with a name. The land belongs to 'Ben now—or he to it. When I've joined him that power will be mine as well, and we shall both be stronger."

"But only as long as you stay there?"

"If we left, we would lose the land to others, as the mage Vhar Kastenid lost it to 'Ben. There are those now who would wrest it from him if they could—Kastenid himself has tried to reclaim it more than once." She shrugged. "If you would have a water wheel, you must dwell at a river, but a miller doesn't think that a sacrifice."

Corson was dismayed at the idea of being bound to one place for any reason. "It's madness! You'll be the prisoner of your own power!"

Nyctasia smiled. "I shall be free, for the first time in my life." She bent over Corson and kissed her. "And if you're ever bored, you'll know where to look for me."

"I'll remember that," said Corson, turning away and pulling the bedclothes over her head. She heard Nyctasia laugh and heft her satchel onto her shoulder, then close the door and start down the stairs.

Corson tried to sleep. She told herself that she was well rid of Nyctasia, that there was no reason to follow the witch any further. Not even to herself would she admit that she felt too weak to make the journey.

It was no great distance to Mehomne, and Nyctasia made the journey in two days. She rode at a leisurely pace and spent the night at a farmhouse along the way. There was no need to hurry, no need to look behind her. She felt that she was no longer running away, but traveling toward her destination.

It was midday when she reached the city and made her way to The Crossroads Inn. According to 'Ben's directions, this was the usual place to join a party of travelers bound for Yth Forest.

But the news at The Crossroads was disappointing. It might be a fortnight yet before their departure, since they were still too few in the company. Nyctasia only made the ninth, and no one would venture into the Yth with fewer than twenty together.

Nyctasia resigned herself to the wait, but found that her companions at the inn were either unfriendly or too friendly to suit her. She would have been graciously received by any of the local nobility, as a courtesy due to one of her rank, but she was unwilling to make herself known, even this far from Rhostshyl. The habit of secrecy was too strong for her and made her prefer the obscurity of the inn, though she had to share a room with a dealer in silks and spices, who talked too much, and snored. She found herself missing Corson. Corson snored too, but she was never boring.

Nyctasia had no preparations to make in Mehomne, so she spent her time exploring the city, an amusement which soon wore thin. Mehomne was only a stopping place for travelers on their way inland, mainly tradesfolk carrying goods from up and down the coast. When Nyctasia visited the marketplace, she was pestered by a swarm of beggar-children who knew her for an aristocrat as surely as if she were attended by a large retinue. They could seldom be deceived on such a point, which was one reason that Nyctasia had often employed their like as spies. Scattering a handful of coins among them, she escaped into the crowd. Though Nyctasia had long dreamt of traveling far from Rhostshyl, it seemed to her now that all cities were much the same.

"There you are at last, Lady!" said a voice just behind her. "I've been waiting for you. Don't you know the danger—"

Nyctasia turned quickly, her hand on her sword hilt, and found herself facing a thin man wearing three hats, one on top of another, and carrying a long pole hung with a score of others. "... the danger of walking bareheaded in the sun?" he continued. "Now, ever since I made this hat I've been waiting for you to come along and buy it. Anyone could see that it was made for you alone." He deftly unhooked a broad-brimmed, grey hat from the pole and handed it to Nyctasia with a bow, somehow contriving not to lose any of the hats he was wearing.

She stroked the black plume pinned to the hat with a silver clasp. Nyctasia could be something of a dandy when she had the leisure. "How much?"

"Five silver crescents, mistress, since I've been saving it specially for you. I could have sold it a dozen times, but it would be a crime to let anyone else have it."

"I'll give you four because I won at dice last night," said Nyctasia. "The hat isn't worth so much, of course, but the performance certainly is."

Her offer was promptly accepted—the hatter would have been glad to get three—and Nyctasia strolled off, equally pleased with the bargain.

"Perhaps some new boots," she thought, but that could wait. Her instinctive lie about the gambling had put her in mind of another errand. She made her way to the artisans' quarter and soon found a goldsmith's shop. There was no mistaking the sign, with its great golden sun and stars.

As she entered the shop, the goldsmith turned from the fire holding a small crucible with slender tongs, and carefully poured the molten gold into a clay mold. A young apprentice laid aside the bellows, brushing the hot hair back from his face with one ringed hand. Both he and the smith were covered with golden jewelry and trinkets. Their bare arms were decked with golden bracelets, and bright pendants swung from their ears. There were gold beads threaded in their hair, and even the heavy work aprons were stitched with flat stars of gold foil.

The apprentice came up to Nyctasia. "How may we serve you, mistress?" he asked politely.

Nyctasia shielded her eyes, as if dazzled by his glittering splendor. "Well, I was wanting a locket, but perhaps I'll buy you instead."

The boy chuckled. "I daresay Desskyres would gladly sell me, but I'll fetch some lockets for you

anyway, shall I?" He set a stool at the table for Nyctasia and went into the back room of the workshop.

The smith, Desskyres, eyed Nyctasia with unconcealed interest and smiled, revealing a gold tooth, "You can have him for a copper penny and welcome, lady! In truth, I'd pay you to take him off my hands."

The boy reappeared with a tray, which he set before Nyctasia. "That one mistreats me something dreadful," he told her in a loud whisper. "Starves me and beats me—it's a wonder I can stand!"

"You look like it," laughed Nyctasia.

Like the rest of the market folk, these two took her for a trader—as she intended—and called her 'lady' simply to flatter her. Had they guessed at her real title, neither would have dared to joke or flirt with her.

She was intrigued by the pair—and especially by the beautiful, dark-skinned smith. She could hardly take her eyes from those lean, muscled arms, ringed with gleaming gold.

Glancing at the tray of jewelry, she saw what she wanted at once. "This one," she said, holding up a highly polished, heart-shaped locket. "This is perfect."

The smith came over to inspect her choice and nodded approval. "That's a fine piece of work. Feel how smooth it is—burnished with soft sand for hours. It's costly, you know."

Nyctasia only smiled. "Can you engrave a name on it?"

"Surely. Write it out, if you will."

The apprentice fetched a slate covered with designs and words, and offered Nyctasia a piece of chalkstone. She handed the locket to Desskyres, letting her fingers brush lightly across the smith's warm palm. Then, taking up the stone, she scratched out, "MELLIS."

"That's easily done," said Desskyres. "I could have it ready tomorrow, if need be. Or the next day."

"There's no great hurry—just let me know when it's finished. I'm staying at The Crossroads."

The smith frowned. "*Vahn*, lady, you don't want to go among such people. Criminals, the lot of them!"

"Indeed?"

"Don't you know? That's where folk gather who want to travel through the Yth. Who'd be so desperate as that if they weren't pursued for some crime?"

"I would, for one," Nyctasia said mildly.

"Are you mad?" the smith cried, then looked at her sharply, "or are you a witch?"

"Oh, a bit of both, perhaps. But what of you—are you a man or a woman? I've been wondering all this while."

The apprentice snickered. "A bit of both, perhaps?" he suggested.

"Clear those things away!" ordered the smith. "And go buy some lamb's wool. I told you yesterday we've need of more."

"I'm going!" The boy winked at Nyctasia and went out.

Desskyres sat on the table, leaning toward Nyctasia. "As to your question, pretty one, if you were very curious, I could suggest an excellent way for you to find out."

"A fair answer," murmured Nyctasia. She too leaned forward, tracing one finger along the prominent cheekbone that reminded her of Erystalben's. "Alas that there's no privacy to be had at The Crossroads."

"The Crossroads is no place for you, and neither is the Yth. You'd do better to stay here—you're such a tiny thing you'd not take up much space." The smith's lips brushed her ear, whispering, "I'd make you forget that nonsense about the forest."

Nyctasia shivered. A fortnight in Mehomne no longer seemed such a tedious prospect.

As she left the smithy, Nyctasia met the apprentice returning. He bowed. "What, leaving so soon, mistress? Were you not pleased with our wares?"

"I mean to return later," said Nyctasia, "when I can study them at my leisure."

"You'll not be disappointed. 'Kyres was smitten with you, plain to see! I fear I'll have to sleep on the hearth tonight."

"Not you, lad. I'll wager you have a dozen other lovers who'd be glad to take you in."

“Oh, well, if you’ve heard my reputation—!” he replied, with a modest shrug. “You mustn’t believe all that folk say.”

“I believe very little of what I hear,” Nyctasia said drily. Reputation indeed, the puppy! All the same, he was nowhere to be seen when she returned that night to the smithy.

The room over the workshop was surprisingly comfortable. The furnishings were dark, carved oak of fine workmanship, and intricately wrought lamps stood on brackets in the corners. One wall was draped with a tapestry of a great tree with bright leaves of all colors.

As Nyctasia admired it, Desskyres came up behind her and clasped her around the waist. “What are you thinking of, little one?”

She leaned back and drew the smith’s gold-ringed arms around her. “I was thinking,” she lied, “that although I never wear gold, tonight I shall make an exception.”

“Never wear gold—what blasphemy under my roof! Then you yourself are not Mellis?”

“By no means. I’m Nyc.”

“And who’s this Mellis, then?” Desskyres demanded, pretending jealousy.

“Why, no one at all, just a child,” said Nyctasia, beginning to unfasten her shirt.

“That’s what you like, eh?”

“You’re what I like. Whatever you are.”

“What would you prefer me to be?” whispered Desskyres, slipping the shirt from Nyctasia’s shoulders. “I like to please.”

“Hlann! I don’t care!” exclaimed Nyctasia. She tilted her head back and kissed the smith under the chin. Strong hands pressed her breasts and gently caught the swelling nipples between thumb and forefinger. Nyctasia drew a sharp breath. Desskyres kissed her temple.

Nyctasia started to turn, but felt a painful tug at her neck. One long, gold earring had caught in the soft hair at her nape. Desskyres carefully pulled it free. “There now.”

“Those are dangerous, smith. Traps for the unwary!”

“Of course they are—anyone who wears my jewelry is irresistible.” Desskyres laughed and set the gold pendants swinging, burning as they caught the candlelight.

For a moment, the sight struck Nyctasia as strangely familiar ... then she remembered—Corson, at the inn in Lhestreq, shaking her head in the same way, the candlelight gleaming on the gold Edonaris earrings. But Corson had not laughed. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she’d said. “One moment I feel fine, then I’m dizzy ....”

Nyctasia’s heart froze in horror. She knew those signs. The headaches, the sudden fever ... but only now did she realize when they’d begun.

Desskyres touched her cheek. “Nyc, what’s the matter?”

“No, nothing. I—” Nyctasia began to pull on her shirt.

“Where are you going?! You *are* mad!”

“*Vahn!* I hope so,” cried Nyctasia. She flung her arms around the smith for a swift kiss. “I’ve no time to explain—I’ll send a message. I’m so sorry!”

Within a moment she was down the stairs and out of the smithy. Before nightfall the next day she was at the gates of Lhestreq.

## 28

“WHAT WOULD YOU have me say?” asked the host of The Crown and Peacock. “I know nothing more about it. As I told you, she went on her way days ago.” He looked as if he wished that Nyctasia would do the same.

It was not easy to get a lie past a practiced liar like Nyctasia. “I see,” she said coldly. “The truth of it is, you threw her out because she was sick.” But she could get nothing more from the landlord, and she was at a loss as to where to look next.

As she paced back and forth in front of the shops on High Street, the serving-girl from the inn darted up to her and curtsied hurriedly. “M’lady, you might find her on Cobble Row—there’s places there



anyone can stay.”

“How sick was she?” Nyctasia asked, anxious.

“Well, she could ride, m’lady, but she looked very poorly. The master was afraid to let her stay lest it spread to others.”

Nyctasia paid the girl for her information and let her go. She knew now that she must find Corson at all costs. If what she suspected was true, there might not be much time left.

After hours of fruitless inquiry among the denizens of Cobble Row, and a good deal of money wasted on false clues, Nyctasia was discouraged, tired, and no nearer to finding Corson. Only at a seamy tavern called The Wanton Mermaid had anyone even admitted to having seen Corson, but they could not (or would not) tell her anything helpful.

“She said she was staying at the Peacock with a wealthy Rhaicime,” scoffed one of the women. “Of course, nobody believed that. She had plenty of money, though.”

Nyctasia had hastily departed, avoiding the curious stares directed her way.

Toward midnight she ordered a meal in a tavern that seemed slightly less squalid than the rest. A large, middle-aged woman was scraping food from the tables and gathering empty mugs while keeping a wary eye on her remaining customers. A young man carried ale and food from the kitchen. Nyctasia paid him, took a few cautious bites of the bread, then gave up all pretense at eating. She laid another coin, a heavy silver Meridian, on the table and addressed the busy woman.

“Perhaps you’ve seen a friend of mine—a tall swordswoman called Corson, with money to spend—”

“Lady, I get soldiers in here all the time,” said the woman impatiently. She did not pick up the coin.

“You’d remember this one—she’s beautiful. Bright brown hair in a long braid, and wide blue eyes. She was probably sick, maybe feeling mean ....”

“What kind of fool soldier wears long hair?”

Nyctasia sighed. “Vanity makes fools of us all,” she said wearily. “You’ve not seen her then?”

At that, the young man came up to them. “Ma, I’ll wager she means the crazy one, over at Merl’s.”

“I never heard that *she* was beautiful.”

He shrugged. “I never heard she wasn’t. And she sure is sick. Merl’s just waiting for her to die so he can throw her out. Last time he tried, she broke his arm,” he told Nyctasia with a giggle.

She stood. “Where is this place?”

“I’ll show you,” he said eagerly. “It’s not far.”

The woman pocketed Nyctasia’s money. “All right, but bring yourself right back here after. There’s work to do.”

“That one has to be into everything,” she complained, watching them from the doorway. She frowned and suddenly called after Nyctasia, “Lady, don’t tell Merl you’re a friend of hers!”

\* \* \*

“Has that madwoman upstairs died yet, Merl?” shouted Nyctasia’s guide.

“I don’t know,” growled a heavysset, bearded man with one arm in a sling. “Why don’t you go up and look for yourself?”

“I will,” said Nyctasia. “Show me where she is.” She started up the stairs.

Merl shrugged and followed her, with the youth and a few curious customers trailing after them. “In here,” he said. “Watch out, she’s rutting dangerous.”

The others prudently fell back, as Nyctasia went in. She shut the door behind her and hastened to Corson’s bedside. “Corson, take off those earrings! That bastard Brethald poisoned them!”

But Corson didn’t move. She lay on a dirty straw pallet, her unsheathed sword on the floor at her left hand. Only her labored breathing showed that she was still alive.

Nyctasia knelt beside her and began to draw off the golden earrings but Corson lunged without warning and dragged her to the floor. Before she could call out for help, Corson had her by the throat.

Corson was back in the woods, surrounded by the band of jeering thieves. “We’ll have the jewelry too,” said the leader, and reached to take her prized earrings. This time he’d not get the better of her so easily! She threw him to the ground and fell upon him savagely, her hands closing around his throat. But

as she stared down into the robber's face, his features began to break and shift like reflections on the surface of a pond ....

Nyctasia was unprepared for the attack, and struggled vainly to break Corson's grip. There was a ringing in her ears and dazzling black patches clouded her vision. Desperate, she groped for her dagger but Corson suddenly went limp, overcome by weakness, and collapsed, senseless.

When Nyctasia had somewhat recovered her breath she bent over Corson and listened for her heartbeat, then quickly drew off the earrings, wrapping them in a handkerchief. Satisfied, she got to her feet, still gasping, and went out to the landing.

"Is she dead?" said Merl eagerly.

Nyctasia leaned on the doorframe, one hand to her throat, and looked at him with disgust. "Get me some rope," she ordered.

With Corson seemingly lifeless, and safely bound, the innkeeper felt much bolder about entering the room. He glared at Nyctasia, who was laying her folded cloak under Corson's head. "She's not staying here!" he said.

Nyctasia stood. "Don't worry, man, it isn't catching. She's not sick, she's poisoned."

"How do you know?"

For answer, Nyctasia unwrapped the glittering earrings. "These were prepared with a deadly poison, but it wasn't intended for her—she stole them. It's unwise to steal from me." The lie would serve as a warning. Nyctasia knew that everyone at the inn probably had plans to rob her already.

Merl looked uneasy. "Well, I don't care what's wrong with her, she's not going to die under my roof. Folk will stay away for a year if they hear about it. You get her out of here or I will."

"She'll not die, I promise you," Nyctasia said, hoping that she spoke the truth. "I'm a healer, I'll see to her."

"She's trouble, dead or alive," said Merl stubbornly.

"Listen to me, man—! don't want her here any more than you do. I'd rather have her someplace clean! But she's too sick to be moved yet, and anyone who tries it will regret it!" She spoke firmly, looking straight at the man like one who can make good her threats. He dropped his eyes. As ever, Nyctasia was convincing.

"I'll take her away when she's stronger," she continued, "but I can make it well worth your while to keep her here for now."

This made a better impression on Merl. "You'll pay what she owes? She broke some furniture too, you know."

"You'll be satisfied." Nyctasia paced rapidly around the room, hands clasped behind her, then pointed to the weapons she'd taken from Corson. "Lock those up somewhere. And have this room cleaned. Thoroughly!"

"How do I know you can do what you say? If she dies—"

Nyctasia smiled. "Very well, you shall have proof." Her face assumed a strange dreamy expression which the burly innkeeper viewed with misgiving. He backed away a step as Nyctasia approached him.

## 29

CORSON COULD SEE nothing but a thin film of mist that crept around her feet. She tried to struggle, but something held her until she lay with her strength spent, watching as the fog swirled about her knees. It clung to her waist, then moved up over her breasts, and from behind her came a pitiful, low, moaning sound. Her head was held still and something pressed against her lips. Wetness filled her mouth.

She awoke and found Nyctasia standing over her. "Nyc," she whispered, "I have to tell you ... burning ... we're burning! Who can help us?" She spoke hurriedly, sure that she had to warn Nyctasia, but to her horror she heard herself babbling nonsense. Nyctasia's face withdrew, retreating farther and farther away until it seemed no nearer than a star in the night sky. Then, there was only darkness ....

Once Nyctasia had healed his broken arm, and paid handsomely for Corson's board, Merl was won over and even became helpful. He let it be known at the inn that anyone who troubled Nyctasia would

have him to deal with, and he'd see to it that they never again troubled anyone.

Before long, Corson's room was comfortably furnished, though Corson herself was hardly aware of the difference. Still delirious and dangerous, she had to be forced to submit to any care, and to swallow the antidotal potions Nyctasia prepared for her.

Nyctasia kept a constant watch over her, sleeping little, pacing, always reproaching herself. She should have foreseen such a thing! It was intolerable to her that someone else should suffer for her carelessness, that Corson should die like this, not at the hands of enemies, not in fair fight, but by pure mischance!

But it was not only Corson's danger that troubled her—she was haunted by the memory of her henchman, Sandor, as well. He had served her faithfully and risked his life in her service more than once, yet when Thierran had killed him she'd sorrowed less than for a hound lost in the hunt. Sandor had always done his duty, but Nyctasia felt that she had somehow failed in hers. Failed, not only in her duty to Sandor, but to some principle of her own philosophy. Who had killed him, in truth, Thierran or herself? When she tried to think about Sandor, she could hardly recall his face. And now, had Corson too outlived her usefulness?

Surely Corson was different, though. Such a wanton, winning creature with her bold tongue and her reckless courage, her generous laughter and her prickly pride. So quick to take offense, so ready to be cajoled.

But Corson was not so very different from others of her station; rather, Nyctasia was different from the woman she had been. For a Vahnite, there was no forgiveness for an offense against the Indwelling Spirit. One could only make amends by becoming a person who was incapable of such a crime.

Nyctasia had been, by turns, amused and angered by Corson, as she might have been by some half-wild household pet. Now, with a pang, she remembered the ways she had tricked Corson, trapped her, used her. She knew that her servants thought her a just and generous mistress—such was the proper role for an Edonaris. Nyctasia had always performed her part well, but it had never been more than a performance. She was not aware of how much she was changing. She only knew that Corson's death would weigh on her heart as well as her spirit.

Corson whimpered. "Nyc, where are you? There's blood on the sand—" but she did not know that Nyctasia was bending over her, bathing her face with cool water. She was wandering along a beach at dusk, looking for something lost, her feet bare and bleeding. The cold wind from the sea threw spray in her face, and she shivered.

Nyctasia brushed back the damp hair from Corson's hot, fever-flushed face. Corson's magnificent hair was lank and dull now, her skin sallow. It was too late for medicines to save her, the poison had been at work too long—long enough to have killed the small, slight Nyctasia. Had she worn the earrings herself, as Brethald intended, there would not have been time for her to realize what ailed her.

Corson was seized with a fit of trembling, and Nyctasia, still watching her, finally came to a decision. With a determined nod, she rose and barred the door. So be it. She would try to work a healing trance, whatever the risk. It was not a spell she should attempt without help, for Corson was far nearer to death than anyone she had tried to heal before. There should be someone at hand to recall her at the proper time and sever the spell. She thought for a moment of enlisting the aid of Merl, who had become her champion, but she dared not trust his goodwill as far as that. She would be utterly at the mercy of anyone who attended her.

Very well, she must take the chance—not only for Corson's sake, but for her own.

Nyctasia wasted no more time. Sitting on the bed, she unlaced Corson's shirt and placed her hand over Corson's heart. She lowered her head and waited, eyes closed, pacing her thoughts to the measured rhythm of Corson's heartbeat and entering gently into the pattern of the first Recognition, the commencement of the Influence Toward Life.

Sleeping one, *dream of me.*

Distant one, *greet me,*

Silent one, *speak to me.*

Secret one, *heed me.*  
Lonely one, *lean to me.*  
Lost one, *seek me.*  
Captive one, *reach to me.*  
Fugitive, *flee to me.*  
Hider, *draw near to me.*  
Wild one, *be dear to me.*  
Stranger, *receive me.*

As the words possessed her, all else receded and became unreal. There was nothing but the seeking in darkness, the reaching of one spirit to another. Then even the words gave way, and only the rhythm remained to guide her. She followed it blindly, trustingly, until she came to its source—the black waves beating on the dark shore.

A still figure lay just out of reach of the breaking waves, and Nyctasia went to her, trying not to see the familiar likeness of Corson, but only to be aware of her presence. The pulse of the surf now said to her, “*Neither land nor sea. Neither earth nor air.*” Nyctasia knew that she was here only in spirit, but it was all-important that she not only know this but believe it, not only believe but remember. Remember. Remember that this was not a place but a state of being. Remember that one could not truly be here, that one must not, above all, stay here... Everything that she thought she saw or felt or heard, she must deny.

She would not even think of Corson by name. “Friend,” she said, “it is time we were away from here. The tide is coming in.” *Neither sea nor sky. Neither shore nor star.*

The being who was Corson and yet was not Corson, replied faintly, “I cannot. I am too weak.”

“That is your dream, but I am here to wake you. Arise. You are whole, you are healed.”

The only answer was the ghost of a sigh.

“Trust in me, do you not know me?” *Neither lips nor tongue. Neither voice nor word.*

A hesitation. “I ... know you ...”

“And I know you. You are a warrior! This battle is not done yet.”

“No ...”

“You have only to face the enemy to defeat them. They are mere shadows who war against you. Come away. Lean on me.” *Neither hands nor limbs. Neither tears nor blood.*

Together, they moved away from the black waves, Corson’s steps growing firmer even as Nyctasia’s weakened.

“Don’t leave me,” Corson cried.

“You can stand alone now,” Nyctasia said aloud, but there was no one to hear her. She was kneeling beside the bed where Corson still lay senseless, beyond the reach of her voice. For a long while Nyctasia knelt there, trembling, ashen, unable to rise. Then, gripping the bedstead, she pulled herself to her feet and staggered to her cot, where she lay gasping like a drowning woman.

### 30

BECAUSE SHE REMEMBERED nothing that she had experienced during her trance, Nyctasia had no way of knowing whether she had been successful. Her own weakness told her that she had given strength to Corson, but had it come in time to shift the balance towards life? Corson seemed unchanged, still wandering in her fever dreams, and Nyctasia could only continue to nurse her and hope for some encouraging sign.

Corson thought that she had been walking for days on end without finding her way. She longed for rest but felt that she must keep moving on, though she no longer remembered why.

Then someone called to her, and she saw a tall figure coming towards her over the dunes. “Steifann ... ?” She tried to run to him, but soon stopped, exhausted. “Steifann, help me! I’m so tired ...” But it was not Steifann who reached to embrace her. Corson frantically felt for her sword, but it had been lost somehow. She screamed as the grinning specter bent over her, sliding its arm around her waist, trying to

force open her mouth with its tongue. Suddenly furious, she struck out wildly at the creature with all her remaining strength, only to find herself lying in a strange room, staring at her own hand. For some reason, a bed slat had been tied to her arm.

Nyctasia scrambled to her feet and ran to throw open the door so that she could summon help if Corson broke free to attack her. She watched from a safe distance as Corson tried to sit up, looking about in bewilderment.

“Steifann ... ?”

Nyctasia approached cautiously. “It’s Nyc.”

Corson stared at her. “Why is your shirt all wet?”

“This is the broth I was trying to feed you when you knocked me down just now.” She picked up a broken bowl and set it on the table.

“I did not,” said Corson. She lay back and tugged at the cord at her other wrist. “Help me!”

Nyctasia hesitated, then sat on the edge of the bed and undid the knots. “Who did this?” Corson demanded, frightened.

“I did. You keep trying to kill me.”

Corson looked puzzled. “We have to hurry,” she said vaguely. “It’s almost dawn.” She fell asleep again before Nyctasia could reply.

Nyctasia laid her palm against Corson’s temple, and smiled. The fever had broken.

“I’m not hungry.”

Nyctasia sighed. “How in the Hlann’s name do you think to get your strength back if you won’t eat?” She began to straighten Corson’s tangled bedclothes again.

Corson picked unenthusiastically at the plate of stew before her. “It’s probably poisoned,” she muttered.

But Nyctasia only laughed. “Do you want me to eat some of it first?”

“As soon as I do get my strength back, the first thing I’m going to do is tear you into shreds, you murderous bitch.”

“I know, you told me. But last time you mentioned it you were planning to cut out my heart and liver and skewer them. Let me know when you’ve decided which it’s to be.”

“I will.” She started to eat the stew, which was not at all bad.

Corson was bored with being confined to bed. She’d been trying for days to provoke Nyctasia, but all her threats and insults had been met with a good-humored patience that was driving her mad. She liked Nyctasia better as a sharp-tongued shrew. “What are you doing now?” she demanded.

“Writing a letter.”

“Where are my weapons?”

Nyctasia paid no attention. Corson looked for something to throw at her, but there was nothing at hand except the stew. She hit the wall with her fist.

Nyctasia looked up. “Do you want something, or are you just trying to annoy me?”

Corson didn’t know what she wanted. When Nyctasia tried to amuse her, she wanted to be left alone, and when Nyctasia ignored her, she felt neglected. Unused to illness, she had no idea that her despair and frustration were only the aftermath of fever. Suddenly she burst into tears.

Nyctasia went to her and embraced her. “You’re a goose! Hush now, listen to me—if you like, I’ll ...” she lowered her voice. “I’ll tell you what *isnathon scrathling* means.”

Corson grabbed her arm. “Tell me.”

Nyctasia whispered something to her and she gasped. “You filthy ...! Get away from me!” She kicked out at Nyctasia who backed away and dropped into her chair, laughing.

“I think *I’ll* write a letter,” Corson announced.

“Very well.” Nyctasia cut another sheet from her book and dipped the quill afresh. Writing was a difficult skill, practiced mainly by students and scribes. The wealthy employed secretaries to write their correspondence, and others patronized public scribes. Nyctasia naturally assumed that Corson meant to dictate the letter to her. “Very well, what do you want to say?”

“No, give it to me. I’ll write it myself.”

Skeptical, but curious, Nyctasia brought her the book and quill, and sat on the bed to watch, holding the ink.

Corson was clearly a self-taught scribe. As she laboriously dragged the quill over the rough paper, the point frequently caught in the fiber, spattering ink across the page. But Corson persisted. “MY DEAREST STEIFANN,” she scrawled.

Nyctasia couldn’t bear it. “Corson, that is a pen, not a sword—don’t stab the paper with it. Hold it loosely and let it slide over the surface.”

“I don’t want lessons in penmanship!”

Nyctasia stood. “I’m going out, then. Shall I bring you anything?”

Corson only shook her head, intent on her writing. As soon as Nyctasia was gone, she tried to follow her suggestions—but it only became harder to control the pen. She tore out page after page and used them up, practicing. The point of the quill soon wore down, but there was nothing to sharpen it with.

When Nyctasia returned after an hour, she found Corson hunched scowling over yet another ragged and blotchy effort. Her hand was cramped and ink-stained, and there was a black smear across the bridge of her nose. She crumpled up the page and threw it at Nyctasia. “Let it slide over the surface!” she shouted. “How, curse you?!”

Nyctasia set down her satchel and looked at the mess Corson had made of her commonplace book. It required all her powers of self-discipline just to keep her temper. “I thought you didn’t want lessons in penmanship. You should be resting, not wearing yourself out over trifles. Lie down!” To Corson’s relief, she cleared the rubbish from the bed and threw it on the fire.

Corson lay back and shut her eyes, too tired even to give Nyctasia an argument. Her own weakness frightened her more than any enemy. How could an hour of sitting up and scribbling be so exhausting? “I’ll never be well again!”

“You just need time to mend, that’s all. If you’d stop fretting yourself, you’d feel a good deal better. Look—” She reached in her satchel and brought out a matching silver comb and hairbrush. “These are for you. Perhaps they’ll keep you amused for a while. After all, you are the vainest person I’ve ever known.”

Corson was already unpinning her braid. She gathered up her hair and drew the brush through it a few times, but even this soon became tiring.

“Shall I do it for you?” Nyctasia offered.

“Mmm, all right.” Corson loved to have her hair brushed. She toyed with the silver comb. “These are just of a piece with my mirror. Look in my pack—it’s wrapped in a cloth. I meant to leave it with Steifann, but I forgot about it, with all the trouble you caused me.”

“Steifann ... is that your friend the taverner?”

Corson nodded. “Best lover in the land. He arranged the passage for us with that Destiver. ‘Old friends,’” she scoffed. “Hah!”

“That’s what you had against her!” said Nyctasia, enlightened. “Corson, I don’t think you need to worry.”

“You don’t know Steifann. He’ll bed down with anyone.”

“Not like you.”

“Are you going to brush my hair or aren’t you?”

“At once, milady!” She wrapped one long coil of hair around her hand and started to brush it slowly.

“He’s probably whoring all over the city by now, and me dying,” Corson mourned.

“The women of ancient Kehs-Edre wore a certain perfume in their hair, when they wanted to keep their men in thrall,” Nyctasia remarked. “I have the recipe in one of those useless books of mine.”

“How can you perfume your hair?”

“Soak a wooden comb in it for three nights and three days, then let it dry. You just comb your hair with it and the scent lingers ... men can’t resist it.”

“What a story!”

“It’s true, though,” said Nyctasia, with the conviction of one who has made the experiment. “In hair

like yours, the effect would be maddening. I'll make you a comb like that someday, if you like."

"When?" Corson asked. She began to feel that she might recover after all.

Over the next week Corson's health, as well as her handwriting, made rapid improvement. When several days had passed without a recurrence of the delirium, Nyctasia succumbed to Corson's insistent demands that her weapons be returned.

"Er ... do you want these back as well?" Nyctasia asked hesitantly, holding out the golden earrings. "I've washed them in vinegar—they're quite safe."

"You wear them. If you live long enough, I'll take them back."

"Gold doesn't suit me."

Corson shrugged. "Keep them."

With a sigh, Nyctasia changed her silver earrings for the gold.

## 31

"YOU'RE RIGHT," SAID Corson, some days later, "they look better on me. Give them back."

They were sitting in The Crossroads in Mehomne, indulging in one of their usual arguments. They had arrived on the eve of a caravan's departure for the Yth, and Corson had been hired by the travelers as an extra guard. It was a job few were willing to undertake, and the wages were more than liberal. Corson felt that the occasion warranted celebration, and she had already downed several tankards of ale.

Nyctasia too was in high spirits. "I've never known a man to equal 'Ben,'" she said, resuming their earlier discussion. She returned the gold earrings to Corson and put on her silver ones.

"That's because you don't know Steifann. I've had them all—gentlemen, peasants, townsmen—nobody compares with Steifann."

"Nobody ... ?" said Nyctasia, glancing towards a man who had just entered. Corson turned to look.

The newcomer was a striking, black-skinned man with strong, sharply chiseled features and a powerful, well-knit frame. He was of average height, but his proud, graceful bearing gave him greater stature.

"I see what you mean," said Corson. For once, she and Nyctasia were in complete agreement.

"We could throw dice for him," Nyctasia suggested.

"You'd charm the dice. Let's arm wrestle instead. I'll even use my right hand."

"Thanks, but I'm afraid I'd find it difficult to write with all of my knuckles broken."

"Well, we'll just have to share him, then."

"Done," said Nyctasia.

They were delighted when the stranger, after glancing around the room, came straight to their table. Corson gave him her most winning smile but he only nodded to her, then turned to Nyctasia with a formal bow. "Give you good evening, my lady."

Nyctasia frowned for a moment, but then broke into laughter. "Do sit down, sir," she said graciously. "So you've come into the light at last—it was a shame to hide such beauty in the shadows. Are you still following me?"

"Let us put it that we have the same destination, my lady."

Corson did not care for the turn events were taking. "Why didn't you tell me you knew him?" she demanded.

"I wasn't aware of it till he spoke," Nyctasia explained. "An occasional conversation with an unseen person is not considered a proper introduction. But he's been two steps behind me since before we left Rhostshyl."

"I'd have known if someone was following you!"

"Corson, you are the best of bodyguards, but even you can't watch for shadows in your sleep."

"Another ruttin' magician!" Corson said with disgust, "They come out of nowhere like maggots these days." She drained her ale and waved for another. "Do you want me to kill him?"

Nyctasia was enjoying herself. "I'm sure that won't be necessary."

"Too sure, perhaps," the stranger interrupted, suddenly abandoning his deference. "You are too sure

of a number of things, lady.”

Nyctasia leaned back, one eyebrow raised, as she contemplated this insolence. “What is this?” she said slowly, “another riddle?”

“No, a warning.” He paused, then exclaimed with vehemence, “You have made sacrifices, Edonaris, but you do not understand that for power one must sacrifice everything!” He did not take his eyes from Nyctasia’s, and she returned his stare. Bored, Corson finished her ale.

“What price have you paid for power?” Nyctasia said sharply. “Why have I never seen you by daylight? Why do you give no name?”

He looked away. “I have not given up what was not mine to give.”

Nyctasia’s grey eyes were the color of steel. “You dare say that I have done so?”

He shook his head. “If I still suspected you, you would never have seen my face. Nor would I risk my life to warn you.”

“What is this warning, then?”

“Do not go to Hlasven,” he said softly.

“You are no servant of Shiasfred!”

“Nor are you, Lady Nyctasia. Not yet.”

Nyctasia glared at him in disbelief. “I suppose you bribed Ben’s messenger to give you the letter?”

He made a gesture of dismissal. “The letter did not interest me. To command a Reflection of the spirit I needed to see you and receive a token from you. This has served my purpose,” he said, handing Nyctasia her glove.

“I’m sorry to have put you to such trouble.” Nyctasia said coldly. “It would have been easier with a lock of my hair.”

“It would have been easier to kill you! I preferred to try the spell. If I’d found you were no different from Shiasfred, I’d have used any means to keep you from him. I can’t hope to fight both of you.”

“You will have to kill me, then.”

“We’ll see. I don’t expect you to believe me now—only listen. When you’ve learned the truth about Shiasfred, come to me.”

For answer, Nyctasia threw the glove in his face, and rose to walk away without a word.

The stranger seized her arm. “Hear me—”

Corson had long since stopped listening and devoted herself to her drinking, but suddenly she too was on her feet. Kicking aside her chair, she pulled the man away from Nyctasia and stepped between them, sword in hand. Everyone in the room was watching them by now. “Nyc, do you want me to kill him or not?” she asked reasonably. “Make up your mind.”

Nyctasia smiled at her and shook her head.

Corson put up her sword. “Well, what are you lot staring at?” she inquired of the room at large, and people turned back to their own affairs.

The stranger sighed, rubbing his arm where Corson had twisted it. “My lady, you have nothing to fear from me. Will you not speak to me alone?”

“Very well,” Nyctasia said flatly. “I will listen, but I have nothing more to say.” She followed him to the door.

“Wait!” Corson protested, “We had an agreement. We’re supposed to share him.”

Nyctasia glanced back at her, “I’ll be back soon. Don’t worry.”

Corson stared after them, wondering whether she should follow Nyctasia. “That little slut,” she muttered, “let her fend for herself. He probably thinks she’s a boy, anyway.” She consoled herself with more ale and finally staggered off to bed, ignoring with drunken dignity several offers of company for the night.

“Move over!” Nyctasia demanded, trying to shove Corson to one side of the bed.

Corson grunted. “You’re back already,” she mumbled. “He must have been a disappointment.”

“I said move, you overgrown sow!”

“What happened?”



Nyctasia climbed over her. “Go back to sleep. The caravan leaves at sunrise, you know.”

“Tell me about him,” Corson insisted, still half asleep.

Nyctasia was silent for a time. “I should have let you kill him,” she said quietly. “He’s Vahr Kastenid.”

“What?”

“Go to sleep!”

Corson yawned. “It serves you right,” she said with satisfaction.

## 32

IT WAS A good two days’ journey to the marches of the Yth, and the countryside grew ever wilder and more desolate on the way. They made camp early on the second night, at the edge of the wood, refusing to enter the Yth at nightfall. Everyone in the party felt oppressed and uneasy except Nyctasia, who was afire with anticipation. She argued that they would be no safer by day, since the Yth was known to harbor an unvarying twilight at all hours, but the others chose to wait for dawn, nevertheless.

Disappointed and restless, Nyctasia wandered around the camp, listening for sounds from the forest. Finally she came and sat by Corson, who was keeping watch by the campfire.

“Stop prowling about,” Corson ordered. “Stay where I can see you.”

“Look at this.” Nyctasia unclenched her fist, and a small flame appeared, dancing above her open hand as if an invisible wick grew from her palm.

Corson frowned at it. “Magicians!” she said, and spat.

“Must you do that?”

Corson pointed to the eerie flame over Nyctasia’s hand. “Must *you* do that?”

“I never could do it before. It’s the Influence of the Yth—so close, I’ve only to reach out for it!” She spoke as if to herself, and Corson looked off into the shadowy forest, ill at ease. Nyctasia had begun to seem a stranger to her.

“You’ve been different ever since we got near this cursed forest. You act like you’re listening to something no one else can hear. I don’t like it.”

“I do.” Nyctasia closed her hand over the flame and it vanished. “You could still turn back. There’s no need for you to make this journey.”

“I’m being paid handsomely for it—I’ll go back to Steifann’s with a fortune. I’m not afraid of spirits.”

“That’s what worries me.”

“Your watch is up, Corson.” Another guard had arrived to relieve her. “Have you seen anything strange?”

“Just her,” said Corson, jerking her thumb at Nyctasia. They went off together, still arguing.

“Well, if everything’s so simple for you here, why don’t you do that mirror spell for me? The one I tried to do on the *Windhover*.”

“Oh, very well,” said Nyctasia, “but I’ll wager you’ll be disappointed. Fetch your mirror and meet me over there.” She pointed to a nearby stand of trees.

Corson had never expected her to agree, and now that Nyctasia was willing, she had her own misgivings. When she went for the mirror she remembered what had befallen those who’d used the spell unwisely, and her apprehensions began to get the better of her.

“Nyc ... are you sure it’s safe to do this? It won’t show me something monstrous, will it?”

“I’m glad you take your lessons so much to heart, Corson—you do me credit. No, there’s nothing to fear now. The power of this place is free to those within its bounds, if they’ve the knowledge to wield it. That’s what draws magicians here—”

“Like crows to carrion,” Corson suggested, “All right, I remember about that. Just get on with it, can’t you?”

Nyctasia shook her head indulgently and picked up the mirror, turning it towards Corson.

“Should I close my eyes?” Corson asked anxiously.

“You won’t see much if you do. Just think of what you want to see. Leave the rest to me.” She

calmly recited the spell of Reflection, holding the mirror steadily before Corson's fascinated gaze. The words sounded different from the way Corson remembered them.

At first the mirror showed Corson nothing at all, not even her own features. It was like staring through a window at a colorless winter sky. She tried to think only of Steifann. What would he be doing now? Sleeping, most likely, at this hour—he was always up before daybreak to go to market. But would anyone be sharing his bed?

Suddenly Corson gasped and leaned closer, straining to make out the distant shape barely visible in the glass. In her excitement, she forgot the mirror and her own surroundings. She could not have said whether the hazy images were drawing closer to her, or she to them.

"Ohh," Corson whispered, transfixed.

Steifann was not asleep. He sat at the table in his room with his account books spread before him, carefully sliding the stones back and forth along the wires of a small counting-frame. He was hunched over his work, leaning on one elbow, his hair falling into his eyes. Every so often he glanced longingly at the bed. The candles had burned low. Yawning, he picked up a quill and began to enter figures in the ledger, but then the nib splayed out and left a blot of ink on the page. Steifann threw down the pen in disgust and got to his feet, stretching wearily. He went to the washstand and bent over the basin to splash water in his face, then shook his head briskly. Wiping his face on his sleeve, he returned to his stool and resignedly scraped away at the inkstain with a sharp knife. Steifann prided himself on keeping neat records.

Corson hated to see him so tired. "Steifann, get to bed, leave that for tomorrow. I can go to market with Annin in the morning." Reaching out to touch his shoulder, she struck her hand against the silver mirror, and it was Nyctasia who answered her.

"Come to your senses, Corson, he can't hear you." She laid the mirror face down on the ground.

"Where ..." cried Corson, looking around in dismay. She snatched at the mirror but it showed her only her own baffled face. "But I ... he ..."

"I know," Nyctasia said gently.

"It's—it's a cheat!"

"Yes, in a way. It's a corrupt spell, turned to self-serving ends. It rarely gives what it promises."

Corson was both angry and ashamed—she felt guilty not only for spying on Steifann, but for taking more from him than she ever gave in return. If she were there now, Steifann wouldn't have to work all day and half the night, too.

The wretched mirror spell had revealed her reflection after all, and Corson wasn't pleased with what she saw. "Does magic always make folk feel worse than they did before?" she demanded.

"Usually," said Nyctasia.

The perpetual twilight of the forest made it impossible to tell day from night, and the travelers soon lost all track of time. Even when the sky was visible through the densely laced treetops, it showed a monotonous grey cast that might have been seen at any hour.

There were no definite landmarks, and they seemed always to be riding through the same stretch of wilderness again and again. When they halted to rest, the light from their cooking fire made the surrounding gloom seem even deeper and more forbidding. They spoke in whispers, while the sounds of the forest, usually distant and elusive, drew all too near.

"That's only wolves, that howling," said one of the merchants. "They won't come close to a fire."

"Werewolves, most likely. We should make torches."

"Werewolves don't fear fire," Nyctasia said. "They make fires themselves. In fact, the sort of werewolves that inhabit the Yth only assume human form in order to make fires, or tend wounds—tasks that require hands, you see." She warmed to her subject. "It's also said they prefer to mate that way, though I don't claim to know how that particular information was obtained. For most things they consider the human form inferior to the lupine."

"Then how can you kill them?" someone interrupted.

"Why, just as you'd kill any animal. But they hunt in packs like other wolves. Of course ..."

Corson nudged her, and she looked up to meet hostile stares on all sides. Those who had been worried that a werewolf might spring into their midst were not heartened at the prospect of being attacked by an entire pack. Nyctasia smiled disarmingly, "But of course there's no danger if we stay on the road—nothing in the forest will set foot on it. Just don't let anything tempt you from the road!"

"No fear of that. Nothing could get me into that cursed forest!"

Everyone in the party agreed, but when they next woke, the guard who had last been on watch was not to be found.

They broke camp hurriedly. "There's no use in our waiting. He won't come back."

"No one ever does."

"That's not so!" said Nyctasia sharply. "Some come back. If you see him by the side of the road, don't listen to him, don't look at him! And for *vahn*'s sake, stay out of his reach."

"But how could we be sure?" asked another of the guards, unhappily. "He's my friend."

"If he comes onto the road he's your friend. But don't try to help him. If you were his friend you're in more danger than the rest of us."

"That's true," someone agreed. "You know the song about the enchanted groom."

People nodded. 'The Marriage of Makine.'

Nyctasia rode up beside the grieving woman. "Do you know the song?"

"No, lady."

"Perhaps you should. It's a pretty song, though a sad one." Her clear voice pierced the eerie silence.

*"There was dancing by the river  
On the eve of the marriage-tide,  
Till a calling from the forest  
Drew the bridegroom from the bride.*

*He left his friends, he left the feast,  
And the dancing in the meadow.  
He left the one he loved the best  
To follow a shining shadow.*

*She waited all night in the field alone,  
All night she called his name  
To guide him back from the forest black,  
And with the dawn he came.*

*She ran and took him in her arms  
She kissed his eyes that were so wild.  
'Oh look at me, my love,' said she,  
And he looked on her and smiled.*

*'Oh speak to me, my love,' she said,  
'This very morn shall we be wed.'  
She kissed his lips that were so cold—  
'I heard you call,' was all he said.*

*She led him from the wood away,  
Across the field to the river's edge,  
But he would not ford the rushing stream  
Nor set his foot upon the bridge.*

*And then she knew what thing it was*

*That came to take her lover's place.  
She saw its image mirrored clear  
Upon the water's face.*

*Swiftly o'er the bridge she fled,  
Nor stayed for him that sought her,  
For only those of the living dead  
Will not cross living water.*

*It was the calling from the forest  
Drew the bridegroom from the bride.  
And there was never a wedding-fest  
Again at the riverside."*

"Bad luck to sing that here, maybe," someone said, after a while.  
They rode on in the timeless twilight.

From then on, Nyctasia insisted on staying with Corson whenever she was on guard duty. Corson was secretly glad of the company, but she indignantly denied that she needed Nyctasia's protection.

"Nothing in that forest could be more of a nuisance than you are," Corson took up a stick and raked a potato from under the ashes. She bit off half and wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

"Corson, you have the manners of an ox."

"Mulghfth?" said Corson. She swallowed, and offered the half-eaten potato to Nyctasia. "Did you want some?"

Nyctasia hid her face in her hands and groaned. "You must be joking."

But there was no answer, and she looked up to see Corson staring past her, open-mouthed. Nyctasia turned, and a sickening fear rose within her.

It was just as perilously beautiful as she'd heard. It held out its arms and laughed, and its laughter was sweet, melodic, entrancing. Burning with a sinister splendor, the Yth-Elf leaned toward them, and its body was a ripple of flame and shadow in the half-light of the forest.

Corson rose to her feet slowly, and the movement roused Nyctasia from her dazed contemplation of the radiant, sensual figure. "Corson!" she cried. "Don't look! Wait!" She tried to pull Corson back, but Corson only thrust her roughly aside and started to move toward the Elf.

Nyctasia seized Corson's pack and hastily spilled out the contents. She found the silver mirror and ran to hold it up before Corson's eyes, frantically chanting a spell:

*"Behold in this enchanted mirror  
Images reversed, but clearer.  
Herein all things reveal themselves.  
Behold the passion of the Elves!"*

Corson backed away, but she could not take her eyes from the glass. Horrorstricken, she dashed the mirror from Nyctasia's hand and fell to her knees, sobbing and retching.

Nyctasia stood over her protectively and dared to look back once at the Elf. It glared at her now, its exquisite features contorted with fury. For a moment she met the creature's challenging gaze before it retreated among the trees. She heard it laugh again—not with seductive sweetness, but in a shrill, mindless titter that seemed to mock her.

"So that's the game, is it?" Nyctasia thought, with a certain satisfaction. So be it. She would not be taken unawares.

Corson looked dubiously at the cup of thick, greenish liquid Nyctasia had given her. "It smells disgusting."

"I'm afraid it probably tastes disgusting, too," Nyctasia said apologetically. "Dried herbs wouldn't be as bitter, but there's no apothecary's shop to hand, so fresh ones will have to do. It will give you a dreamless sleep, I promise you."

Corson had not had an easy night's rest since she'd seen the Elf. She lay awake for hours, and when at last she fell asleep she was plagued by terrifying nightmares that left her wakeful again. With a grimace, she shut her eyes and drank down the potion in two gulps. "Hlann's blood, that's foul!"

"I had nothing to sweeten it with. You'll soon sleep, all the same." Nyctasia spread a blanket on the floor of the tent. "Come lie down."

Corson swallowed some water to wash away the taste of the sleeping draught, then threw herself down beside Nyctasia. "I don't feel any sleepier than I did," she complained. "That slime of yours probably won't help at all."

"It will help, if you let it," Nyctasia said patiently. "Just lie quiet. If I had my harp I'd sing you a lullaby."

"You ought to read to me from one of those books of yours. They're dull enough to make anyone sleep."

Nyctasia laughed. "Goodnight, Corson."

"Night!" Corson mumbled. "Who knows whether it's night or day in this Hlann-forsaken forest ..."  
She yawned.

Nyctasia watched her for a time. "Corson—"

"Hmm?"

"May I borrow your dagger and leave you mine in its place? I'll bring yours back to you—I swear it on my honor as a Vahnite."

"If you like," said Corson drowsily. It seemed an odd request. Bring it back from where? And there was something else she should ask Nyctasia, but she was so sleepy .... For a moment it came to her and she roused herself just long enough to say, "Nyc, where did you find those herbs?"

Nyctasia leaned over her, gently stroking her hair. "Hush, Corson, sleep now. Don't worry."

### 33

ENTERING THE FOREST was, for Nyctasia, like coming into a garden after years in a barren wasteland. It was radiant with life, a wellspring of power. She felt that the world she had known until now was the domain of death—that she had escaped from some dire captivity.

She looked back at the road and was overcome with terror. It looked to her like the ghost of a dead, dried river—a river of evil that hungered to draw her in and drown her. The very dust of the road seemed to be the powdered bones of its victims. Surely, if she set foot upon it, it would leech the life from her and leave her one of the lost, shadowy creatures who wandered the road, only fit to be prey for ghouls or the perverse Elves. She shuddered, not at the ways of the Yth, but at the horror of the road—banishment from the source of life. She turned her eyes away in loathing.

Nyctasia willingly allowed herself to harbor the inhuman feelings that flooded her. She wished to know the voice of the Yth in all its treacherous glamour—to resist its lure because she chose to do so, not because she refused to hear it. To understand the Yth's power was to master it.

She touched the hilt of Corson's dagger, the token of the oath that bound her to return. It was a primitive spell, but all the more powerful for that. She forced herself to look back at the road, to see it as it was, and she smiled at the sight of it, familiar and reassuring. It was the way to her true home and her own kind. Unafraid, she turned and moved off deeper into the Yth.

The forest was as curious about Nyctasia as she was about it. Leaves brushed her face as she passed, and a grey bird lit on her shoulder and tried to steal one of her silver earrings. But she was not to be caught so easily. She would leave nothing belonging to her within the Yth's power.

All about her there was a furtive rustling that quieted whenever she paused to listen. Even the wind seemed to follow her, whispering, carrying the sound of distant voices.

Nyctasia knelt to study a cluster of pale yellow mushrooms growing at the foot of a hollow tree. She held herself very still and watched from the corner of her eye, hoping that whatever hid nearby would take courage and draw nearer. The thickets stirred with wary, sly movements. She thought a pallid face peered out from the branches of a tree, but it vanished before she could turn to look. There was a frantic

scurrying of shadows and Nyctasia was left in an absolute, ominous silence.

She looked up to see that the missing guard from the caravan was approaching her. He moved haltingly and his face was set in a mirthless, tight-lipped smile. He did not speak to her.

Nyctasia had expected this. Rising unhurriedly, she faced him and made a Sign of Command, then uttered a simple spell of Unveiling. He backed away, grinning in rage, and Nyctasia saw that his teeth were sharp and jagged, and slanted back towards his throat. Then the creature lost all resemblance to the guard. It crouched on its haunches, snarling at Nyctasia, but when she took a step towards it, it turned and swiftly loped away.

Nyctasia meant to find the man, alive or dead, and this creature could lead her to him. She started in pursuit, but it ran faster than a person could follow on foot.

She would not be a person, then. This was the Yth, where one's form only reflected the need of the moment, and her need was for speed and stealth and the keen senses of a hunter. Almost at once, a shape like a small silver fox darted through the trees and took up the chase.

Nyctasia was familiar with the Principle of Transformation. A shifting spell was not intended to change one thing into another, but to manifest the truth that all things were, in essence, one and the same. But only here, with the power of the Yth at her command, could she avail herself of this knowledge without risk. The teaching had always seemed to her more of an ideal than a reality.

Now it seemed altogether natural to take on a different shape, for this shape belonged to her as well. When it no longer suited her ends, she would simply discard it for another. She ran effortlessly, keeping track of her quarry by scent and hearing alone. She was assailed by a myriad of smells and sounds, some alluring and some threatening, but she kept to her course unswervingly.

All at once there was a familiar scent on the wind that made her stop and hug the ground, prowling about and sniffing. She gave a sharp whine. It was the smell of man, the smell of death. Nyctasia had found what she was seeking.

“Wake up, you! Your friend's gone. Do you know what's become of her?”

Still muzzy-headed, Corson said vaguely, “Who, Nyc? She was right here a moment ago.”

“She's nowhere in camp, I tell you! Get up, everyone's to be counted.”

It was soon determined that no one was missing except Nyctasia.

“She's the one who knew all about the forest. If it could get her, no one is safe!”

“She knew too much about it, if you ask me. I never did trust that one.”

Corson was sure that Nyctasia had left the road by her own wish, but would she return? She wanted to wait, but the others insisted on moving the camp. Whatever had taken Nyctasia might still be close by.

While they took down the tents and harnessed the horses, Corson paced back and forth along the edge of the road, shouting for Nyctasia. No one told her to help load the wagons, but neither did they help her to call. Corson knew what they were thinking. She was thinking the same thing—what if Nyctasia *did* come back ...?

Nyctasia was walking beside a stream, gathering some sweet-smelling herbs, when she heard Corson's voice calling. She paid no heed to it at first but kept on her way, following the stream until she found that it was leading her back to camp. Surely not so soon? She stopped and sat down beside a shallow pool, trying to sort out her thoughts.

She dipped her hand in the clear water, and silvery minnows swam into her palm, curious and unafraid. Her reflection rippled as though with laughter. Gazing down at it, Nyctasia hardly knew its features for her own.

“Images reversed but clearer,” she murmured. Why should she renounce the power and freedom of the Yth for the sake of that stranger mirrored in the pool? What would she lose by yielding to the fascination of the forest?

Corson's voice pulled at her like an answer to her questions, but she set her back to it and struck off aimlessly through the forest. She wandered among the whispering leaves and beckoning shadows, wishing to lose herself in the depths of the Yth, but still she could hear Corson calling her. Whichever way

she turned, the shouting only grew louder, and she was soon within sight of the road again. Resigned, Nyctasia drew nearer to the campsite until she stood almost at the edge of the road. Half-hidden by the thickly tangled bushes, she watched the caravan prepare to depart. They were almost ready. She must have been gone longer than she'd intended.

Corson was no longer shouting. She stood in the middle of the road, looking about her hopelessly. Someone came over to her, and Nyctasia could hear them arguing, then Corson shrugged and followed after him.

Nyctasia approached reluctantly. Try as she might, she could not let her promise go unfulfilled.

"Wait!" She came to the edge of the road and held the dagger out to Corson.

For a moment, everyone was frightened into silence, then people shouted to Corson to keep her place.

Corson needed no warning. She made no move towards Nyctasia, but only drew her sword and waited, her face cold as stone.

Their fear amused Nyctasia. And Corson seemed most laughable of all, brandishing a sword as if such a weapon could avail against the Yin's magic. She could destroy the lot of them if she chose!

"Corson, come away! Leave her!" the drivers whipped up the cart horses, and folk scrambled to mount the wagons, calling to each other to hurry. Corson began to back away, never taking her eyes from Nyctasia. Drawn against her will out of the shelter of the forest, Nyctasia followed her, still proffering the dagger.

Seeing her walk onto the road, Corson allowed her to approach. "Nyc ... ?"

"I told you I'd bring it back. You needn't have worried."

Corson's relief was overmastered by rage. Seizing Nyctasia by the collar, she shook her roughly and shouted, "If you ever try a fool's trick like that again, you'll wish you'd been keelhauled before I finish with you!"

Nyctasia let herself be railed at and buffeted about, without a word of protest. When Corson paused for breath, she merely straightened her clothes and said mildly, "It is written, 'If the Yth fails to make you its prey, beware lest it make you a predator.' You're quite right, Corson, I shouldn't have gone. I'm sorry."

"You are?!"

"Yes, I was wrong. It was far more dangerous than I expected."

Corson was dumbfounded. Nothing she had anticipated was as unsettling as winning an argument with Nyctasia.

"It takes a witch to enter the Yth and return, so be thankful you have a witch with you!" Nyctasia said defiantly. "If I hadn't gone *she* would have, and we'd have lost her as well." She pointed at one of the guards. "You've seen him, haven't you?"

The woman nodded. "He wouldn't speak to me," she said softly.

"We wouldn't let her go to him. She wanted to," one of the others volunteered.

"I thought as much. Listen to me, I found him—he's dead, you must understand that. Here, I brought you this as proof." Nyctasia handed her a brass armlet. "I don't think you'll see him again."

"Thank you, lady," the woman sobbed.

"Now, if you're all satisfied, I should like to get some rest," Nyctasia said scornfully.

No one answered her, but when she was out of earshot someone muttered, "We ought to kill that one, if you ask me."

"No one's asked you!" Corson snapped, loud enough for the rest to hear. "If anyone's to kill her, it'll be me. I've earned the pleasure!"

## 34

NYCTASIA HAD PUT on her new suit of black velvet for the first time that morning, and she looked more the lady than Corson had ever seen her.

But Corson was haggard and worn, and she didn't even try to conceal it. "What are you waiting

for?" she asked Nyctasia impatiently.

Nyctasia had reined in her horse at the crossroads and was letting the rest of the party pass her by, "I'm not going into Hlasven itself. The other road leads closer to my way."

"You go where you like. I want to spend the night at the inn. I'm tired, Nyc."

"I know. You'll find a bed sooner if you come with me. We're closer to 'Ben's home now than to the hostel."

Corson turned her horse. "All right then. I'd like to see if he's as beautiful as you say."

Nyctasia took the lead. The road gradually gave way to an overgrown track which branched and meandered, sometimes disappearing completely—but Nyctasia never hesitated. She rode through pathless fields and stretches of dense woods as confidently as if the way were clearly marked before her.

"You must have been here before!" Corson accused. "You know the way too well."

"Ben gave me very careful directions. I've studied them so often, I know them by rote."

"That won't do." Corson halted her horse. "I know you think me a fool, but even a fool knows that no one could travel so surely through land unknown to them—not even with a good map in hand. You've lied to me all along." She did not sound angry, only resigned and weary.

"Corson, no ... I'm sorry ... I didn't think you'd care to hear the truth. I've not been here before, but I don't have to look for the way because the way is looking for me."

"You're right, I don't want to hear this. I'd rather you were just lying. How much farther is it, can you tell?"

"We're close, Corson, I feel it!" She laughed excitedly. "Close to home!"

Soon the path reappeared and widened to a broad track that led through cleared ground. Nyctasia suddenly spurred her horse to a gallop.

Corson followed more slowly. Far ahead of her, she saw Nyctasia race to meet another rider. He lifted Nyctasia onto his own horse and, to Corson, they seemed to become one figure.

As she approached them, he was saying, "'Tasia, how could you cut off your hair? You look like a street urchin." He held the reins with one arm and Nyctasia with the other.

"Or a vagabond student?" suggested Nyctasia. "But perhaps I'll let it grow again, now."

Corson had never seen her so carefree and elated. "She's beautiful," Corson realized, trying unsuccessfully to picture Nyctasia with long hair.

Watching them, Corson had to admit that for once Nyctasia had been telling the truth when she'd boasted of her handsome lover. He was all she'd claimed—lean and graceful, with a tense, whiplike frame that suggested carefully controlled power. Intense blue eyes burned against his dark skin, and thick black hair framed the sculpted planes of his face. Corson could well understand Nyctasia's passion for him.

"And this is Corson," Nyctasia was saying. "I'd never have reached the coast alive without her."

Lord Erystalben looked at Corson for the first time. "Then she is welcome," he said. Without waiting for a reply, he wheeled his horse about and rode ahead, leaving Corson to follow with Nyctasia's mount. She had only to ride straight before her, for the walls of the keep could now be seen in the distance.

Corson was not offended by his treatment of her. He and Nyctasia had been parted for so long—how should he spare a thought for anyone else? And in truth, it was a relief to be spared further courtesies when all she wanted to do was rest.

She was met at the gates by a groom who took charge of the horses, while another servant offered to show her to her quarters. Corson gratefully followed.

Even when she found herself assigned to cramped servants' quarters, Corson made no objection. She fell onto the narrow bed and was asleep at once.

Corson woke suddenly, confused, and for a sickening moment thought that she was still in the forest. Yet even as she realized where she was, the feeling persisted, like a dream she could neither quite remember nor quite forget. She would not have admitted to being frightened, but she rose at once and went in search of company.

Everyone fell silent as she entered the kitchen.

"Good day to all. My name's Corson."



No one offered a name in return. Finally, one of the women said, “You’ll have something to eat? Some ham and dripping-bread?”

Corson remembered that it was said to be unwise to speak one’s name in an enchanted place—or to eat or drink anything offered. She’d never put much faith in such tales, but she found that she had no appetite now. “No, I thank you. Let someone tell the Lady Nyctasia that I want to see her.”

“She’s with His Lordship.”

“I don’t care if she’s with all the gentry of the Maritime Alliance—she’ll see me! Take me to her!”

But they paid no attention to her demands. The woman went back to rendering ham fat in a pan. Scullions continued their scrubbing, and cleared ashes from the hearth.

“If you’re sent for, you’ll be told,” said a man whom Corson took for the steward.

That Lord Erystalben should think her a lackey was understandable, but why had Nyctasia sent her no word? She glared at Shiastred’s people, whose very calmness was unnerving. “Are you folk of flesh and blood, or of sand and smoke and spells?! This place reeks of magic. I’m leaving! Tell Her Ladyship I’d better things to do than wait on her pleasure. Tell her I’ve gone, if she thinks to ask!”

The steward rose. “You are free to go. We’ve no orders to hold you here. I’ll have your horse brought. Follow me.”

Corson lost most of that afternoon searching for the elusive path that led back to the road, and it was late in the day before she came upon familiar landmarks. Knowing that she would lose her way again if she traveled by night, she resigned herself to sleeping in the open.

As daylight faded, she made a tidy pile of dry twigs and bark for a fire, Flint and steel were in her pack, and she soon coaxed the spark into a small but comforting blaze that allayed her solitude. If she set out at first light, she could reach the crossroads by noon. Soon she would be on the great trunk road that skirted the Yth and led back towards Mehomne. She was going home—and with enough money in her pockets to set the folk at Steifann’s back on their heels.

Corson stared into the fire, wondering, not for the first time, if the real reason she continued in her restless, wandering ways was the pleasure she took in coming home to the Hare. She always reveled in the commotion she caused when she arrived, unlocked for, loaded with gifts and full of wild, exaggerated tales about her daring exploits. Naturally, no one believed these stories—except for the cook’s children, who could never hear enough of her adventures. They’d run about waving wooden swords, playing at warriors, until Walden threatened to use Corson for stew-meat if she didn’t stop filling their heads with her rubbish.

But after the excitement of her homecoming had waned, Corson would soon begin to tire of the familiar pattern of life at the Hare. There was plenty of work to be done, and Corson did her share, but she could never get used to the monotony of doing the same chores day after day.

Steifann always gave her a hearty welcome and urged her to stay, but his time was largely taken up with the responsibilities of keeping the tavern. He never seemed to tire of the endless round of marketing and cooking, overseeing both the help and the customers, and studying his account books. Despite his generosity and good humor, Steifann was known as a shrewd man of business, and the tavern turned a tidy profit under his direction.

“You’re a slave to this place!” Corson had once complained. “You won’t even come on a fortnight’s journey with me. What good’s all this to you, if you’re just a drudge?”

“At least I know where my next meal’s coming from, which is more than you do—except when you’re cadging from me!” Though Corson earned her way at the Hare, Steifann always joked that she ate enough for three. “I’ll probably end my days in the alms-house from feeding you.”

Corson tugged playfully at his beard. “I do well enough on my own.”

“So does a stray dog, but that doesn’t mean that you should live like an animal. And die like an animal,” he added soberly. “You’ve never had a home, Corson, but if you live long enough to learn common sense you’ll be glad of a roof over your head.”

“And just remember,” he teased, “if you don’t choose to settle down with me, there are others who’d be glad of the chance—”

He got no further because Corson gave a yell of outrage and shoved him out of the bed, which put an

end to the argument for then.

Though Corson's carping about Steifann's other bedmates was mostly in jest, she did worry that he might find someone else better suited to his way of life. When the boredom of chopping wood and peeling vegetables grew too great, she sometimes hired on with the city guard of Chiastelm just to be near him, but her days in the army had left her with little taste for routine and regimentation. Anything that curbed her freedom felt like a trap to Corson, even Steifann's concern for her.

Still, looking back over her bleak and brutal past, she could see that what Steifann offered her was better by far than any life she had yet known. In the army, she'd only been marking time until the moment when a sword or spear would make her food for the crows. When she was forced to fight, she fought with ferocity and cunning; she ate whatever was doled out to her, then stole from those weaker than herself; and, hardest of all, she learned to obey her superiors' orders well enough to avoid being beaten into the dirt.

When her term in the army was over, Corson had set out on her own, determined to live as she liked and let nothing hinder her. She went wherever a skilled sword was needed, traveling from place to place, squandering her pay on gambling and ale. Her newfound freedom often brought her nights in prison, where she lay sick with drink until the magistrates saw fit to release her—taking whatever money she might have left. It was only through good fortune that Corson had so far escaped the early death that was the common fate of her kind.

Her first piece of luck was Desmalkin, a young student, who was thrown into her cell one night for trying to cheat an innkeeper. They'd taken up with each other for a few months, and his company had been a civilizing influence on Corson. She was in awe of his sophistication and learning, and he was gratified by her obvious admiration. She had insisted that he teach her to read, more to gain his respect than from a desire to better herself. But 'Malkin was pleased with her progress, and even Corson began to suspect that there might be more to life than mere survival.

'Malkin had his own ambitions, however, and when he entered the service of a provincial nobleman as a scribe, he found that it no longer suited his position to be seen with a common ruffian like Corson. She was hurt and bitter, and before long had fallen back into her old habits.

Corson's second piece of luck had been Steifann. Unlike the polished 'Malkin, he genuinely cared for Corson, but he couldn't afford to harbor troublemakers at the Hare and he would make no exceptions for her. Time and again, Corson would ride off, swearing never to return. She would be again as she had been, free, with no thought for anyone but herself.

But wherever she went she found herself thinking, "What would Steifann say to this?" and "Wait till Steifann hears about that!"—and in time she'd find a reason to return to Chiastelm. Steifann's hold on her was frightening, but Corson wasn't sure she wanted to break free. Often, while he slept, she would study his face as though its features held the answer to a question she had not yet learned to ask. Had all her traveling been in search of that answer—and had she now found it only to lose it again through her own blindness? Was her vaunted freedom really no more than aimlessness and license?

Corson picked up a twig and began to strip off bits of bark. "After all, what freedom do I really have? Always following someone else's orders—'Very good, my lord ... Yes, my lady ...' bowing and scraping and maybe dying for some nasty little aristocrat who can't even be bothered to bid me farewell—!" She snapped the twig in two and tossed it into the fire. "Steifann's worth the lot of them!"

The vision conjured up by the mirror spell continued to haunt her. She should be in Chiastelm with Steifann, not traipsing about like a tinker! Why couldn't she make up her mind to stay with him, then?

If her life had been crueler before she met Steifann, at least it had been simpler, Corson thought ruefully. In those days she had been all of a piece—she had acted without hesitation and suffered no afterthoughts. But now there seemed to be two Corsons, each clamoring for something different. One wanted the affection and security that Steifann could give her, while the other still feared confinement more than loneliness, still drew her strength from a black pool of hatred and anger. Would that demon never let her rest?

Corson yawned and moved closer to the fire. The night was turning cooler and a light breeze had come up. "What's the good of mauling on like this?" she chided herself. "I'm just tired and hungry,

that's what ails me." She made a poor meal on the remains of the provisions in her saddlebag, and wished that she'd accepted the offer of food from Shiastred's cook. Now that she was well away from the place her qualms seemed like foolishness, and the sense of shadowy menace had left her. Sighing, Corson stood and began to scuff out the fire, then lay down and shifted about, trying to find a softer spot of ground. "Asye, but I must be getting old. Time was when I'd sleep in the mud for weeks and not give it a thought."

Overhead, the stars burned clear as candles in the cloudless night sky. "A fair day tomorrow and good traveling." Corson pulled the saddle blanket over her shoulders and slept soundly until dawn, undisturbed by sinister dreams.

## 35

A DAY'S EASY ride brought her to the roadside hostel. A meal and some strong ale was what she needed now.

A few of her fellow travelers from the merchant troupe were sitting together at supper, but when Corson greeted them she was met with a hostile silence. Bewildered, she turned to one of the guards who'd stood watch with her. "What's the matter here?"

He gestured toward a corner table where someone sat slumped over a tankard of ale. "Everyone knows you're her friend. I'd get her out of here if I were you," he said, and turned his back on Corson.

"Oh no," said Corson. "It can't be!" But there was nothing for it. She crossed the room to Nyctasia's table.

"Corson! How delightful! Will you have a drink?" She leaned back in her chair and waved for more ale. "Did I ever tell you that your name is a corrupt form of 'Corisonde'? At least I think it is."

"You're drunk!"

"I looked for you when I left, but you'd already gone—and very sensible of you, too. I thought I'd pass you on the way here."

"I lost my way. What are you doing here? Where's Lord Collarbone?"

Nyctasia looked at her dully. "Ben? He's—he's dead, I think .... I don't know." She shuddered and took a long draught of her ale.

Corson sat down. "What are you talking about?"

For a moment, Nyctasia's eyes held a terrible clarity. "Everything that is taken must be paid for," she said. "But there are ways of making others pay for what one takes. The *vahn* forbids such a thing .... I can never return to him now, I must not!" Staring into her empty tankard, she said softly, "I might better have stayed in Rhostshyl to be murdered, what does it matter?" She began to rock back and forth, her face in her hands. "Kastenid tried to warn me, but how could I believe him? I want more ale."

"You've had your fill. You're not used to drink."

Nyctasia laughed wildly. "That's because I never knew it was such an effective Consolation!" She seemed to find this extraordinarily funny. She reached for Corson's tankard and, as Corson snatched it from her, she tossed a gold coin into the ale. "Look!" she said proudly. A goldfish was swimming in the dark liquor.

Corson gasped and dropped the tankard. Ale splattered their boots, and the coin rolled across the floor. No one picked it up. "Nyctasia," Corson said tensely, "a lady does not make a spectacle of herself in public!"

Nyctasia giggled. "So beware, my Lady Alys," she sang tipsily. She threw back her head and drew a deep breath, then let it out slowly with a look of intense concentration. To Corson's horror, three large, pale moths drifted from Nyctasia's mouth, one after another. They fluttered about erratically then dissolved in the air like smoke.

"That tickles," Nyctasia remarked, laughing.

Corson now understood the suspicion that surrounded them. Those who lived near the forest mistrusted magic, and the travelers had been wary of Nyctasia from the start. They took her for some creature of the Yth—and Corson was not quite sure that they were wrong.

Nyctasia had begun to trace patterns on the tabletop with the spilled ale, muttering to herself in some foreign tongue. "I think I'll summon a demon," she announced loudly, raising one arm in a dramatic gesture. A serving-girl shrieked and dashed for the kitchen. Several people started to their feet, seizing knives or staffs. A heavy earthenware pot struck Nyctasia's shoulder.

Corson grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her to the door. They were both thrust roughly into the yard amidst shouted threats and curses. Someone threw Nyctasia's satchel of books out after them, and the door was slammed and bolted.

Nyctasia sat up and tried to wipe the mud from her face with an equally muddy hand. "I'm an Edonaris," she protested, slurring her words slightly, "and a Rhaicime! How dare they!"

Corson kicked her. "Get up, *lady*," she spat. "Rhaicime! Rutting half-wit! You almost got our throats cut for us!"

Nyctasia rose unsteadily to her feet and regarded Corson with wounded dignity. "You are forthwith dismissed from my service. Leave me!"

"I ought to! I don't know what stops me—I must be bewitched. Come along!" She led Nyctasia to the stables and heaved her, none too gently, onto her horse.

Even drunk, Nyctasia instinctively gripped with her knees to keep her seat. "Where are we going, love?" she asked amiably, following Corson out of the courtyard.

"There's a village about a league down the Hlasven road. We'll find some sort of shelter there." Corson thought resentfully of the lost comforts at the hostel. "I didn't even get a meal. You and your stinking sorcery! Moths ... ! It's disgusting!"

"I don't think I could really summon a demon," Nyctasia said wistfully. "Of course I've never tried it so close to the Yth."

Corson rode closer to her and took her roughly by the arm. "You're not about to try it now, either—I'll break your arm first!"

Nyctasia smiled blandly at her. "Yes, Maeg."

"Asye ...!" sighed Corson, and rode ahead. They went on in silence broken only by snatches of songs and spells from Nyctasia.

*"Behold in this enchanted mirror  
Images reversed but clearer.  
Patterns of shattered shadow yield  
Their mysteries in silverglass revealed.  
Read if you will the gleaming's meaning,  
Pierce the ... something ... mmm ... seeming.  
Deep in ...."*

"I forget the rest," she yawned.

"Good. I don't want to hear that. Sing something else."

"The Cold Ballad'?" suggested Nyctasia.

*"And some folk said that she had died  
Through working of a curse.  
A doll, a needle in its side,  
An image shrouded in a band?  
And others whispered worse.*

*Had she not enemies in the land?  
Forbidden rivalry, bitter scorn—  
They guessed at poison in her wine.  
A venom'd thorn, A length of twine,  
A sudden, smothering hand?*

*But no one ever shall discover,  
Nor guess, what she walked out to find.  
A rose, a shell, her demon lover  
Perhaps her peace of mind ...”*

Nyctasia stopped abruptly.

“Is that the end?”

“No, there’s another verse, but I’ve never understood it. I don’t even like that song,” she said petulantly.

“Oh, hold your noise. There’s someone coming. We must be near the village.” Peering into the darkness, Corson could make out two figures approaching on foot, one holding up a lantern. “We can ask them about lodgings.”

“You there—” she called, but the man in front went straight to Nyctasia and took the reins of her horse.

“Ben!” she exclaimed happily, leaning over to caress his cheek, “I’ve missed you terribly ...” She reached down to him and he caught her by the waist and lifted her from the saddle. “I can’t walk,” she laughed.

“No matter, ’Tasia, we’ve not far to go. I’ll carry you.” He picked her up easily, cradling her in his arms, and started back along the dark road.

Corson dismounted hastily. “My lord, where are you taking her? Wait!” Shiasfred’s servant laid a warning hand on her arm, but she shook him off and followed. Nyctasia had not made much sense that evening, but she had certainly meant to break with Lord Erystalben, Corson stepped in front of him, barring the way.

“Stand aside,” he commanded. Nyctasia looked on curiously, her head nestled against his throat.

“Let her be, she’s out of her senses with drink. I can’t let you take her off—”

Shiasfred laughed. “Your sense of duty does you credit, woman, but I assure you, your mistress is not in danger. I have told you once to stand aside.”

“She’s not my mistress, and I’ve told you once to let her go!” But as Corson stepped towards him, she was stricken with a sudden irresistible weakness that left her helpless. Overcome by dizziness, she fell to her knees at Shiasfred’s feet. Raising her head with an effort she met his cold blue eyes, narrowed in anger.

“Call off your watchdog, ’Tasia. She’s liable to bite someone.”

Puzzled, Nyctasia looked down at Corson crouched in the road, her face mad with rage and hatred. “Not a watchdog, a wildcat,” Nyctasia said solemnly, “Killed three of my best hunting dogs.” She laid her head back on his shoulder and closed her eyes, sighing deeply.

“See to her,” Shiasfred ordered his man, nodding towards Corson. He walked past her indifferently, bearing Nyctasia off into the darkness.

“The weakness will pass soon,” the servant said. He helped Corson to rise and mount, then led away Nyctasia’s horse. Corson could only follow.

She asked no questions, and did not look up until they halted in the yard of a great stone hall. “But where are we?” She knew of no manor house this side of the village.

“Why, at my lord’s holding, of course. He never goes far hence.”

Corson recognized the place now, and her senses reeled in protest. “But I took the Hlasven road,” she cried. “I know I did!”

## 36

THE CHAMBER HAD been arranged entirely to Nyctasia’s taste, as only one who knew her well could have done it. The furnishings were sparse but rare, of marble and oak and ivory. In the center of the carpet there stood a round table of petrified wood, and the bed filled a niche draped with curtains of

dark brocade, shot with silver threads. A mirror in a silver frame hung on one wall, flanked by brackets holding silver candlesticks.

The deeply arched window overlooked a pool amid overgrown gardens, and on the window seat stood a small, silver-stringed harp of black ebon wood. Shiastred set it aside and laid Nyctasia, half-asleep, among the cushions.

Not until he had left her did she open her eyes and try to sit upright. Her head ached cruelly, and the sight of the chamber sobered her still more, as she began to remember her reasons for leaving it the day before. She took up the black harp and very lightly brushed the strings, but set it down again when she heard Shiastred's footsteps in the corridor.

He handed her a heavy goblet of a steaming, fragrant liquid which she accepted gratefully, knowing that it would ease the throbbing pain behind her eyes.

"And since when have you taken to drink?" he asked.

Nyctasia looked at him over the rim of the goblet, "Since when have you taken to human sacrifice, 'Ben?"

"Don't talk nonsense, 'Tasia! You too have destroyed your enemies—"

"To protect myself, not to increase my own power!"

"Which of them would not do as much to me if they could?" he demanded angrily, but then said more gently, "Sometimes that is the only way to protect oneself. You do not yet know the Yth as I do."

Nyctasia shook her head, still too tipsy to argue. She knew there were reasons, but it was so hard to arrange her thoughts. "I don't care what you do to your enemies, 'Ben. I care what you do to your own spirit."

Shiastred stood over her, as if undecided whether to stay or go, but now he sat at her side, looking out over the dark gardens. "Are you so changed to me 'Tasia? I would not have believed that you could mistrust me, turn from me .... To what end have I won this safe hold if not for you—that we might be together, beyond the reach of any enemy?"

"It is not I who have changed. We never thought to pay such a price for our freedom."

"We were children then! Yth-land is not won for the asking, or held by the weak. Kastenid lost this place because he would not do all in his power to keep it. But together we would be proof against any challenge. We'd have no need to use our enemies' ways to defend ourselves. That is what we wanted!"

He drew her into his arms, caressingly massaged her aching temples with strong, knowing fingers. "But if you would renounce our plans now, 'Tasia, we shall leave here together. Let Kastenid take back his own—what can it mean to me if you no longer want it? We will travel if you wish. Only tell me what you want me to do!"

Nyctasia closed her eyes. "I want you to hold me, 'Ben." She knew that she was vulnerable, in her confusion, to Influences she should resist, and that lovemaking would only weaken her further. She knew that there were questions to be asked, plans and promises to be made. Yet she told herself that they would wait, that her desire would not. A chill went through her as Erystalben lightly kissed the back of her neck. "I want you to hold me," she said.

Corson was awakened next morning by a servant who informed her that she was wanted by Her Ladyship and must come at once.

She had not spent a peaceful night. Too weak to seek other shelter, she'd had no choice but to remain under Shiastred's roof. The sickening dizziness had gradually left her, but sleep had not brought her rest. In her dreams, she was harried by a great hawk that circled about her, raking at her with its talons. Each time she tried to strike down the raptor it swept out of reach of her sword, letting her wear herself out with useless blows, biding its time to strike. She woke still exhausted from the losing battle.

She was suspicious of the summons. Suppose it were a trap? She knew she was at Shiastred's mercy as long as she was within his walls, but how could she get away if every road only led her back to this cursed place? The sense of confinement struck her with a cold panic terror. All her prowess would be unavailing against Shiastred's sorcery. Would she really be allowed to see Nyctasia?

She followed the servant up a long staircase and through a series of winding corridors. He left her at

the curtained doorway of Nyctasia's chamber.

"Good morning, Corson. I trust you've been well looked after?" Nyctasia said graciously. She was sitting in bed, wrapped in a robe of silver-grey watered silk.

At first Corson was dumbfounded by Nyctasia's distant manner, but then she saw Lord Eryalben watching them from the alcove window.

Corson stiffened. "I want to talk to you alone."

"Do you hear, 'Ben?" laughed Nyctasia. "You are dismissed!"

He shook his head, smiling tolerantly. "You were always too familiar with your servants, 'Tasia."

"Oh, but one must allow for some spirit. One doesn't want a bodyguard with the gentle temper of a ewe-lamb."

He came to Nyctasia and, leaning over her, lovingly raised her head. "You've no need of a bodyguard now." Pulling her close, he gave her a lingering kiss. Corson moved well out of his way as he went to the door, but he passed her as though she weren't there.

"You've changed your mind again?" Corson asked, feeling like a fool. She sat down on the bed by Nyctasia, uninvited, "When I found you at the hostel you said you would never come back here."

"I'm afraid I don't remember much of what I said last night," Nyctasia admitted ruefully. "I ought not to drink. 'Ben had insisted that we make a marriage pact, and we quarreled—but as you can see, I gave way in the end." She held out her hand to show Corson the slender golden band.

"But what of you, Corson? I thought you were eager to return to Chiastelm." She pointed to a well-filled purse on the table at her bedside. "That will more than meet your needs, though of course you are welcome to stay. You will always be welcome here. I know what I owe you."

Corson did not dare to slap her. "You owe me nothing, lady," she said, rising. "I want to reach the crossroads before dark—have I your leave to go?"

"Of course. A safe journey to you, Corson." She summoned a servant to show Corson out.

### 37

THIS TIME, CORSON had no difficulty finding her way to the hostel. "If that Yth-taken friend of yours—" the host began.

"She's not with me! And she's not my friend. I want a room!" Corson looked around defiantly, daring anyone to try and put her out. Today she'd give them a fight, and welcome. But no one challenged her, and she was shown at once to a small bedchamber. She ordered some ale and dropped wearily onto a bench by the window overlooking the moonlit roadway.

Corson knew that no one at the inn wanted anything to do with her, and she could hardly blame them. "That ungrateful bitch!" she thought, leaning her arms on the windowsill and staring out into the night. She cursed the day she'd met Nyctasia, she cursed all magicians and then all the aristocracy for good measure. On an angry impulse, she took off the earrings Nyctasia had given her and pushed them into her pouch, "I'll sell the filthy things. I don't want her cast-off trinkets."

"Gold doesn't suit me," she said prissily, mimicking Nyctasia's high voice and aristocratic accent. "Gold's not good enough for her!"

Corson frowned. Some notion seemed to leap out at her like a startled fox, plain in the moonlight for only a moment, then scuttling back into the shadows. Lost in thought, she didn't hear the hesitant knock at the door, and she was startled when the serving-maid appeared with her ale. The girl approached timorously and set a pitcher and mug on the bench next to her. "I don't have any demons in my pockets!" Corson snapped, and the child hurried off in confusion.

"I might as well be a leper, thanks to Her Ladyship!"

Corson shook her head, still vexed by the memory of Nyctasia's indifference. She knew what an accomplished actress Nyctasia could be, but she could not persuade herself that Nyctasia's familiarity with her had all been feigned. If Nyctasia were really as haughty and proud as all that, she would never have taken so much trouble to nurse Corson back to health. She'd have thought it beneath her to cosset and humor a lowly servant like Corson, to wait on her with her own hands.

Had she been acting when she'd dismissed Corson with cold formality? Why should she perform such a masquerade for Corson's benefit—was she afraid of Lord Erystalben?

Corson downed a mug of ale and poured herself another. No, Nyctasia had been more than willing to throw in her lot with that bloodless, spindle-shanked bastard, of that Corson was certain. She slammed her fist down on the windowsill. If only there were some way to settle her score with Shiastred! He'd called her a dog, and she'd slunk off like a whipped dog, too. If she could just fight him on her own terms—! She gulped down the last of her ale and went downstairs for more. Though no one was likely to drink with her, she preferred the busy taproom to her own chamber just then. She fetched a fresh pitcher and took a seat at an empty table.

To her surprise, someone did sit down across from her before long. She looked up from her drink. "You again! Let me be—Lady Nyctasia's not here."

"So I see," said Vhar Kastenid. "Where is she?"

Corson took a long pull at her ale. "She's dead."

"Dead—how? What do you mean?"

"You ought to know what it means. She said you were right about him—that he was dead. I wish he was!"

"Then she has left him?" he asked eagerly.

"Well, she did, but she went back again. Of course, she was sotted," Corson snickered.

"Impossible—Lady Nyctasia observes the Discipline. You'd best tell me everything from the beginning."

Corson fell silent. Her wounded pride rankled too keenly for her to tell of her humiliation at Shiastred's hands. "It's none of your affair."

"You don't understand. She's in grave danger."

"She's always in danger!" Corson exploded. "What's it to me? I don't care what becomes of that high-handed, treacherous vixen!"

"But I care what becomes of her, and I need your help. You want vengeance on Shiastred. Don't deny it. This is no time for your cursed sullenness!"

Corson started to her feet, fists clenched. "You—!" But at a look from Kastenid she suddenly caught her tongue. Shiastred had looked at her in that way.

"Sit down," he said quietly.

Corson obeyed. "You're no better than he is," she muttered.

"That's as may be. We want the same things, he and I, but I perhaps am more particular as to how I get them."

"What do you want with me?"

"What would I want with a mercenary but to buy her services? And I pay well," He studied Corson for a long moment. "What is it you fear?"

"I'm no coward!" Corson hesitated, toying with her empty mug. "But I'm ... helpless. I can't fight Shiastred."

"I don't want you to fight him. That is for me to do. But I cannot challenge him at the source of his power. If he's drawn off his own ground he'll be weaker, and with Lady Nyctasia's help I could defeat him."

"Are you mad? She won't turn against him!"

"I believe she will, once she's freed from his Influence. When she broke the Discipline she abandoned her defenses, and now she's beyond my reach, within his domain. But you can go there freely. She trusts you, and Shiastred has no reason to harm you. He'll not consider you a threat."

"I know. I'm beneath his notice."

He leaned closer to her. "Do you dare to return there?"

It was a wise choice of words to put Corson on her mettle. "I've daring enough. But I warn you, for such a deed I command a noble fee." She did not much trust Kastenid, but without a magician's help she could never hope to foil Lord Erystalben. It could do no harm to hear him out. As he talked, she reached absently into her pouch for the gold earrings and put them on.



“Come for a ride with me,” said Corson. “I want to talk to you.”

Nyctasia was more than ever a stranger to her. She treated Corson as a favorite, whose familiarity was to be indulged. Shiasfred simply took no heed of her—how Nyctasia managed her servants was her own affair.

They rode along a path that led up into the hills toward the stone but where Kastenid was waiting. “Bring her as far as you can,” he’d told Corson. “I’ll try to create an Influence to draw her on, but I can do nothing while she remains within his walls.”

Nyctasia reined in her horse, frowning. “We’ve come far enough, Corson. What have you to say to me?”

Corson dismounted. She seated herself on a fallen log and waited for Nyctasia to join her. “I’ve been with Kastenid, Nyc. He says you’re spellcast and I believe it. You’re not the same.”

“One behaves more freely on the road, of course—formalities may be put aside. But the journey is over now.” She looked off into the hills. “So Kastenid hopes to use you to sway me? He is wrong to bring you into this. You do not understand the risks you run.”

“I don’t trust any magician. Never mind Kastenid—you should come away from here for your own sake. This place is a prison!”

Nyctasia rose. “This is where I belong. Go back to Chiastelm, Corson, you can do no good here.” She held out her hand. “Farewell.”

Corson shrugged. “I’ve done my best.” She suddenly smiled and reached her right hand out to meet Nyctasia’s. “Farewell, Nyc.” Her fist caught Nyctasia neatly under the jaw in a swift, stunning blow.

## 38

“HOW DO YOU, Lady Nyctasia?” Kastenid asked worriedly, holding a skin of water to her lips. “Can you rise?”

Nyctasia gingerly touched her sore jaw and winced. “I trust you enjoyed doing that,” she said to Corson.

“Oh, I did. It was a great pleasure.”

“She’s been wanting to hit me for a long time,” Nyctasia said, turning to Kastenid, “but I do not see what you hope to gain from this. I have answered you for the last time. If you cannot stand against him, you must fall!”

Kastenid was silent, shaken by Nyctasia’s unlooked-for scorn. Warily, he passed his hand over his face and sighed, “At every turn you elude me, lady.”

“I’ll not be bait to lure him from his stronghold.” She went to the doorway of the hut, only pausing to say, “And if you’re wise, you’ll be gone from here before he takes up your challenge.”

“Shall I hit her again?” Corson suggested.

Kastenid looked blindly after Nyctasia. “You were right,” he said finally, “she is dead.”

But a moment later they heard Nyctasia’s high, clear laughter outside. “No, it was my own fault,” she said. “Come away.”

“Shiasfred! You’ll deal with me first!” Kastenid shouted. Corson reluctantly followed him outside.

“Just as you will,” said Erystalben ar’n Shiasfred, smiling. “I should have dealt with you long ago.” He was perfectly confident and at his ease.

“Ben, there’s no need for this,” Nyctasia urged. “He can be no threat to us now.”

“It is not I who insist upon it. I’ve spared you once before, Kastenid. I shall do so again if you let me.”

Kastenid, too, smiled. “I’ll not find you so far from your lair again.”

Shiasfred gestured in resignation. “Speak to him, Tasia. Perhaps he’ll listen to you.”

“Come to your senses, Kastenid. You seek your own destruction.”

He barely glanced at her. “If you will not stand with me, stand aside.”

“Enough!” said Shiasfred, and suddenly they were surrounded by an intense silence. Corson could

not tell when the conflict had begun. Neither man moved—they still stood facing one another across the stony ground, but they no longer smiled. No leaf stirred and the air grew still and heavy. But Corson remembered how Shiastred had struck her down on the road without a blow, and nothing could have made her walk between the two magicians.

Nyctasia was white and rigid with tension. She never took her eyes from Shiastred, and when he reached out to her she went to his side at once. Kastenid staggered suddenly and fell back a pace.

“Nyc, don’t!” Corson gasped, hardly knowing what she meant. Nyctasia turned to her, and Corson was certain that for a moment her grey eyes were a vivid blue.

“Don’t interfere in this, Corson. I have no quarrel with you.” She raised her hand in warning, and Corson suddenly saw what had been before her eyes all the time. Seizing Nyctasia’s outstretched hand, she wrenched off the golden wedding band and flung it from her with all her strength.

Nyctasia cried out like a lost child. At the same time, Shiastred whirled to face Corson, and the full force of his fury struck her before she had time to think. The sky seemed to wheel, and she was crushed to the ground by an agonizing weight. Pain seared her to the bone, but she could not even draw breath to scream. She knew she was dying.

“Kastenid, help me!” Nyctasia called. She stood over Corson, her face like a white-hot flame. Vhar Kastenid walked slowly towards them, his gaze fixed on his enemy, and came to stand at Nyctasia’s side.

But Shiastred took no heed of him. Stunned by Nyctasia’s betrayal, he stared at her in disbelief and sorrow, but Nyctasia did not waver.

He turned away, then, like a man wounded, walked aimlessly for a few paces, then stopped and pulled off his cloak, holding it out before him. As he tore it across, the air was rent with a shaft of gleaming darkness that blinded the eye.

When sight returned to them, the three who remained found nothing but the sundered cloak where Lord Erystalben had stood, Nyctasia walked slowly over to it and picked it up. “It is always carelessness that defeats one,” she said softly.

Vhar Kastenid helped Corson to her feet. “I owe you my life, my friend. I’ll not forget your courage. But how did you know?”

“She doesn’t wear gold.” Corson said brusquely. To her amazement she found herself uninjured. Only minutes before, she had thought that her bones must be crushed to dust. But she felt weak and shaken still. “Let me alone. Look to Her Ladyship.”

“I’m sorry,” he said gently.

Nyctasia was kneeling on the hard ground, holding the riven cloak tightly against her, her head bowed, her slender frame racked with sobs.

Vhar Kastenid touched her shoulder. “Come home, Lady Nyctasia.”

“I have no home!” The tears denied by years of discipline coursed down her face unchecked. “Only now do I know what it is to be an exile, I left everything without regret, but now I have lost myself!”

“What is truly yours cannot be lost or taken,” Kastenid said gravely. “Though the heedless may throw it away.”

## 39

WHEN THEY RETURNED, there was no sign of Shiastred’s servants—the halls were silent and empty.

“My people will return to me now,” said Kastenid, “and I shall be able to show you a more fitting welcome. I would have you treat my home as your own.”

Corson was relieved to find the hall deserted. It seemed a different place, and no longer afflicted her with nightmarish memories and forebodings. She took full advantage of Kastenid’s hospitality and enjoyed her unaccustomed idleness at first, but soon began to grow restless. Only her concern for Nyctasia made her reluctant to be on her way.

It seemed that nothing would ever rouse Nyctasia from her grief. She barely left her chamber, sitting day after day at the window, long after it grew too dark to see more than the moonlit surface of the quiet

pool below. Her will to heal herself had left her.

“Do not war against the *vahn* in this way,” Kastenid pleaded with her. “You must allow it to console you. Despair destroys the spirit.”

“... and mourning denies the Discipline,” Nyctasia rejoined. She looked up from the piece of sewing that lay across her lap. “I know the Principles as well as you, my friend. But now that I need them the most, I find them hollow .... No, the fault is in myself, not in the Discipline, I know that. I am too weak to achieve Balance.”

“Then let me help you.”

“You’ve tried to help me before, and you did not find me grateful.”

“You know now that I am not your enemy.”

“No, I have been my own enemy all the while. You think me as true a *vahnite* as yourself, but I tell you I’ve done things that would turn you against me if you but knew—”

“You have left Rhostshyl, yet you still dwell within its walls, Edonaris. That life is behind you now.”

“Erystalben is part of that life.”

He watched her draw the silver needle deftly through the dark cloth. “You follow a dangerous course, my lady.”

“What ’Ben did was more dangerous! He couldn’t know what awaited him beyond that Threshold. It was madness!”

“It was his only hope of escape.”

Nyctasia’s voice trembled. “No, he wasn’t afraid. He risked that spell rather than strike at me—though I had turned on him!”

“You cannot blame yourself for that, you had no choice. Shiasfred used you.”

Nyctasia shook her head. “I warned you that I would stand with him—you refused to take me at my word.” Her voice grew hard. “I turned to you because I had to protect Corson. But he believed that I’d betrayed him; that is why I must do this, danger or no. He may be dead—I have to know.” She shook out the folds of the mended cloak, neatly stitched where Erystalben and Shiasfred had torn it.

“I don’t believe it either,” Corson said. Kastenid had found her in the stable, busy grooming her horse. “But I don’t believe much of what Nyc says about anything.” She had finished with the curry comb and was going over the animal a second time with a soft brush. Kastenid took up another and began working on the horse’s other side.

“She believes it, and as long as she does she’ll, never be free of him,” he said.

“That one’s such a clever liar she’s begun to believe her own lies.”

They worked in silence for a few minutes. Corson knelt and gently ran her fingers down the horse’s foreleg. Then, lifting the hoof, she began to clean out the mud and pebbles with a pick.

“I’m afraid of what she may do,” he said at last.

Corson looked up at him. “You’re in love with her yourself.”

He did not deny it. “She will take nothing from me,” he said helplessly. “I have won, and yet I am defeated.”

## 40

FOR THE MOST powerful spells, the preparations are the simplest. Nyctasia lifted the heavy mirror from the wall and laid it on the round table, then covered it with Shiasfred’s cloak. For a long time she only stood there, calm and still, her hands resting on the draped mirror. At last, she silently recited the necessary words, and swept aside the mended cloak.

*Behold in this enchanted mirror*

*Images reversed but clearer.*

*The silent echo of the spirit*

*Speaks to those who choose to hear it.*

Her reflection appeared dim and distant as though seen at the bottom of a dark well. But it was not her own face that she sought in the mirror.

Erystalben knelt at the edge of a pool like black glass, and Nyctasia saw her reflection appear to him in the quiet water. "Why did you do it?" she whispered, and saw that his lips formed the same words. Her tears spilled onto the mirror's surface, making the images waver like broken water. She saw her pale reflection ripple as Shiastred leaned over to touch the pool, and a feeling of faintness came over her. She reached to steady herself against the table but tears blinded her, and her hands closed on empty air. As she fell, her forehead struck sharply against the heavy silver frame of the mirror.

*Nyctasia drifted in darkness till a dim light glimmered somewhere above her, and she reached toward it, curious. A hand parted the darkness and clasped hers, drawing her upward easily. She stepped from the dark water, her hand still clasped in Erystalben's.*

*"Forgive me," both said, but no sound broke the unchanging stillness. Silent as shadows, then, they came together, and their wordless lips met to say all that was needful between them.*

## 41

CORSON PACED RESTLESSLY about the chamber where Nyctasia had lain all that day, motionless, never waking, hardly seeming to draw breath. To Corson she looked paler and more fragile than ever.

The mirror, cracked and blood-stained, gave back to her a crazed reflection of herself each time she passed by. She found herself trying to avoid the sight of it. Shiastred's cloak still lay at the foot of the table and she kicked it aside, then, puzzled, picked it up. The material was all of a piece—there was not a seam or stitch to show that it had ever been torn. With a shudder, she dropped it over the broken mirror.

Nyctasia opened her eyes and sat up, looking around her in bewilderment. She smiled when she saw Corson. "You're still here, then, my Corson? I'd have thought you'd be on your way to the coast by now."

Corson crossed over to her. "It was only this morning you knocked yourself senseless."

"So it was ... it seems a long time ago."

"But I would be on my way if you could stay out of trouble for half a day."

"You needn't worry about me," Nyctasia said, taking Corson's hand. "I'm all right now. There's nothing to keep you here."

Corson hesitated. "Well, and what's to keep you here? Why don't you come with me?"

"You know I dare not show my face near Rhostshyl."

"But I've a long way to go before I even reach Mehomne—I don't mean to cross that rutting forest again! And you ought to see something of the world before you wall yourself up in some wizard's den. Besides, you could profit from lessons in sword fighting," Corson reminded her.

Nyctasia toyed absently with one silver earring. "There's something in what you say," she mused.

"We could go south to the Edonaris vineyards and visit your relatives on the way, if you like." She saw a flicker of interest light Nyctasia's wan features.

"That is tempting," she admitted.

"Well, we shouldn't lose any time—I want to reach Lhestreq before the turn of the season. Ships are scarce once the rough weather sets in."

"Will tomorrow suit you?"

"We can't get away from here too soon to suit me. But are you fit to travel?"

Nyctasia lay back against the pillows. "I will be."

Corson bowed low. "With your permission, then, my lady, I shall leave you to your repose."

"Corson ... I had reason to act the lady with you as I did. The Influences at work here could have destroyed you. Don't you see, I had to drive you away for your own sake, and what better way to do it than to offend your pride? And it worked, but then you came back .... I warned you not to interfere ... when you attacked me. 'Ben knew you for Kastenid's pawn. He had to deal with you quickly, before Kastenid could recover."

Corson was unconvinced, but she knew it was useless to argue with Nyctasia. "What does it matter now? He's dead, Nyc, forget him."

Nyctasia hesitated. “Well ... he’s *gone*.”

“But isn’t he dead?” cried Corson, not concealing her dismay.

Nyctasia looked up at her with a ghost of her old mischievous manner. “I can explain—” she offered. “Not if I know it!” Corson protested, and hurried from the chamber.

“I cannot stay here.” Nyctasia finished looking through the books she’d brought from Rhostshyl. She chose only one, and put it back in her satchel, “I’m no longer as sure as I was, what sacrifices I’m willing to make. I must decide that alone, Kastenid—away from the Yth and its temptations.”

And how to find ’Ben unless she took up her travels again? But she kept her own counsel as to that.

“Don’t you see that together we could hold this place without making the compromises Shiastred was driven to?” he urged.

“If I’d been with him he’d not have been forced to pay that price! But the city was in chaos—I hoped I could prevent a civil war if I stayed. But I only made more enemies for myself, and I failed ’Ben when I knew that he needed me here. You’re well rid of me, I tell you—I’m poison to those who trust me!”

“You do not know yourself, Nyctasia, but I have tested you, and I know your true worth. There’s no need for you to run away again—you’re making a mistake.”

“I’ve made many,” Nyctasia said bitterly. “I’m sorry.” She turned away from him abruptly. “Will you keep these books for me? I daresay you can make use of them.”

“Done.”

Nyctasia wrapped Shiastred’s long cloak about her, then took up the black harp and hung it at her back. “I may need this,” she said tightly. “Perhaps I’ll have to make my way as a minstrel.”

“Nyc!” Carson shouted from below, “I’m waiting for you! I told you I want to get an early start.”

“Yes, I’m coming,” Nyctasia called to her. “I’m ready now.”

## 42

THE FARTHER THEY traveled from Hlasven, the higher Corson’s spirits rose. The cool weather was beginning and the morning was bright and clear. Even Nyctasia grew less subdued and moody as they rode through the ripe, sunlit countryside.

“That fortuneteller wasn’t far from the mark after all,” Corson remarked. “I’ve made a dangerous journey, and I’m much the richer for it, but what of the titles and honors he promised me? Why don’t you make me a Lady for saving your useless life, you ungrateful whelp?”

“Only the majority of the Rhaicimate can confer a title—and at present I am unfortunately a weak minority. But if ever I regain my authority in Rhostshyl, you’ll get all that you deserve, never fear. I’ll have you flogged from one end of the city to the other to teach you your place!”

Corson shouted with laughter. This was more the Nyctasia she was used to. “I know what place fate intended for me. The fortuneteller said I’d become a lady of title and influence at the end of the journey.”

“Then perhaps the journey isn’t over yet,” said Nyctasia. “Where are we bound now, oh Lady Corson, favorite of fortune?”

“Time enough you took heed of that! Do you know of the harvest fair at Osela?”

“No. Is it an important market?”

“Asye, what a mooncalf!” Corson said with exasperation. “Don’t you know anything but spells and schemes? The Osela fair is famous—there’s nothing to match it on the coast. It lasts for weeks, and we’ll be there in good time to see everything—dancers, acrobats, troupes of players and mummers, jugglers and conjurors. And there are games and contests, races, wrestling, archery matches ....”

“And minstrels, I suppose?” Nyctasia unstrapped her harp and opened the sound-box at the back. She took out the silver key and began turning the pegs to tune the strings.

“Oh yes, singers and harpers and beggars and pickpockets—all the usual rabble.”

Nyctasia gave her a dark look. “If I never make a lady of you, Corson, you may yet succeed in making me forget that I am one.”

“So much the better for you. What good is a title to you now?”

“What good has it ever been to me, for that matter?” said Nyctasia. She sighed and plucked a chord on the ebonwood harp.

*“Oh, I could complain  
That my life is a curse.  
The grief and the pain  
Would fill many a verse.  
But it's best to refrain—  
Things could always be worse!”*

## Web Of Wind

1987

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### GOING. GOING ... GONE?

“Surely only criminals can be sold—or captives of war?”

A gleam of devilry lit Corson's blue eyes. Seizing Nyctasia by the collar, she called out lustily, “Who'll buy a beautiful foreign princess, stolen from the courts of the coast? Take note of her pale skin and delicate features ...”

“You'll regret this!” Nyctasia bit her, hard, and Corson hastily released her.

“You venomous little snake!” Corson exclaimed, waving her wounded hand about. “You're poisonous as a viper! My hand'll turn black! I'll die ...” She was laughing too hard to go on.

Nyctasia regarded her coldly. “Corson, you go too far.”

Corson interrupted her tirade. “Nyc, look! That fellow—don't you remember him?”

“Where?” Nyctasia asked anxiously. Which of her enemies would pursue her so far?

Praise for *Silverglass*

“It's fun to see a tall, handsome, hard-fighting, hard-drinking, barbarian hero—who is female.”  
—Piers Anthony

“Open-reading romance!”  
—Fritz Leiber

“Rousing adventure by, for, and about women.”  
—Jessica Amanda Salmonson

## 1

CORSON BRENN TORISK looked irritably at her companion. Nyctasia was toying with her dinner in gloomy silence, lost in thought, and Corson had had enough of her brooding.

“Are you going to eat that or aren't you?”

"I haven't much appetite, I'm afraid," Nyctasia said listlessly.

Corson shrugged and scraped the rabbit pie from Nyctasia's plate onto her own. "Since we got to Oselia you've done nothing but mope about," she complained. "You've hardly left the inn. We came here to see the fair!"

"And after I've seen it, what then? On the way here I had at least a destination. Now we're here, I've lost even that."

Corson had long been accustomed to the life of a wandering mercenary, but the Lady Nyctasia ar'n Edonaris had never known what it was to be homeless. She had passed all her life in the city-state of Rhostshyl, and she could not resign herself to exile.

Corson sighed. She was losing all patience with Nyctasia's melancholy. "I thought you planned to go south to the Valleylands, to visit the Edonaris who own vineyards at Vale."

"Even if they should prove to be of my blood, I'll only be a stranger to them. I've no place or purpose among them. Why should they welcome me?"

"It's true you're useless," Corson agreed, "but do you have to be boring as well? You know I'm dangerous when I'm bored."

"Nothing keeps you with me, Corson. I no longer need a bodyguard—I've no enemies this far from Rhostshyl."

Corson smiled her dangerous smile. "Well then, it's time I gave you those lessons in swordfighting you wanted. If you mean to travel without an escort you'd best be able to defend yourself. There's more than thieves and cutthroats in these parts—you'd make a pretty prize for a pack of slavers."

"You needn't worry about me. I can fend for myself."

"Come along," Corson ordered. She mopped up the last of the gravy with a piece of bread and gulped it down. "We may as well begin at once, since time's so heavy on your hands." Ignoring Nyctasia's protests, she all but dragged her out to the courtyard of the inn.

"Stand ready!" Corson commanded. "That's a sword, not a pen—hold fast to it! Watch this—" She made a move, and Nyctasia's sword landed several feet away, out of her reach.

"Impressive," admitted Nyctasia, "but I think you broke my wrist."

"No I didn't. If I'd wanted to break your wrist I'd have done it differently. And I will, the next time I see you with such a lax grip. Pick it up."

Nyctasia obeyed, and instinctively took up a fencing stance, which Corson regarded with scorn. "Forget those fool fencing rules. There aren't any rules in a fight." She came at Nyctasia swiftly.

Nyctasia parried successfully at first, but Corson seemed to be everywhere, and within minutes Nyctasia was ready to surrender.

Corson brought the flat of her blade down hard on Nyctasia's shoulder. "That's cut off your arm."

By the end of the lesson Nyctasia was bruised and aching all over, and bleeding from numerous pricks and scratches. Corson was an effective teacher. Her pupils had to learn quickly, purely in self-defense.

"You might make a fair fighter for someone your size." Corson said with a grin. "You've a good eye, and you're light on your feet. But you need plenty of practice. Tomorrow we'll work on the attack."

"No we won't," said a faint voice from the depths of a tub of steaming water. "I'm not leaving this tub for a week, and when I do I have every intention of poisoning your ale. I should have let you die back in Lhestreq, you great overgrown ox."

Corson laughed, "In a real fight you can't choose the size of your enemy."

"No one's as big as you are!"

"At least I gave you something to think of besides your woes."

Nyctasia looked at her sharply. "Corson, sometimes I suspect you might be clever—for a simpleminded barbarian."

"I must have learned my crafty ways from you then. You weave schemes like a spider spins webs. A poisonous spider."

"Not anymore," Nyctasia said gravely. She only wanted to forget the measures she'd taken in the past to outwit her enemies. That life was behind her now, "Such webs are only snares for one's own

spirit.”

Corson yawned. “Your philosophy’s too lofty for a simple-minded barbarian like me. You can stay here and rack your wits with riddles—I’m for the fair.”

“Oh, very well,” said Nyctasia. “Wait for me.”

Osela was famous for its harvest fair, the largest of its kind in the Midlands. Farmers came from far and wide, bringing their crops and livestock to market. Merchants and traders hawked their wares, gossip was exchanged, performers vied for the crowd’s attention, and thieves and beggars were kept busy. The city guard had all they could do to keep the peace, and summary justice was the order of the day.

In spite of herself, Nyctasia was fascinated by the chaos of revelry that overflowed the market square and spilled into the streets. The markets of the coastal towns she’d seen seemed tame in comparison. If she lingered too long to watch the dancing bear, she missed the performance of the swordswallower. All about her, storytellers chanted, mummers danced, and fortunetellers offered to reveal the secrets of destiny for a fee.

As usual, Corson was drawn irresistibly to the rows of merchants’ stalls. She was greedy as a magpie for glittering trinkets, and she would not be satisfied till she’d squandered money on something impractical and garish. She tried on gloves embroidered with silk and stitched with tiny pearls, but their price was too dear even for a spendthrift like Corson. Flinging them down carelessly, she strolled off to find something that was more within her means.

But Nyctasia went her own way. The swordplay with Corson and the excitement of the fair had shaken her from her despondency, and she had quite recovered her appetite. It was the hawkers of fruits, sweetmeats, buns and savories who tempted her.

“Pork pies, threepence! Hot pork pies!”

“Fine, ripe pears! Sweet pears!”

“Roast potatoes! Who’ll buy?”

It all looked inviting to Nyctasia, and she wanted to sample everything. A smell of frying meat and spices lured her toward a crowded stall where a young boy was spooning a mixture of meat and vegetables onto thin pieces of dough. A heavysset woman deftly roiled the pasties and set them to sizzle in a greasy pan. A girl was selling them, two for a penny, as fast as the pair could make them. Nyctasia gave her a copper, and received her meat-cakes wrapped in a waxy green leaf. She devoured one of them in a single bite. With the other halfway to her mouth, she suddenly gasped and started to choke.

“I’ve been poisoned! My throat’s afire!” she said hoarsely, as Corson came up to her, chewing one of the spicy delicacies.

“Poisoned! What—who—?” Then Corson saw the uneaten pasty that Nyctasia was still clutching. She started to laugh, and thumped Nyctasia cheerfully on the back. “Haven’t you ever eaten zhetaris before?”

Nyctasia wiped tears from her eyes. “Asye’s blood! You don’t mean to say they’re *supposed* to burn like this?”

“If they don’t, they’re no good. *These* are good,” Corson said with satisfaction, eating Nyctasia’s other zhetari. “They’re festival-food, for harvest time.”

“Barbaric custom!” Nyctasia muttered, hastily drinking down a stoup of goat’s milk offered by a shrewd milkmaid. In her gratitude, she paid the girl three times its worth.

## 2

“MAKE WAY, MAKE way there!” A troupe of tumblers dressed in gaudy tatters shouldered their way through the crowd, and succeeded in clearing a space.

To the beat of a painted tabor, they formed a ring and began to juggle brightly colored wooden balls, tossing them back and forth across the circle, while keeping several aloft at once.

The crowd shouted and clapped to the drumbeat as the dark-skinned jugglers performed an intricate dance, weaving in and out of the circle, never dropping even a single ball. Nyctasia strained her neck to



watch them over the shoulders of the onlookers. The drummer bowed, sweeping off his ribboned cap which he proffered to the audience for coins. Meanwhile, the two tallest of the tumblers stretched out a rope between them and a small, nimble woman hoisted herself up onto it.

The drummer took up a pair of charred wooden clubs, their tops smeared with tallow, and dramatically set them alight. He threw both to the rope-dancer, who caught one in each hand and began to juggle them. Soon she was juggling five flaming brands, while the other acrobats scrambled for coins on the ground before the beggar-children could snatch them up.

With a final flourish, the woman tossed the clubs, one by one into a tub of water, and leapt to the ground, rolling into a somersault. Delighted, Nyctasia squeezed her way to the front and slipped some silver into the drummer's cap. The crowd quickly dispersed, and Nyctasia looked around for Corson. She was not surprised to find her haggling with yet another merchant. This time an ivory hair-clasp had taken her fancy. Corson was vain of her waist-length, chestnut hair, though she wore it sensibly bound up in a braid.

"Did you see them?" Nyctasia asked eagerly. "It was inspiring—a perfect manifestation of the Principle of Balance!"

Corson concluded her purchase of the costly ornament. "What are you blathering about now?" she asked Nyctasia.

"The jugglers—their skill and grace—like outward signs of discipline and harmony of the spirit! If only—"

Corson was used to her friend's everlasting explanations of the mystical philosophy of the Vahnite faith. According to Nyctasia's beliefs, the *vahn*, the Indwelling Spirit, was the true source of a magician's powers. Nyctasia herself had invoked its Influences, and she was always willing to discourse at length upon the workings of her spells. Usually Corson paid no heed, or cut Nyctasia off with a curt jibe, but this time, to her astonishment, Nyctasia suddenly fell silent.

Corson turned to her in surprise, and saw her staring, speechless, as a line of people straggled past, chained together at the wrists and ankles.

Nyctasia's own ancestors had been responsible for the elimination of slavery in Rhostshyl, and she thought of it as an ancient and uncivilized custom. The sight of people being sold like livestock in the market square sickened her. "I knew such things went on, but—to see it—it's shameful," Nyctasia said in horror. "It shouldn't be allowed!"

Corson spat. She'd seen slave-traders before, in her travels, and she considered them lower than vermin. Having spent time in the army, Corson valued nothing above her freedom.

"It's a disgrace how little I know of the world outside Rhostshyl," said Nyctasia seriously.

"I never thought I'd hear you admit that there's something you don't know. I told you the countryside's crawling with slavers, and they're none too fussy about how they get their wares."

"Surely only criminals can be sold—or captives of war?"

"Oh, so says the law. But half the folk who are sold were waylaid on the road and smuggled to foreign markets. I could sell *you* here and now if I'd a mind to."

"Nonsense!"

A gleam of devilry lit Corson's blue eyes. Seizing Nyctasia by the collar, she called out lustily, "Who'll buy a beautiful foreign princess, stolen from the courts of the coast?"

"Corson! You fool! Hold your tongue!" Nyctasia sputtered indignantly. She tried to kick Corson on the shins but Corson held her at arm's length, still describing her attractions to the crowd.

"Take note of her pale skin and delicate features ...."

"Let go of me, you stinking—"

"... and grey eyes! You'll not see her like in the Midlands!"

"Bitch! You'll regret this!"

"She can read and write, too, and sing to the harp—a prize at two hundred crescents! Who'll buy?"

Nyctasia bit her, hard, and Corson hastily released her. "You venomous little snake!" she exclaimed, waving her wounded hand about. "You're poisonous as a viper! My hand'll turn black! I'll die ...." She was laughing too hard to go on.

Nyctasia regarded her coldly. “Corson, you go too far.”

“I daresay you’re right,” said Corson, still gasping with laughter. “No one would pay two hundred crescents for a vicious little creature like you.”

Nyctasia meant to say a great deal in reply, but she had barely begun to hold forth on the subject of Corson’s behavior, when Corson interrupted her tirade.

“Nyc, look! That fellow over there—don’t you remember him?”

“Where?” Nyctasia asked anxiously. Which of her enemies would pursue her so far?

Without answering, Corson suddenly darted across the square, shoving people out of her way. She seized an unsuspecting young man by the arm, shouting, “Where are my earrings, you thieving bastard?”

He tried to squirm away, protesting, but Corson threw him against a fruit barrow, sending apples flying. The crowd watched curiously as Corson continued to pummel the man with both fists, as though she meant to murder him. She could easily have done so, since he was only of average build and clearly not a fighter.

“Corson, stop—what are you doing? You’ll kill him!” Nyctasia tried to pull her away, but was knocked roughly aside. She grabbed Corson by the belt, but someone dragged her back and held her fast.

The furious fruit vendor had summoned the city watch. It took three of them to deal with Corson.

### 3

OF THE MANY indignities Nyctasia had suffered in exile, this was the crowning outrage. It was past believing that she, a lady of the rank of Rhaicime, could be thrown into a prison cell with the riffraff of the city. She was only thankful that it was too dark to see her filthy surroundings. Fastidious by nature, she hardly dared breathe the foul air.

Corson would have enjoyed Nyctasia’s discomfiture if she had not been so wretched herself. She’d been in prison many times, during her frequently lawless career, but she could never resign herself to confinement. She paced back and forth, cursing, as the other prisoners scrambled to get out of her way. Helplessness always frightened Corson more than danger, and her fear took the form of unfocused rage.

The man she’d attacked had simply been thrown into the cell with them; no one had troubled to discover who was to blame for the brawl. He lay huddled in the dirty straw, and Nyctasia knelt over him, tending to his injuries. Fearing that his collarbone was broken, she unlaced his shirt and removed the leather pouch he wore around his neck, then felt gently along his shoulder. He groaned faintly without opening his eyes.

Looking at him, Corson remembered the time he’d robbed her and Nyctasia just after their escape from Rhostshyl. He and his fellow thieves had not only taken Corson’s prized golden earrings, but had taunted her with her helplessness as well. Corson had felt shamed at her defeat, though she knew she was hopelessly outnumbered. She did not have a forgiving nature, and she never forgot an injury. She would gladly have taken out her panic on the thief now, but he was plainly not fair game for a fight. She stood over him, glowering, and stifled a desire to kick him.

“Stay away from him, you stupid savage!” Nyctasia hissed. “I don’t mean to be hanged for murder to satisfy your bloodlust. Let him be!”

“But—but that’s the rutting whoreson who robbed us—he was the ringleader, you remember! They should hang *him*.”

Nyctasia stared at her. “*That* is why you tried to beat him to death—for the loss of a few coins and some trumpery jewelry? That is why I am in this reeking dunghole?”

There was some whistling and jeering from the drunks and pickpockets who shared the cell with them.

“Make way for Her Ladyship—”

“Clean linen for Her Majesty here!”

Nyctasia clenched her teeth, her fine features hard with rage, but in a moment she had mastered her anger. It was not like her to give herself away. She stood and faced her fellow prisoners, suddenly

seeming to become a completely different person. Corson had seen these masquerades of Nyctasia's before, but they always caught her unawares.

"Now I leave it to you!" Nyctasia cried. "This great lummock is supposed to perform feats of strength to draw a crowd, so I can pick their pockets—and what does she do but start a fight in the middle of the marketplace! And here we are! What's to be done with a dunce like that?" She ended her performance with a remarkably ill-bred laugh, which the others echoed.

"Cut her throat," someone offered.

"Get rid of the dolt—I'll go partners with you."

There were other suggestions of a coarser sort, but Corson was in no mood to bandy words, "I'll serve the next who laughs just as I served that one," she threatened, pointing at the hapless thief. No one took up her challenge.

She turned back to Nyctasia, who was once again kneeling beside the thief. "It may have been a few coins to a wealthy *lady*," Corson muttered, "but it was a rutting fortune for the likes of me."

"However much it was, it's not worth hanging for!"

Corson looked uneasy. "He's not really like to die, is he?"

"No thanks to you if he doesn't. He has broken ribs."

"Well, why don't you use your witchery to heal him then?" said Corson, lowering her voice. "You always say that healing-spells are simple to do."

"They are simple, but they're not easy. To heal, you must first be whole yourself—"

Corson foresaw another of Nyctasia's learned lectures. "Don't explain it, just do it!"

"If you'd keep out of my way, I could get on with it! Keep everyone away from me!" She glared until Corson had retreated a few paces.

Leaning over the thief, Nyctasia laid her hand over his heart, murmuring something ceaselessly to herself. To Corson, she seemed to be somehow drawing ever farther away, though she remained still as a figure of carven stone. Corson knew that Nyctasia's trance would take her deep into the realm of the *vahn*. Watching her, Corson could almost feel that it was she herself who was stranded on the shore of a dream, while Nyctasia entered into the waking world.

Corson shook herself abruptly. Magic! she thought, and spat.

#### 4

IT WAS A highly discontented party that took shelter for the night in a barn on a small farm near the Southern Trade Road. That morning, they'd been unceremoniously escorted to the city gates, fined for disturbing the peace of the fair, and sent on their way with a warning not to return.

The unfortunate thief was still with them. He'd been unable to travel on foot, and Nyctasia had agreed to let him ride with her, but even on horseback he had found the journey a grueling one. By the time they dismounted he was more stiff and sore than ever.

Nyctasia was almost as weak as he. The healing-spell had already sapped much of her strength, and the long day's ride left her exhausted. The barn was not noticeably cleaner than the jail had been, but she was so weary that even a pile of hay looked inviting.

Corson too felt that she'd been very hard used. What right had they to arrest her for capturing a thief, and how could Nyctasia take his part against her? Was that justice? She had ridden ahead of the others in sullen silence for most of the day.

But everyone was in better spirits after the hearty meal they bought at the farmhouse. They ate smoked ham, buttered oatcakes, and fresh curds. There was plenty of brown ale, and a crock of new buttermilk for Nyctasia, whose Discipline discouraged the drinking of spirits.

After her night in prison and a day on horseback, Nyctasia longed for a bath, but she made do with a wash at the well. Spreading out her long cloak, she made herself a comfortable nest in the hay, then hung her harp on a peg in the wall. "As a child I was taught that a lady ought never to complain about her accommodations," she remarked. "But I'm sure my nurse never imagined me in lodgings like this."

"I admired the ladylike way you accepted your lot in prison last night," Corson sniggered.

“It’s not surprising I forget myself in company with a lout like you. The wonder is that I have any manners left at all.”

“I stand rebuked, Your Ladyship.” Corson made a mocking bow, and threw herself down in the hay.

The thief looked from one to the other of them, trying to make them out, then gave it up and settled down near Nyctasia. He moved stiffly, grimacing as he lowered himself slowly onto the hay.

“You ought to stay here for a while and rest,” Nyctasia said. “You’re not really fit to travel.”

“I know,” he groaned. “Would you think it impertinent of me to ask why your friend tried to murder me?”

Corson was indignant. “You and your people robbed us in Rhostshyl Wood and took our horses! I told you I’d make you pay, you slinking weasel—maybe you remember that?”

“I remember those rutting horses! They broke loose and we nearly got trampled trying to catch them. They were such beauties, too,” he said regretfully. “They’d have fetched a good price.”

“They were hers,” Corson said. “Thoroughbreds can be quite vicious.”

“You were that crazy soldier, then,” he mused, “but you were traveling with some prating little student ....”

“He’s taken *your* measure, Nyc.”

Nyctasia had made her escape from Rhostshyl disguised as a poor student. “Appearances may be misleading,” she said, sounding amused. “I’m Nyc brenn Rhostshyl, and this is Corson brenn Torisk. And you?”

“I’m called Newt.” He eyed Nyctasia suspiciously. “What are you really? A witch? A pickpocket?”

“A liar,” Corson suggested.

“A healer,” said Nyctasia firmly. “And if you’ll take my advice, you’ll get some sleep. You’re not yet whole.”

“I feel like a bone that’s been gnawed by hounds.” Newt lay back and started to loosen his tunic, then sat up again suddenly, wincing in pain. He searched about frantically. “My pouch—where is it? I had it round my neck. Did you take it?”

“Not I,” said Corson lazily. “But if I thought you had anything of value, I’d surely take it, as my right. You robbed me of a fortune.”

“What, this?” asked Nyctasia. “Here, I’d forgotten it.” She tossed the small leather hag to Newt.

But Corson was at his side in a moment and snatched it from him. “Let’s have a look at this.”

“It’s just a scrap of paper!” he protested. “Give it back!”

“I will,” said Corson, “when you give me back my earrings.” She opened the pouch and pulled out a much-folded page, but to her disappointment there was nothing else.

Impatiently, she shook it out, but it concealed no treasure. “What’s all the row about *this*?” she muttered, examining it by the light of the flickering oil lamp. “Here, Nyc, you’re partial to this sort of gibberish:

*Neither out of doors nor in,*

*Begin.*

*Within four walls and yet beneath the sky,*

*I lie.*

*Riddle’s secret, and to mystery*

*The key.*

*All unhidden*

*Though I be.*

*No man or woman*

*Doth see me.*

And here’s another—

*Here is a web to catch the wind*

*And a loom to weave a lay.  
Riddles play on words, my friend—  
Play on these and play you may.”*

“What in the Hlann’s name ...?” Nyctasia reached for the paper. “I don’t make much of the first one,” she said after a moment, “but the other’s simple enough. The answer’s in plain sight.” She pointed to her ebonwood harp.

“A harp?” said Newt, sounding disappointed. “Just a *harp*? Are you sure?”

“As I said, the answer’s in plain sight—for those who can read it. H-A-R-P,” she said, touching the first letter of each line.

Newt looked puzzled, “But ... what does that part about the wind mean?”

“There’s a sort of lyre called a wind-harp,” Nyctasia explained. “You hang them in the trees and they’re sounded by the wind. I had one in my garden at home.”

“I like the clue about playing on them,” said Corson. “Read us another.”

Nyctasia peered at the page in the dim light. “Let’s see ... there’s all sorts of riddles...”

*Where is the hunter found  
Who hunts by night and morn  
But never wearied yet?  
Who keeps not hawk or hound,  
Who has not horse or horn,  
But slays without a sound,  
With but a silken net?*

Well, that’s easy, and here’s a pair that spell out rhyming answers:

*Bird am I none.  
What thing am I,  
Ever soaring as I sing,  
Lifting up my voice on high,  
Lightly I fly, without a wing.*

And:

*Where is there a tower found,  
Empty, planted underground,  
Like a tunnel turned on end?  
Look down to see the sky, my friend.*

What else have we here? Rhymes ... drawings of some kind, names ... Ylna, Rowan, Leaf and Bough, Amron Therain, Jocelys. Vale—” She stopped abruptly and turned to Newt, fixing him with a cold and baneful stare. “No wonder you tried to keep this from us,” she said grimly.

“Nyc, what is it?”

“My name is on this list. The fellow’s an assassin. Am I to be hunted like a fugitive all my life? Who was it sent you? Lady Mhairestri? Ettasuan ar’n Teirynd?”

“You’re *both* mad!” cried Newt. “I’m a thief, not a murderer—I’ve no dealings with lords and ladies!”

Nyctasia stood and drew her dagger. “We’ll soon see. Corson, hold him fast.”

Experience had made Nyctasia a keen judge of character. She was certain that Newt could be frightened into speaking the truth.

“But—please—I tell you, I don’t know who you are. I can’t even read—I don’t know what’s on

that paper! It's nothing to do with me!"

"Then how did you come by it?" Nyctasia demanded.

"I stole it, of course! Me and three others—we robbed a traveler near Ylna ...."

"Why would you steal a piece of paper that you can't read?"

"We didn't know what was in the pouch when we took it. We might have given the thing back, but he fought like a madman to keep it, so it must be valuable. And the mark of the Cymvelan Circle is at the bottom—look for yourself. Folk still talk of the Cymvelan treasure in these parts. That paper might be a clue!"

At the mention of treasure, Corson retrieved the paper from Nyctasia and scanned it eagerly, still keeping a firm grip on the distraught thief.

"And it was just chance that brought you to Osela, I suppose?" Nyctasia pursued.

"I hoped to sell that paper at the fair—I come to Osela every year. Most of us do."

"That's so," said Corson. "The fair draws thieves like flies to a honeypot."

"No doubt," said Nyctasia, "but I trust they're not all carrying my name about with them."

Newt was sweating, "But I didn't know—"

"It's not your proper name. Nyc," Corson broke in. "It says 'Edonaris,' not 'Nyctasia ar'n Edonaris.' I'll wager it means those other Edonaris—the vintners." She dropped Newt indifferently and showed the page to Nyctasia again. "Look here. That *is* the sign of the Cymvelan Circle," she said, pointing to an intricate, knotted design. "Their temple was in the Valleylands to the south, near Vale—it can't have been far from the Edonaris vineyards. And some of these riddles do talk about treasure—'Wealth beyond a lifetime's spending'!" The two of them bent over the paper, forgetting Newt, who sank to his knees in the hay and stared at them.

"Nyctasia ar'n Edonaris!" he gasped. "The witch? In Rhostshyl they say you're dead."

"It's unwise to believe everything you hear."

"To think we let you slip through our hands," said Newt dejectedly. "If we'd known who you were we could have made our fortunes—there was a reward of five hundred crescents for your capture. Five hundred crescents!"

"Don't plan on earning it now, my lad," said Nyctasia. "My kinsman Lord Thierran offered it, and he's dead."

"I saw to that," Corson added, slashing her finger across her throat. She smiled at Newt.

"I don't want any part of it," Newt said hastily. "I wouldn't go back to Rhostshyl now for any money—it's too dangerous. The city's divided. It's nothing but brawls and bloodshed between the Edonaris and the Teiryng. There'll be open war before long."

"Sure sign of war, when the rats and thieves leave a city," sneered Corson.

"We had to go our ways. The gentry there go about with armed escorts, and folk are too war-wary to be careless. What were we to do, steal from paupers? We'd have soon starved," he said indignantly. "But there were good gleanings to be had at the fair—and now I'm banned from Osela, thanks to you!"

"A most sad tale," said Corson. "Nyc, this wretch knows nothing about you. It's no use to question him. Let's go to sleep." She turned back to Newt. "Don't think to mend your fortunes by picking our pockets—I sleep lightly."

"I can barely move," Newt protested. "How could I make an escape? I'll not stir from this place till I'm healed, if I can beg my bread from these folk."

Nyctasia roused herself from thoughts of her city torn by civil war. Taking up the curious piece of paper, she folded it neatly and slipped it into her shirt, "I'll buy this from you—then you'll have more than enough to pay your keep. The Edonaris of Vale might be interested in this paper."

Newt sat up a bit straighten "It might be worth a fortune," he said eagerly. "The treasure of the Cymvelan Circle—"

"Is a lot of moonshine," Corson scoffed. "There's nothing but rhymes and scribbles on that page. You'll take what you get and be glad of it." She stretched out on the hay and yawned. "We ought to just take the thing, Nyc," she grumbled, without much conviction. "You're too softhearted by half."

Nyctasia blew out the lamp. "Mercy is the mark of true nobility," she said dryly. "Go to sleep."

Corson had the soldier's knack for falling asleep in an instant, but Nyctasia, despite her weariness, lay awake brooding over her own behavior. "A fine Vahnite!" she accused herself. "The moment you think yourself threatened, your scruples take wing like startled quail!"

It was no use to tell herself that no harm had been done. What steps would she have taken if Newt's answers hadn't satisfied her? This was the question that kept her awake and restless. She did not want to know what answer might lie within her.

Newt was not asleep either. He shifted from side to side in the hay, trying to find a less painful position, but however he lay, his chest and sides ached unbearably. He groaned aloud.

When Nyctasia approached him, he struggled to sit up, alarmed, for he now regarded her as the more dangerous of the two. She stood over him for a moment, indistinct in the darkness, then knelt beside him.

"Forgive me, Newt," she whispered. "I see my enemies everywhere. I am certain I left them in Rhostshyl, and yet I cannot escape them." It was perhaps the strangest adventure of her exile that she should bring herself to ask pardon of a common thief.

But Newt understood nothing of her confession. "I'm no spy, my lady," he said helplessly. "What do you want with me?"

"You forget that I'm a healer. And sometimes I forget as well. But I can give you sleep if you wish."

"Please," said Newt, then hesitated. "How ... by a spell?"

"A simple charm. It's quite harmless." She relit the lamp, but hooded it so that only a single ray escaped.

Corson was now awake and watching. "Nyc, what ...?"

"Healing, what else? When you attack someone, you don't do it by halves."

"He deserved it," said Corson crossly, turning her back to the light and burrowing deeper into the hay.

"Be still, if you please, I need silence for this spell." Nyctasia drew from her pouch a faceted crystal on a silver chain. "Look well at this," she said to Newt. "You've never seen its like before."

Newt watched the stone swing gently to and fro before him, catching the lamplight on its polished planes. "Is it a real diamond?" he asked covetously.

"It's far more valuable than a diamond. This jewel holds the power of peace." Back and forth it swayed, and Nyctasia's voice with it in a low, melodious tone. "This is a stone that can ease all ills, heal all hurts, soothe all suffering. Watch it well, and you will feel its peace possess you. It will give rest to your spirit, it will shelter you beneath the wings of sleep." Her words grew ever slower and slower. "You feel its power even now, don't you, Newt?"

"I ... feel it," said Newt with some difficulty.

"Already your eyes are heavy with sleep."

"Yes."

"You cannot hold them open any longer."

Newt's eyes were closed, his face finally relaxed in repose. Without his habitually wary expression, he seemed another person entirely.

"Now there is nothing but sweet sleep," murmured Nyctasia.

"No, nothing," he sighed.

"And there will be nothing but sleep, till the sun is high on the morrow."

Newt made no reply, and Nyctasia blew out the lamp once more and returned to her place, wrapping herself in her cloak.

"Nyc ...?"

"You needn't whisper. He'll not wake."

"If you have a stone that heals all ills, why didn't you use it when I was sick, in Lhestreq?"

Nyctasia laughed softly. "This stone couldn't cure hiccups, Corson. It's only a common crystal. Anything bright would have done as well. The spell's in the shining and the speaking, and the healing's all humbug. It gives sleep, no more."

"Is that why it didn't weaken you to do it?"

That all power has its price was the guiding Principle of Nyctasia's philosophy. More than once Corson had seen her drained of strength by a healing spell.

"No, this is a spell that draws its power from the one who is spellcast, not from the one who acts. That's why it can only be laid upon one who is willing. It's a very rare and significant Balance."

A snore interrupted her explanation. Corson questioned everything, but she listened to the answers only when she chose.

Now that Newt slept, Nyctasia could sleep as well—though even in slumber she could not rest. In her dreams she was again in Rhostshyl, her ancestral home, but the proud city was in ruins, ravaged by flames, its walls broken, its towers fallen. Fires still smoldered among the piles of debris.

Nyctasia wandered through the empty streets, so well known to her that she could have walked them blindfolded, until she stood before the remains of a house where she had hidden before fleeing the city. The iron gate still stood, protecting ashes and dust and broken stone. She slipped into the yard and found the fragments of her great mirror shining among the blackened timber. Her favorite harp, the Sparrow, was charred and useless. It crumbled in her hand when she lifted it from the rubble.

"Why, 'Tasia, I thought you didn't know how to weep."

At first Nyctasia thought it was her cousin Thierran who stood outside the gate, but she saw in a moment that it was his twin, Mescrisdan. When they'd last met he had urged his brother to kill her, but now Nyctasia went out willingly to meet him. He could do her no harm—he was dead, struck down by Corson on that very spot, where he and Thierran had lain in wait for her.

"I can weep for Rhostshyl," she told him, "if it is now the city of the dead."

He shrugged. "When the city was dying you ran away. Why should you mourn it now? Come along, everyone's waiting for you."

She accompanied him in silence, knowing without question that the palace of the Edonaris was their destination. Where else was there to go?

The battered gates and smashed windows of her home were like wounds in her own flesh. She had passed most of her life within these halls, the most splendid in the city. Now they lay open to the night, the great columns and arches supporting nothing, the magnificent windows gaping, fanged with shards of colored glass.

Nyctasia followed Mescrisdan through the stone-strewn corridors till he stood aside to allow her to precede him into the dining-hall. She was, after all, a Rhaicime, his superior in rank.

Lady Mhairestri, matriarch of the Edonaris, sat at the head of the table, a privilege due her great age rather than her rank. Nyctasia was surprised to see her there, for the matriarch was not dead, for all that she could remember. There were others of the living present, her elder brother Emeryc among them, though it seemed that his wife, a commoner, had not been invited.

Nyctasia's parents observed her entrance with the same indifference they'd shown her in life. She had been a sickly child—a disappointment to her mother, an iron-willed woman so impatient of weakness that, after safely giving birth to twins, she'd scorned her physicians' advice to rest, and had died as a result. The elderly, reserved nobleman she'd married out of duty had survived her by only a few years. Nyctasia had not often seen her father in life, and she hardly recognized him now, but she bowed dutifully to both her parents. Her father did not seem to know her, but her mother nodded coldly in reply.

"Late as usual, Nyctasia Selesq," said Lady Mhairestri. "Take your seat. You have kept us waiting long enough."

"Your place is here, cousin, at my side," said Thierran. "Now that you are here at last, our wedding feast can begin. Only you would arrive late upon such an occasion, 'Tasia, but I forgive you, as always."

Thierran had been Nyctasia's bitterest enemy ever since she'd refused the marriage their family had planned for them. But now she faced him with composure. Him too she had seen lying dead at her feet, his throat slashed. She felt only regret as she stood beside him, looking into his pale, handsome face.

There was no malice in his eyes as he said, "You've taken a long way, only to return to me, 'Tasia. Would it not have been simpler to remain where you belonged?"

"Perhaps," she sighed. "But what choice had I, Thorn?" It was a childhood name she'd not used for him for many years. "I suppose we none of us had a choice."



How could she have helped falling in love with Erystalben ar'n Shiasfred, who had seemed to her a twin spirit? And how could Thierran have helped his jealousy and, above all, his wounded pride? All the Edonaris were proud and willful.

Nyctasia might have honored the marriage alliance, to serve the family's interests, and kept Erystalben as her lover—an arrangement which was common enough among the high aristocracy. But Erystalben too had his pride, and the more he had tried to persuade Nyctasia to repudiate the betrothal, the more dangerous he had become to Edonaris ambition. The full power of the house of Edonaris was brought to bear upon his kinfolk till he was forced to flee the city to protect his people. In time, Nyctasia had renounced her family and followed him into exile, but by then it had been too late ....

Now she seemed to see this course of events clearly for the first time. What could she have done to alter it? Who was to blame? If she had been wiser, kinder, like the Vahnite she claimed to be, would anything have been different?

And the maddening thing was that she did love Thierran, could not but love him, in spite of everything. They had been children together. Why had she not been able to explain—? Before the assembled company of ghosts and memories, she bent down and kissed him. "I'm with you now," she said.

He took both her hands in his and drew her down beside him. "A toast to our union!" he called.

A full wine glass stood at every place except Nyctasia's, as was usual. But now the matriarch filled the gold chalice called the Bride's Cup and handed it to her brother, Brethald, who bore it formally to Nyctasia.

"Your affectation of Vahnite Principles must give way to tradition for once," he said, presenting the goblet.

All glasses were raised, and everyone looked toward Nyctasia.

"To the bride and groom."

"To the House of Edonaris."

"To your homecoming, sister," said Emeryc.

It was for Nyctasia, as the guest of honor, to drink first, and the others waited, watching her. At that moment she desired above all to obey, to be accepted, finally, by her kin. She had only to lift the wine to her lips and her exile would be at an end.

"Allow me, my lady."

She turned and saw her trusted henchman Sandor standing guard behind her chair. Sandor, who had been killed while trying to bring her warning of a plot against her. Now, like a monarch's table-servant, he took up the goblet and tasted its contents before Nyctasia could drink.

Without a word he put it down and turned it on its side, to signify that the drink was dangerous. A crimson stain spread over the damask tablecloth, seeming as though it would soak the whole table. Nyctasia was seized with a sudden horror that it would reach her, drench her, drown her. She clutched at the cup, trying to right it and stop the endless tide of poison that threatened to flood the city. "Help me!" she cried.

"You are weak, weak!" said the matriarch sternly. "Only thus will the fires in the city be quenched." She stood and raised her glass. "To the everlasting destruction of our enemies! An end to the Teiryne line!" She smashed her glass on the hearth, and another spring of crimson welled from the spot, flowing across the floor. The others echoed her toast.

"No, don't! Stop! You're making it worse," Nyctasia pleaded. "We'll all be drowned!"

The company broke into laughter. "How could that be, when we are already dead?"

"But surely not the whole city," Nyctasia sobbed. "Not all! We must warn them!" She ran from the hall, down corridors haunted by her earliest memories, through courtyards where she had often gathered the hounds for the hunt, past gardens she had planted herself, now sere and withered.

The gates had always been guarded, but now they stood open, and Nyctasia raced out into the streets, seeking the living. Not till she reached the Market Square did she see another person, a man who sat at his ease on a fallen beam, as if waiting for her. She hurried to him eagerly, but when he turned to her she found herself facing another of her remembered dead.

“Fie, Nyctasia, and you a Vahnite!” said Rhavor ar’n Teiry. “If you mean to break your Discipline, drink honest wine, not that foul brew.”

Nyctasia realized that she was still clutching the golden goblet, and she threw it from her with disgust. “Ah, but it’s your fault, Rhavor. If you’d married me, they’d not be able to wed me to Thierran.”

They had once considered a political marriage between them, in hopes of uniting their warring families, Rhavor’s death had put an end to the plan, but now he smiled and said, “It is not too late for that.”

“It is too late to save a dead city.”

“Rhostshyl dead? Nonsense, my dear girl!”

“Show me the living then! Where are they?”

“They are coming this way. Don’t you hear them? Listen—”

At first there was only the heavy silence, but then a sound of horns and drums reached her, distant but drawing nearer.

“Hurry,” Rhavor urged her, and she set out again, her heart leaping wildly to the drumbeat. The streets grew lighter as the music grew louder, until she turned a corner and met with a grand wedding procession in full regalia, bright with banners, colorful caparisons and gold trumpets splendid in the sudden sunshine.

Nyctasia was astonished to see the coats-of-arms of both the Houses of Edonaris and Teiry among the heralds and standard-bearers. Together! Was it possible? But more bewildering still was the sight of the noble couple who led this festive throng. The bride was herself, but younger, hardly more than a girl, and the groom was not much older. But he was Rhavor ar’n Teiry, Nyctasia saw, not her cousin Thierran. They rode side by side, solemn and unsmiling, she looking straight ahead, he down at the cobbled street.

Overcome with wonder and confusion, Nyctasia watched the procession pass. She had never known Rhavor as a youth—when she’d come of age he’d already been a grown man, a widower with a young son.

Perhaps he could explain this mystery. She turned back toward the Market Square, following the parade, and now she saw that the streets through which they had passed were whole again, the shops and houses restored. Behind them, folk flocked, cheering and shouting, but ahead of them the silent streets were still in twilight and in ruins.

Nyctasia fell behind, gazing all about her at the return of life and prosperity to the city she loved. Then suddenly she stopped in her tracks, forgetting all else as she caught sight of one man among the onlookers. He looked more haggard and careworn than she had ever seen him. His long black hair was unkempt, his clothing dirty and ragged. Even his fierce blue eyes seemed dulled and defeated. But Nyctasia knew at once, without doubt, that here was the lover ravished from her by a dark and desperate spell, lost beyond an unknown threshold of perilous magic.

“Ben,” she cried, “this way! I’m here!” But she could not make him hear. She struggled toward him through the crowd, calling his name again and again, but when at last she reached his side he looked past her without a sign of recognition or welcome, and kept on his way, unseeing. “No!” Nyctasia screamed. “Ben, no—come back!”

I can’t bear any more of this, she thought wildly, and woke.

It was day. Corson was already up and feeding the horses, but Newt still slept, while the farm folk gathered eggs and milked the cows, not far from where he lay.

“If Her Ladyship would deign to rise we might reach Ylna by nightfall.” Corson remarked. “The people here say it’s a day’s ride. I’ve been trying to rouse you since sunup—it’s time enough you woke up!”

“It is indeed,” said Nyctasia.

“Well, it was only a dream,” Corson said sensibly.

It was easy to dismiss Nyctasia’s fancies in the clear light of morning. As they rode south along the Southern Trade Road, they were greeted gaily by families traveling north to the fair. Corson joked with the passersby and accepted an apple, which she ate in three bites. “A fair day and good traveling,” she

observed with satisfaction. She had no misgivings or forebodings about the future.

But Nyctasia could not shake off the memory of her visions. “The *vahn* speaks to us through dreams, Corson.”

“Not to me it doesn’t.”

“Very likely not. But I’ve had dreams before that later came to pass.”

Corson was not impressed. “And for every one that did, a hundred that didn’t—isn’t that so?”

“Yes, but—”

“Dreaming of cabbage doesn’t fill your belly,” Corson said firmly.

“You don’t understand,” said Nyctasia, but she smiled, and for once she did not offer to explain. This time she preferred to think that Corson might be right.

## 5

THE VILLAGE OF Ylna was little more than a cluster of cottages and a wayside inn that depended on the Southern Trade Road for its custom. Corson and Nyctasia reached it in good time and might have pressed on, but the signboard of the Leaf and Bough caught Corson’s eye.

“Nyc, wait. Let me see that foolish paper again. Yes, look, Ylna is on this list, and it says Rowan, Leaf and Bough.” The Cymvelan treasure was still on Corson’s mind.

Nyctasia shrugged. “We may as well stop here as go on. I’m ready for a rest, that’s certain.” What matter when she reached the Valleylands—one place was the same as another to her.

They gave their horses to the ostler and entered the public room of the inn, which was crowded with travelers on their way to the Osela fair. They paid their share, and sat at the long table, where folk were helping themselves to the common fare. The host scurried about, filling the mugs with foamy, dark ale, while the help brought more food from the kitchen.

Set before the company were platters of meat and roasted fowls, great loaves of bread, wheels of cheese, and basins of suet pudding. Bowls of boiled potatoes and onions were passed from hand to hand, and crocks of butter and honey stood at either end of the table. Corson and Nyctasia fell to eagerly. Corson forgot about treasure for the time being, and even Nyctasia found nothing in the meal to complain of. She had several helpings of sweet bread-pudding with apples and raisins, floating in cream.

When the board was cleared, people gave their full attention to drinking and exchanging news. Travelers from the south reported rumors of bandits and slavers prowling the countryside and attacking solitary wayfarers. But most of the talk centered on the harvest and farmers’ concerns. Had there been enough rainfall in the Valleylands? What did a bushel of millet fetch in town? Did the spring frost kill many lambs?

Should barley be planted during the new moon or the first quarter? Believers in both traditions had their say, and the discussion was a lively one. Nyctasia, who had inherited a good deal of farmland, had been raised to take an interest in such matters. But she held her peace, unwilling to reveal her station to strangers.

Corson only interested herself in barley when it was brewed and fermented, and she nursed her mug of stout, paying no attention to the talk. A group of students, as bored as she, looked about for some amusement and caught sight of Nyctasia’s harp.

“You, there, harper, give us a song!”

“The ‘Song of the Bat’!”

“No, not that—something bawdy!”

Corson expected Nyctasia to resent their addressing her in this manner, but instead she made them a bow and began to tune the strings of her harp. “I fear the songs of this region are not known to me,” she said mildly. “I’ll sing you one of my own.”

“She’s up to some trick,” Corson thought.

Nyctasia winked at the students and sang:

*“O, I never was made*

*To take heed of advice,  
I've gambled and played  
By the fall of the dice,  
And rambled and strayed  
All over creation,  
Beset by temptation  
And courted by vice.*

*Each friend and relation  
Who knew me of old  
Often foretold  
That I'd go to the bad.  
By wall and by wold  
I've rambled and wandered,  
And gambled and squandered  
The whole that I had,  
To my last piece of gold.*

*Of all wisdom's students  
'Twas I was the best,  
But I never learned prudence  
When put to the test.  
For all of my lessons  
I was no whit the wiser—  
When I've lost my last crescents  
Then I'll be a miser,  
And if my last pence  
Should follow the rest,  
With virtue and sense  
I shall feather my nest!"*

Her performance was received with enthusiasm. The students cheered and threw coins, and even some of the other guests applauded. Corson made haste to gather up the money.

"Give us another, lass!"

Nyctasia smiled, "I believe I do know a song from this part of the world, after all," she said. "Perhaps someone here can explain it to me:

*"What has come before  
Will return again,  
Neither less nor more,  
Neither now nor then.  
Nothing that befalls  
Comes about by chance.  
The nursling babe that crawls  
Will soon join in the dance.  
Stars are wheeling in the night,  
Moments spinning into time,  
Winter turning into spring.  
Birds are circling in their flight,  
Words are winding into rhyme,  
Children dancing in a ring.*

*What has gone before  
Will return again,  
Neither less nor more,  
Neither now nor then."*

This time there was no clapping when Nyctasia finished. An uneasy silence had fallen on the crowd, and people turned away, avoiding one another's eyes. Corson recognized the song as one of the verses from the page of riddles.

"What do you mean singing that accursed thing in here?" shouted the landlord. "We're decent folk here. Take your trouble-making somewhere else!"

"I'm sure I didn't mean to give offense," Nyctasia said in a bewildered tone. "I heard a drunken man sing it at the fair."

He looked at her suspiciously. "You'd be wise to guard your tongue, minstrel," he muttered, and hurried off to the kitchen.

Nyctasia turned to the students. "Why all this fuss over a trifling verse?"

"Don't you know that's a song of the Cymvelan Circle?"

"Well, and what if it is? Who are they?"

"Don't blame her, she's an outlander," said Corson. "I've heard of them—sorcerers or demon-worshippers or some such, weren't they?"

"That's what people say. The Valleylanders rose against them during the great drought. In my father's time, it was. They slaughtered the lot of them and destroyed the temple."

"Not all of them were killed," said a local fanner. "Some of the children were spared, and *he*"—he jerked his thumb toward the kitchen—"was one of them, though he doesn't like folk to mention it. He thought you sang that song to bait him."

"I've heard it said that they had some great treasure hidden," Corson said cautiously.

"Superstition," said one of the students loftily. "Many a fool has wasted time hunting for it, and no one's so much as found a copper."

"That's all very well," said a traveler, "but I come from the valley, and I can tell you those ruins are haunted. Some who entered those walls never came out again, and their friends found no trace of them. You tell me what's become of them—that demon-brood may be dead, but they're not gone yet."

"They don't sound so very fearsome to me. *Cymvela* means 'peace' in Old Eswaine," said another student, showing off his learning.

Nyctasia, who prided herself on her scholarship, winced at his mispronunciation of the word. *Cymvela* was a word with several levels of meaning in Ancient Eswaine, and it was with difficulty that she restrained herself from explaining them all at length, from "the harmony of Creation" through "the conciliation of the Spirit." But a tavern-songster would hardly know such things, so she held her tongue.

One of the villagers stood. "You ought not to name them," he warned. "It's bad luck even to speak of them. I'll not hear it—you'll bring their vengeance on us!" He and his neighbors hastily took their leave.

"I seem to have shaken down a wasps' nest," said Nyctasia apologetically.

"Never mind those ignorant peasants," said the student. "Now they're gone, we shan't have to hear about tilling and toiling. Let's have another song!"

"Oh, I daren't," Nyctasia demurred. "I don't know what's like to displease these folk—"

"What of the 'Bird in the Bush'?" someone suggested with a leer. "Will anyone quarrel with *that*?"

There were no complaints.

## 6

CORSON AWOKE AND lay stiffly in bed, listening carefully. What had roused her? Nyctasia lay beside her, her breathing steady and peaceful. A tree branch tapped against the shutters, and there were all the random noises that plagued old houses—creaks and groans as timbers shifted like troubled sleepers.

As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, Corson looked into every corner of the room, trying to spot something odd or out of place. But the shadows all resolved themselves into the clumsy furniture of a country inn, and the shaft of moonlight sneaking in between the shutters revealed no prowler lurking nearby.

Yet Corson would not go back to sleep. Her intuitions had saved her too often for her to ignore them now. She slid softly from the bed, without waking Nyctasia, and padded silently to the door.

Had she heard a sound outside, and then another, following too evenly to be a settling board or loose panel? Her right hand stole to the latch and paused there for a moment. Suddenly she yanked the door wide, lunged over the sill and grabbed something with her left hand, throwing it into the room.

Nyctasia started up and was faced with the sight of Corson bending back the leg of a rather short, plump fellow, and then sitting on him.

“Corson, what in the name of all that’s reasonable—!”

“It’s the landlord,” said Corson. “I don’t know why. Ask *him*, why don’t you?”

Nyctasia shook her head. Wrapping the blanket around her with a regal air, she got out of bed and ambled over to Corson and her prisoner. She sat down on the floor beside the man, looked at him with drowsy disapproval, and yawned.

“It’s not yet dawn,” she pointed out.

“Good of you to wake up, my lady,” said Corson.

“Dealing with the rabble is your job. And I’d really much prefer you to do it outside in future, if you don’t mind. I need my sleep.” She turned her attention to their host. “Explain yourself! How dare you come in here unbidden?”

“I know why you’re here,” he gasped, “and I’ve come to tell you I want no part in it!”

Corson and Nyctasia looked at each other. “Why *are* we here?” Corson asked. Nyctasia shrugged.

Corson relinquished her hold on the indignant landlord and sat down next to Nyctasia. They both looked at him expectantly.

“It wasn’t by chance you sang that song here,” he accused. “You meant it as a sign to me.”

“Well ...” said Nyctasia slowly, “we meant it as a sign to *someone* ....”

“Garast told me you’d come, but you’re wasting your time. I’m not one of you. It’ll be the ruin of me if folk learn you’ve been here!”

“We’re not C—” Corson began, but Nyctasia cut her words short.

“Then why is your name on this list?” she demanded, fetching the page of riddles. “You’re Rowan, are you not?”

“This is Garast’s,” he cried. “He wouldn’t have given it up—how did you get it? What have you done with him?” The man’s face was ashen in the moonlight.

Nyctasia sighed. Was she so soon to break faith with her Principles again? “We mean you no harm,” she said gently. “We are not Cymvelans—we bought this paper from a thief. I only want to know why it says Edonaris here.”

“I want to know why it says treasure,” Corson put in.

“You’re only treasure-hunters, then?” Rowan asked hopefully.

“I am an Edonaris,” said Nyctasia in a haughty tone that unmistakably proclaimed her rank and station. “I wish to know why our name is listed here. What has the Cymvelan Circle to do with us?”

Though he had seen her playing the minstrel, and now saw her sitting on the floor, wearing only a threadbare blanket, Rowan did not doubt Nyctasia’s claim to belong to a distinguished family. Her manner simply did not admit of doubt. “Garast heard that the Edonaris had bought the land the temple stood on—it was no more than that,” he explained, much relieved. “He thought he’d need their—er, your—leave to search the ruins.”

“Ah, yes, well it’s possible,” said Nyctasia coolly. “But it is hardly a matter for common gossip.”

“Of course not, madame. By no means—”

“And who’s this Garast? One of the Circle?”

“No! We were only children when the Circle was overthrown—Garast, Jocelys and I. We never knew that there were other survivors. We even shunned one another, the better to forget our evil lineage.

But this past spring Garast visited me, to warn me that they were looking for the three of us. Somehow, a few of the elders escaped the attack on the temple, and now, after a score of years, they would bid us return to the Circle! Garast refused them, of course. When you turned up tonight, I was sure they'd sent you. I suppose they'll find me sooner or later, but they'll get the same answer from me." He seemed glad to be able to tell the tale to someone.

Nyctasia frowned down at the page of Cymvelan rhymes. "If Garast spurned their offer, what did he want with this?"

"He took a notion that they meant to go back for the treasure, and he thought to outfox them, the fool. The three of us were to recall all we could of our childhood lessons, according to his plan, and that would somehow lead us to the legendary treasure—"

"Then these *are* clues to the treasure," said Corson.

"These are rot," he said scornfully. "Mere rhymes for children. Garast's mad! There was never any treasure there that I saw, and no more did the rest—we lived like poor folk. If there'd been anything of value there it would have been found when the place was sacked."

Corson grabbed the list from Nyctasia. "What about this?" she insisted.

*"Tales I have told, although I cannot speak.*

*Treasure I hold, enough for all who seek.*

*However many plunder me for gain*

*Yet will as much as ever still remain."*

Rowan laughed. "Any half-wit could answer that riddle! What could it be but a book?"

Corson crumpled the paper in her fist and threw it into a corner. "Just my rutting luck! A lot of useless bookworms like you, Nyc. It's not fair!"

But Nyctasia retrieved the page, smoothed it out, and replaced it in her commonplace-book. "I believe that all our questions have been answered," she said calmly.

## 7

"WHAT DO YOU mean we're lost?" Nyctasia asked indignantly. It was growing dark, and there was a steady rain. "How can we be lost? We've not come half a league from the Trade Road."

"They said we'd pass fences and cottages soon—do *you* see any?"

"I can't see anything in this wretched rain. We should have kept to the road."

"We won't find your long-lost relatives that way."

"We're not finding them this way either," Nyctasia pointed out, and sneezed. "At least we might have found some shelter along the roadway. I'm drenched."

It had been raining all day, and neither of them was in a gracious temper. Water trickled down Corson's neck as she asked herself how Nyctasia contrived to make her feel personally responsible for the weather. Nyctasia sneezed again.

"If you were any rutting good as a sorceress you could make it stop raining," Corson said spitefully.

"That is not the purpose of the art."

"You can't do it, that's all."

"True. But if I had the power, I'd not use it so lightly as that. It doesn't do to interfere with the Balance of the elements for frivolous purposes. The consequences can be—"

"No doubt," said Corson, "Tell me about them another time. I think there's some sort of building ahead—maybe it's those cottages. Come on."

But if it was a dwelling they came upon, it had long been abandoned. They climbed the broad stairs and crossed a roofed portico to peer into the open doorway, but it was too dark to see anything within. The place was altogether still, save for the sounds of the storm. It was not a welcoming spot, but it was dry, at least where the roof was still whole. They left the horses tethered to a pillar in the shelter of the porch, and settled themselves in the empty corridor just within the doorway. There was an inner door at their backs, and the corridor stretched away into the blackness to both sides of them.

Enough leaves and branches had blown into the porch for a small fire, and they tried to dry their

clothes a little in its warmth. Nyctasia sneezed, in a way that clearly expressed her vexation with her present circumstances. Sleeping on the ground was nothing new to her, but sleeping in damp clothes on cold stone was, she felt, a grievous affront to her good breeding. She dutifully attempted to regard the situation as an opportunity to practice the Discipline of Toleration, but discomfort such as this lacked even the dignity of pain. And sneezing interrupted her concentration.

Corson had been unusually silent for a time, but at last she burst out angrily, “Why did you bring us here. Nyc? What’s your game?”

“I? I’ve been following *you!*”

“This place feels like that spell-ridden Yth Forest you’re so fond of. You can’t deny there’s magic here—anyone could tell!”

“On the contrary, anyone couldn’t. I can, because I’ve studied magic and developed an awareness of it. But you, you sense its presence by instinct alone. That’s a rare talent. I shouldn’t wonder if you could be a magician yourself, Corson, with the right training.”

“I’d rather be a swineherd!”

“Well, that’s probably wise. But I suspect that your antipathy to magic is actually a result of your unusual sensitivity to it.”

“What’s ‘antipathy’?”

“Loathing.”

“Oh, *that’s* just common sense. Magic’s ruttin’ dangerous.”

Nyctasia laughed, incredulous, “You’re a warrior, woman! What you do’s not dangerous, I suppose?”

“That’s different! What I do is straightforward, there’s no pretense or cheat to it. A battle’s a monster’s bloody maw that’ll chew you to shreds if it can, but if you know what you’re doing, you’ll be one of the teeth of battle, not the fodder.”

“But that’s what the magic of *yth* is like, you know. Safe enough for those skilled in its ways, but—”

“No, you don’t see what I mean. War ... war is *honest*. You can *see* that it’s hideous and vicious, so at least you have a chance—It can destroy you, but it can’t deceive you. It doesn’t promise one thing and give you something else....” Corson thought of the alluring and deadly denizens of Yth Forest, and of the mirror-spell that had shown her an unflattering reflection of her own spirit. “Magic!” she spat. “Magic’s all lies—that’s why *you* take to it.”

“Lies ...” Nyctasia mused. “Why, that’s really quite profound, Corson.”

“It is?” Nyctasia was a puzzle Corson could never quite make out. She might take furious offense at a chance remark, while a deliberate insult would only amuse her. “You’re—” Corson began, but stopped suddenly. This time, she would not let herself be caught and lost in the web of Nyctasia’s words. She’d have an answer! “Curse you, Nyc! I want to know what we’re doing in this place!”

“But I don’t know, I tell you. I only sensed it a little while ago, myself. I didn’t say anything because I know you fear magic, and since we’d lost our way—”

“I don’t fear it,” Corson lied indignantly. “But I’ve wits enough to let it alone, and that’s more than you can say. I don’t believe you didn’t lead us here.”

“I know,” sighed Nyctasia. “No one ever believes me when I tell the truth. But I swear it, on my honor as a Vahnite and an Edonaris, I don’t even know where we are.”

Corson shrugged, more or less convinced. Nyctasia had too much respect for her precious faith and her family name to take such an oath lightly. It would be no use arguing. It was never any use arguing with Nyctasia. She stood. “You won’t mind if we move on, then. I think this must be part of the Cymvelan ruins, but I don’t mean to fight with phantoms for that treasure, so I tell you.”

“We’ll go if you like. But I don’t believe we’re in danger here. The power in this place is potential, not actual.”

“Oh, yes, that makes all the difference, of course,” said Corson, with leaden sarcasm.

“Listen, I can explain. It’s like a weapon—that sword of yours is potentially dangerous because you *could* draw it and kill someone—”

“I admit I’m sorely tempted, at times like this.”



“—but so long as you don’t, it isn’t *actually* dangerous. This place isn’t like Yth Wood. The power there is free, but here it’s fettered. It cannot act unless it’s invoked.”

“Could you invoke it?” Corson asked suspiciously.

“Perhaps. But I’m not about to tamper with a power I know nothing about—one might as well try to bridle a dragon. This is a sleeping dragon, though, and it won’t wake unless we step on its tail. We’re safe enough if we let it be.”

It was still raining, and Corson wanted to be convinced to stay within the warm shelter of the passageway. Her clothes were just beginning to dry, and there were the horses to consider, too. Nyc knew about such things, after all ... Nyctasia’s suggestion that Corson was afraid to stay spurred her to prove her mettle, and if they stayed she could have a look for that treasure by daylight. That decided her, but she was not easy about sleeping with those dark, ill-rumored ruins at her back. “You might as well get some rest, then,” she told Nyctasia, “I’ll keep first watch.”

Corson took a brand from the fire and set out to survey their campsite, to satisfy herself that all was secure. The building held too many hiding places to suit her, but all the rooms seemed to be deserted. They were laid out in a simple rectangle about a long inner yard where she found only rank greenery and an old stone well. Returning to the corridor, she stepped over Nyctasia and went out to the porch to see that all was well with the horses. The rain had slackened, and the night now seemed very still and desolate.

Just past the foot of the stairs was a round, ornamental pool, filled by the rain. Corson sat on the steps and tossed her torch into the water. From here she could see Nyctasia through the front doorway and keep an eye on the horses as well.

She watched her reflection, a darker shadow floating on the dark shadow of the pool, distorted by ripples. A few stars had pierced the cloudy sky and cast wavering reflections that danced before her eyes. One of them, she saw, gleamed brighter than all the rest, a star called by some the Crimson Empress because at its height it burned a deep red in the autumn sky.

But farmers, Corson knew, called it by the humbler name of the Reaper’s Eye. Seeing it in the ascendant, they knew it was time to look to their barns and houses, to make sure they were fast against the cold winds that would soon be coming. The star was a signal to the wise that it was a time for putting by, and counting stores, for looking forward to the comforts of home and hearth.

And what of me? Corson thought discontentedly. Blown this way and that like a leaf in the wind. Where will I be when winter comes?

As always, when she was in this mood, her thoughts turned to the coast, and Steifann. She knew how he would answer such questions. She could almost hear him, reasonable as always, urging her to give up her wandering and stay with him. “This senseless roaming of yours has to end someday, Corson,” he’d say. Steifann had raised himself from a penniless sailor to the owner of a thriving tavern. He was proud of the prosperous and secure life he’d made for himself, and he wanted Corson to share that life.

Corson knew that she’d be wise to accept Steifann’s offer of a home and a comfortable living, but the restlessness that drove her from place to place would not let her stay anywhere for long—even with Steifann. Their arguments were always the same. At times his confidence and complacency made her hate him.

“What’s so wonderful about a life of peeling potatoes and serving drunks?” she’d yell.

“It’s good enough for me. But if you’d rather make your living murdering people, that’s an end of the matter.”

“You smug bastard! Just because I don’t choose to stay pent up with you all the time and lose my mind from boredom!” It was a lie. She never grew bored with Steifann, and she was ashamed at saying it, all the more because she saw she’d hurt him.

“No one’s keeping you here,” he’d say coldly. “If you want to take to the road, and throw your life in the gutter, I can’t stop you. Go ahead!”

Corson’s pride made it hard for her to apologize, but losing Steifann would be far harder to bear than losing an argument. He had forgiven her for much worse things than insults—but what would she do if one day he was no longer willing to forgive her? “Oh, Steifann, I didn’t mean ...”

He shook his head, tossing the hair back from his brow, and grinned at her in the way she found irresistible. “Asye! You’re nothing but an overgrown child who doesn’t know what she wants. Do what you have to, Corson, but just don’t think that I’ll spend my days, or my nights, pining away for you while you’re gone.”

“Yes you will!” She threw her arms around his neck and pressed close to him, letting her hands travel slowly down his back. Nuzzling his bearded chin, she whispered, “You will, you’ll long for me all the time, and don’t you forget it.”

All their arguments ended in the same way too.

Corson groaned. *Was* he longing for her? Probably not, the brazen breed-bull! She always imagined, when she was away, that Steifann was in bed with half the town of Chiastelm. Somehow she never thought of him doing anything but being unfaithful to her. Now, with a pang, she remembered the vision Nyctasia had conjured for her outside the Yth Forest.

Steifann had appeared to her in a mirror, worn and haggard-looking, working on his accounts long after he should have been asleep. Seeing how hard he had to work when she wasn’t there to lend a hand with the heavy chores, Corson had felt guilty not only for spying on him, but for refusing to settle down in Chiastelm as well.

He needs me, she thought mournfully. What am I doing chasing all over the countryside when I could have the best home on the coast for the asking? What ails me? When I’m there for a season I long to be journeying again, and when I’m away I only want to go back! Once I see Nyc safe with these grape-growers I’ll go straight back to Chiastelm for the winter. Searching for this treasure is nothing but hunting the will-o-the-wisp. There are other treasures in this world.

Steifann’s good-natured laugh, his steadiness and generosity, his unequalled lovemaking. She closed her eyes and pictured his body stretched beneath hers, as her hands and mouth wandered along his broad, powerful chest toward his tender, yielding belly. “Sweet as honey from the comb,” she sighed.

Corson knew it would be easy for him to find someone who’d gladly share his life—he reminded her of the fact often enough, curse him! Did he even think of her when she wasn’t there? As she stared into the pool, taken up with her memories and jealousy, the words to Nyctasia’s mirror-charm came back to her, unbidden. The spell promised to reveal the doings of friends or enemies, however far away they might be. Now she wondered, uneasily, was Nyctasia right that she, Corson, had magical skills of her own? She found that she remembered the whole of the spell perfectly.

The rain had ceased, and the surface of the pool lay still and smooth as a mirror, yet her reflection seemed to waver and dissolve in the water. Somehow, Corson was not surprised to see another image forming in its place—the taproom at the Jugged Hare, Steifann’s tavern, as plain to see as though she were standing outside on a cloudy night, looking longingly in through a torchlit window. Even the familiar noises of the place, laughter and chatter, the clink of tankards, came to her from afar, seeming to form within her like the echoes of her own thoughts.

Steifann was sitting sprawled at one of the tables. Across from him was the smuggler Destiver, and it was clear that they both had had plenty to drink. “It was in Ochram,” Destiver insisted, pounding the table with her fist. “It’s just that every time we went there, you were too drunk to know where you were.”

“I may have been drunk *then*,” Steifann argued, “but I’m not *now*. I remember everything.”

“That doesn’t make a rutting bit of sense, and you’re drunker than the ship’s cat when she fell in the ale barrel. You’re heeled over like a cog in a gale.”

“Destiver, you haven’t been sober since you could hoist a flagon, and it was in Cerrogh. You’d take that crooked alleyway behind the Red Dog Inn, then the little street on the other side of the ashpit. It was the third on the left, and you’d go ...”

“The Red Dog is in Ochram.”

“... into the side door, the one in the alcove that you’d miss if you didn’t know it was there.” A broad grin spread across Steifann’s face. “It was a wonderful place. There was nothing you wanted that you couldn’t have.”

“The House of One Hundred Delights,” said Destiver dreamily. “Every room had something different,

remember? If you liked what you saw ... Ah, that little one, with her song ...

*You fishers come back with the tide.  
You sailors come home from the sea,  
My port, it lies open and wide,  
My fish is as fresh as can be!*

She was fine, that one. She'd shake all ever like a leaf in the wind. What a little pearl."

Steifann snickered, "Here's to pearls," he said, emptying his mug.

"It is the jewel every woman is born with—rich or poor. Here's to them," Destiver agreed. "And to certain other jewels too. The more the better, eh, Steifann?"

He carefully poured out another mug of ale for Destiver, then one for himself. "Well, I like to be an obliging fellow. How can I refuse anyone, when no one else can do the job as well as I can?"

"You are handy, no mistake. No one threads the needle the way you do, old friend."

"Or churns the butter," Steifann suggested, grinning.

"Or rakes the hay."

"Or shakes the ashes."

They both collapsed in drunken laughter. Annin ambled over to their table, hips swaying under her full skirt. "You two make a merry crew," she said, setting down a trayful of dirty mugs, and taking a long pull of Destiver's ale.

Destiver reached around Annin's waist and pulled her down onto her knee. The chair creaked. "Here's a true pearl among women. Annin, my queen, when I make my fortune, I'll take you away from this rat-hole on a golden galleon." She buried her face in Annin's neck.

"My place is no rat-hole, you slattern," Steifann protested huffily. Both women ignored him.

Annin snorted. "You worthless water-rat, you'll make your fortune when the Empress peels potatoes in the kitchen. Why should I waste my time waiting for you when there's plenty who'll spend on me now?"

"You're a faithless wench. I love you better than them all."

"Hmmp! And what is it you're both braying about while I do all the work of the house?"

"Why, love again, my beauty," said Destiver, running her hands over Annin's bodice.

"Lechery, more like, if I know you and this one here," Annin retorted, jerking her head in Steifann's direction.

"And where's the difference?" Steifann asked, waxing philosophical. "It's love, even if it's only for the night, A cold and lonely bed's never made anyone the happier. It sours you, and turns you from the world." He gestured broadly, knocking over some of the mugs on the tray.

"You're a besotted fool." Annin took another drink and started to mop up some of the spilled ale with a cloth she wore at her waist.

Steifann began to sing:

*"Ah, once I caught a bird,  
A sweet and lovely dove.  
I said to her these words:  
Come here and be my love.*

*Ah, doveling don't be shy,  
Don't hide your head away.  
I'll teach you how to fly  
Though on the ground you'll stay.*

*Charm me with your eyes so bright.  
Let me hear your song.*

*Kiss me once and hold me tight,  
Here in the grass so long.*

*Into my arms the darling flew,  
I kissed her downy breast,  
And how that dove began to coo  
When I entered her snug nest.*

*'Twas a deep and mossy valley,  
And fit for any king.  
In that nest long did I dally,  
Till the bird and I did sing."*

Annin and Destiver began to sing with him.

*"Ah, once I caught a bird,  
A sweet and lov—"*

"Corson, do you hear me? I'll take a turn at watch—why didn't you wake me?" Nyctasia called sleepily. "It's nearly dawn."

"Whore!" Corson shouted, throwing a rock into the pool. "You scum, wait till I get back to Chiastelm, I'll kill you, you and that stinking smuggler with you!"

Nyctasia was wide awake now. "Corson, what's the matter?"

Corson turned on her in outrage. "You and your filthy magic! Do you cast spells in your sleep?" She was astonished to see that the sky was already growing pale at the horizon. How long had she been in the grip of the vision?

"Perhaps, if it isn't asking too much, you'd be good enough to tell me what you're talking about," Nyctasia suggested. "What spells?"

"I saw him, in the pool."

"You saw whom in the pool, a merman?"

"Steifann—at the Hare—and Annin, and that bitch Destiver. 'Old friend'—I'll wring her scrawny neck for her! I was thinking about him, and then he was there .... He was drinking and singing and, and ..."

"And not moping about, missing you?" Nyctasia guessed. Corson scowled at her. "But, Corson, it was probably just a dream."

"I never fall asleep on watch—I couldn't if I tried!" That was a weakness which had been beaten out of Corson in the army.

"All I know is, I could have been murdered in my bed while you were dreaming of your lusty lover—if I had a bed," she added ruefully.

"It wasn't a dream, I tell you!" Corson suddenly stiffened. "You may be murdered yet," she said tensely.

"Now, Corson, don't be so hasty—"

"Quiet, fool! There's someone over there. Draw your sword."

"Are you sure you're not still imagining things?" Nyctasia whispered, but she obeyed, nevertheless.

"Watch those trees," Corson breathed.

"It's too dark, I can't see any—"

Then three people stepped into the open, from the overgrown stand of trees, and strode toward them purposefully. As they emerged from the morning twilight, Corson could make out a man and two women, all armed, their long blades held at the ready.

"Good morrow, strangers," said one of the women. "Have you passed the night in this haunted place?"

“And if we have, what of it?” said Corson, making no attempt to hide her mistrust. “We’ve done no harm. We’ll be on our way at once.”

“Not so soon, I think,” said the man, and rushed at her. One of the women followed his lead, while the other turned on Nyctasia.

Suddenly it seemed to Nyctasia that she was back at the inn-yard in Osela, with Corson shouting at her, “Don’t hesitate, act! Move! Faster! Don’t stop to think, there’s no time for that. Think with your arm—that sword’s alive! It’s faster than you are, you can barely keep hold of it—grip it fast—don’t let it get away from you—that’s right—”

It was still too dark to see her opponent very clearly, but she could hear the woman’s gasping breath, and she realized that she too was panting heavily. I suppose one of us will be killed,” she thought dispassionately, watching her own arm in fascination. But then the woman dove in under her guard and knocked her legs from under her. Nyctasia’s back struck the ground with a bone-jarring blow that forced the air from her chest and lit sparks before her eyes. She lay stunned as the woman knelt over her, pinioning her arms.

Yet a moment later, to Nyctasia’s surprise, her assailant leapt to her feet again, called something to her companions, and ran off swiftly into the trees. The other woman too turned and fled, and the man hurled his sword at Corson and followed.

Corson hurried to Nyctasia and helped her to her feet. She was still dizzy and breathless, but otherwise unhurt. Reassured, Corson went in pursuit of their attackers, calling back, “Stay there, watch the horses. If you see anything, shout.”

Shout? thought Nyctasia, I can’t even breathe! She waited, worried, for Corson to return. As soon as she could draw breath well enough, she decided to go after Corson on horseback, leading the other horse with her. But before she had mounted, she saw Corson returning, alone, and she seemed to have her cloak wrapped around her arm. Nyctasia ran to meet her. “Corson, are you wounded?”

“Wounded? Of course not.” Corson took a last bite of juicy pear and tossed away the core. “I was just fetching us some breakfast. Those are all fruit trees in there! Here.” She handed Nyctasia a ripe peach from the mound of fruit she carried wrapped in her cloak, in the crook of her arm.

“But what became of those people?”

Corson swallowed a mouthful of apple, and frowned. “I don’t know—they just vanished. I couldn’t find a trace of them. I don’t like it. Probably spirits,” she said glumly.

“They seemed all too substantial to me. What did they want, for *vahn*’s sake?”

“Us, of course. Why do you think that woman didn’t cut your throat? They’re slavers, you can wager what you like on that, and we’d better get out of here before they come back with the rest of the band.” She spat out seeds as if spitting in the faces of their would-be captors.

“By all means. We can’t be far from Vale now, and I for one have no intention of spending another night in the open.”

Silently, they rolled up their blankets and saddled the horses. The rainclouds had passed with the night, and faint streaks of rose and misty grey were slowly drifting across the sky. There was lark-song in the old orchard; the sunrise already gave promise of a bright, hot day. Nyctasia, who was used to the cooler climes of the coast, wished above all for a bath.

“Do you mean to come back here to look for the treasure?” she asked Corson, as they rode back to the by-road.

“If it’s guarded by spells, I’ll do without it,” Corson said, biting into another pear. She looked back, but in the early morning light the ruins didn’t seem such an uncanny place after all. “Nyc, you never told me—was it real, all that about Steifann? Is that what he’s doing now?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say it’s impossible, but—”

“Can’t you ever give a simple answer to a simple question!”

“Corson, that is not a simple question. Tell me, did you say the spell?”

“Not aloud.”

“That’s no matter .... What were you thinking about before it happened?”

“I told you, I was thinking about Steifann.”

“*What* were you thinking about Steifann?” Nyctasia asked with exaggerated patience. Corson gave her a sidelong look, and they both laughed. “Well, what *else* were you thinking about him?”

Corson sighed, trying to sort out the jumble of thoughts that had preceded the bothersome visitation, “I was ... remembering all the arguments we’ve had ... about the way I’m gone for months at a time. He always says I shouldn’t expect to find him waiting for me when I get back. As if I care.”

“So you were distressed, most like, and therefore susceptible,” Nyctasia said thoughtfully.

“I was what?” Corson bridled, suspecting an insult.

“Defenseless against the Influences present in the place. What with your natural ability, and your rather perturbed state, it’s not inconceivable that you did experience a manifestation of some sort.”

“You prating parrot! Did it mean anything?”

“Of course it did. Everything means something—Everything we do, everything that happens to us, is part of the web that binds us to our past and our future, and links us each to each, whether we would or no. Our actions, our visions, our dreams—” She was silent for a moment, then shook herself abruptly. “As for what you saw, it may not have been what it seemed. There’d have to be a very powerful Influence at work to call forth a true Reflection. This was more likely a lesser magic that showed you only shadows—”

“Lies.”

“—of your own fears.”

Corson looked sullenly at the ground. “I’m not afraid—I could find another lover quick enough.”

“In the time I’ve known you, you’ve found no end of them, but you’ve always said that no one’s as good as your bearded bedmate in Chiastelm.” Nyctasia looked at her with real irritation. “If you don’t care, and you’re not afraid, what does it matter whether you really saw him or not? You can ask him yourself when you’re back in Chiastelm. And all the man was doing was drinking and singing a few vulgar songs, according to you. Why do you want to kill him for that? I swear I’ve no patience with you! You know better!”

“He didn’t even mention my name. He’s not thinking about me at all, and it seems like I think about him all the time.”

“It wouldn’t seem that way to him, if *he* could spy out *your* doings,” Nyctasia pointed out.

Corson had to smile. “He wouldn’t stop yelling for a week,” she admitted. “But it’s more than that ...” She struggled to explain. “It’s not just Destiver, it’s—well, Steifann needs someone to help him at the Hare, but I can’t stay locked up there all the time, like a beast in harness.”

“Well, why should you?”

“Because if I won’t, he might find himself someone else who will, the mangy cur! He cares more for that rutting tavern than for me.”

“He’d be a fool if he didn’t—it’s his livelihood. He sounds a very sensible man. But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t care for you, Corson. Because you love your freedom best doesn’t mean that you don’t love him, does it? Look at the matter reasonably—”

Corson blushed. “Oh, what’s the use of talking to you? I don’t want a scholar’s argument! You don’t know what I’m talking about—you only understand what’s in your moldy books.”

Nyctasia did not answer, and her silence was a reproach to Corson. It wasn’t Nyc’s fault that Steifann didn’t miss her. She’d meant to help, in her maddening way, But the sense that she was in the wrong only made Corson more stubborn, and they continued on their way in silence till Nyctasia spoke again.

“It’s a mistake to think that a lover can be a way of life. I do know what you feel, Corson, but I’ve no answer for you. How could I blame ’Ben for loving magic more than he loved me, when I had proved that I loved Rhostshyl more than I loved him? I *understand* that he could love me still, though he loved the Yth better—I *know* I loved him well though I loved my city more. But I am not comforted by that reasoning, and why should you be? There is no absolute union of spirits, no companion in eternity, no mirror of one’s being. Each of us is one and separate and utterly alone. Is that simple enough for you?”

“No—it’s a lot of blather about nothing. There’s enough to fret about in this life without worrying over eternity too. What’s the good of it?”

With one of her abrupt changes of humor, Nyctasia smiled and said, “You’re a deep one, that’s certain. You may well be right. Many great philosophers agree with you.”

“Philosophy!” Corson snorted. “Antipathy! Plague take it, I want to know what Steifann’s at with that hag Destiver. He’ll see—two can play at that game. Maybe I will hunt out that treasure. Then I’ll go back to Chiastelm with more money than he’s ever seen, and—”

“Why wait? You’re carrying quite a fortune with you as it is—how much do you need to impress him? The treasure’s probably all moonshine anyway, you know.”

Though she had made light of Corson’s vision, Nyctasia was worried at the thought that Corson might return to the ruins. If the spell had been all that it seemed, then she had dangerously misjudged the power of the place. What sort of magic had the Cymvelans meddled with, to leave such Influences at work when they themselves were long gone? She had not put much stock in the tales of demon-worship and blood-sacrifice, but now ... If Corson, who was no magician, could unwittingly draw upon it, then that power was too unbridled to be safe. She herself might control it, but Corson was hardly prepared for such an undertaking.

Nyctasia saw much in Corson that she knew to be true of herself. In Corson she recognized her own pride and passion, her deep fears and her love of power. But in Nyctasia they had been governed, by years of Discipline and denial, to serve her rather than rule her—or so Nyctasia hoped. She was a Vahnite. But Corson would be defenseless against a magic that promised to fulfill the darkest desires of the spirit ... and did as it promised. Corson, with her curious gift for magic, would be its perfect prey.

“Besides,” Nyctasia added, “I thought you were so eager to know about the carryings-on at Chiastelm.”

Corson spat. “Drinking and screwing everyone in sight—I don’t need sorcery to tell me that.” She gave Nyctasia a shrewd look. “You won’t get rid of me so easily as that. I’m not afraid of that place. And there’s no such thing as enough money. If you weren’t such a spoilt, rich little aristocrat you’d know that.”

“Civilized,” said Nyctasia, “is the word you want, not ‘spoilt,’ but I suppose I shouldn’t expect your barbarian brain to grasp such fine distinctions.”

Corson grinned wickedly. “That reminds me, I can’t go back to Chiastelm just yet anyway. I was forgetting I owe you a few more lessons in swordfighting. You didn’t do too badly against that clumsy fool, but you shouldn’t have come out into the open. You had the advantage inside the porch there, among the pillars. When your opponent is bigger than you are—and that means anyone, for you—you should keep the fight in a tight place if you can, where the enemy will be hampered while you can move freely. You can’t help being such a little speck of a thing, but at least you can put your size to use now and then. I might be able to make something of you if I work hard at it.”

“I don’t believe that you’ll stay in Vale that long, even for the pleasure of cutting me to shreds. Don’t you have to go west from here to reach the river at Amron Therain?”

“The port’s not a half day’s ride from Vale,” Corson assured her. “I’ve wasted so much time looking after you that another day or two won’t matter. I’ll have time enough to give you those lessons, don’t you worry.”

Nyctasia groaned. “I’d get more mercy from the brigands and slavers.” She was glad enough to change the subject when they saw a team of ditchers hedging a field beside the road, not far ahead of them. “Now we’ll find out where in the *vahn*’s name we are.”

But at first the laborers only stared when Corson asked for directions to the Edonaris vineyards. Then one woman finally answered politely enough, “You’ve only to ride ahead as the road climbs, mistress, and take the east turn when you smell the grapes,” The others stood as if struck dumb, but broke into excited talk as soon as Corson and Nyctasia had ridden on.

“I think they’re still gaping after us,” Nyctasia said uneasily, looking back.

Corson was used in being stared at. “They don’t often see soldiers in these parts.”

“Let alone soldiers tall as towers, eh?”

“Better than being a half-grown gnat with a title longer than my arm.”

“They say one stinging gnat can drive an ox to frenzy.”

“It’s not the stinging I mind so much as the buzzing.”

“Well, you needn’t listen to it longer, you know.”

“That’s as may be—we’ll see. You might decide to go on to Amron Therain with me. How do you know this Edonaris family will want anything to do with you? They might not even believe you *are* an Edonaris. Maybe they’ll think you’re an imposter claiming kinship with them because they’re rich. That’s an old game,” Corson pointed out, clearly relishing the idea of the proud Lady Nyctasia being turned out of doors as a charlatan.

“And you mean to be there to see me humiliated. I take it?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for all the diamond-fields of Tierelon. Nyc, what *will* you do if they don’t accept you as an Edonaris?”

“The possibility has occurred to me. I have my seal-ring, of course.”

“You might have stolen it.”

“Well, I know more of the family history than any outsider possibly could.”

“I suppose I’ll find out—and soon, at that. This must be the east turning she meant.” There could be no mistake. The scent of grapes was stronger with every breath they took.

Nyctasia smiled ruefully. “You’re right, you know—they probably won’t believe me. If I *weren’t* an Edonaris, I know I could convince them, but since it’s the truth ...”

“Then use your persuasive powers to convince them to let us search the rest of the ruins, since we’ve come all this way.”

“Oh, come, you don’t really believe there’s a hidden treasure there?”

“No ...” Corson said reluctantly, “not much. But we’re here, after all. And those moth-eaten riddles might mean something.”

Nyctasia shrugged. “Possibly the Edonaris ought to see them, since their name’s on that list, though it seems to be harmless enough. Let’s ask the way to the house.”

They were riding through grape-covered slopes now, where workers were busy pruning the vines and testing the ripeness of the fruit. Corson and Nyctasia dismounted and hailed a man who was walking toward them along the roadside, stopping at the edge of each row to examine the grape-leaves for harmful insects. When he saw Corson, he stuck his pruning-knife in his belt and strode up to her jauntily, with a welcoming smile.

“Probably an overseer,” Corson thought, and started to ask about the Edonaris manor, but when she saw his face she only stood and stared, her question forgotten. He looked enough like Nyctasia to be her twin brother.

“Nyc,” she said finally, “I don’t think you’ll have trouble convincing them that you’re an Edonaris, after all.”

## 8

BUT THE MAN ignored Nyctasia and swept a low bow to Corson, gallantly kissing her hand. “A harvest goddess, come to bless the vines!” he declared, then, turning to Nyctasia, he demanded, “What ails you? Why don’t you introduce me to this vision of heartbreaking beauty?”

Corson grinned at her. “I like this branch of your family better than the other,” she said.

“This is Corson brenn Torisk,” Nyctasia told him, laughing, “but who am I, for the *vahn*’s sake?”

He glanced at her quizzically. “Are you really ailing, ’Deisha? You do look pale.”

Nyctasia took off her hat to allow him a better look at her face. Her grey eyes met his, and she smiled at his start of astonishment. “I’ve always been pale,” she said.

He took a step toward her but stopped, shaking his head as if to deny that she stood before him. “You’re not—I took you for—but, who are you?” he whispered.

Nyctasia bowed. “Nyctasia of Rhostshyl, cousin.”

“An Edonaris of Rhostshyl, of course. You’d have to be. What do you want here, Rhostshylid?”

Nyctasia’s manner stiffened. “Hospitality,” she said, “is what we expected. If we’re not welcome here, we’ll seek it elsewhere.”



“All strangers are welcome at harvest time,” he said resignedly. “Forgive me—I am Raphistain ar’n Edonaris. But since when do the nobles of Rhostshyl own us as kin? What sort of welcome would any of us receive at court?”

“A fairer one than I, I fear,” Nyctasia sighed. “I myself am banished from the city.”

“Then you are not here as an emissary?”

“By no means. Rather as a fugitive.”

“Why, that’s another matter altogether! The others must hear of this. Come with me, the rest won’t be back till dinner. You’ll have time to refresh yourselves from your journey.” Now that he knew who Nyctasia was, he became the courteous host, but he was no longer certain how to address Corson. Was she only a guard? Was it fitting for him to flirt with her?

Corson saw his curious look, and decided to make it clear that she was not Nyctasia’s servant, “You can blame me that we’re here,” she said. “I told Nyc there were Edonaris at Vale. She’d never heard of you.”

Raphistain abandoned his scruples. “*You* would be welcome in any company,” he assured her, with a meaning smile. “But how did you hear of us? Isn’t Torisk one of the Maritime cities, then?” All coastal accents sounded alike to a Midlander.

“Torisk’s a swamp, in the south. But I’ve traveled about the Midlands a good deal, and heard praise of Edonaris wine. I’ve never tasted it, though,” she hinted.

“What a tragedy! Fortunately, that can easily be remedied, now that you’re here. I shall see to it myself.”

They followed him on foot, leading their horses, till a stable-boy came running from the yard and took the reins. He gave Nyctasia a puzzled look, but Raphistain sent him about his business at once and hurried them on to the manor house. It was a sprawling stone manse which had obviously been added to many times, as more space was needed. The newer wings and turrets were joined to the main body of the house at all possible angles, but the ivy climbing over the whole facade seemed to bind its parts together and make them one. The walls were alive with song-sparrows, invisible in the ivy vines, chirping and rustling restlessly, never still. Nyctasia saw the coat-of-arms of the Edonaris carved into the arch of stone above the main portal, half-hidden by leaves.

The great, dim hall was almost chill after the late-summer heat of the countryside. The walls of thick stone allowed little of the sun’s power to penetrate, and the windows were high and small here in the oldest part of the house. The doors stood open to admit more light, and Nyctasia could not but compare them to the portals of the palace of the Edonaris at Rhostshyl—defended by a portcullis and armed guards, fortified with great bars and bolts of iron. What must it be like to have no enemies?

Their host led them quickly through the confusing maze of corridors and stairways, but he could not altogether avoid the curious stares of the few servants they passed. He stopped before the open door of an old, book-lined room where a sharp-featured woman of middle age sat bent over the household accounts. A great ring of keys at her belt clinked when she turned to face them.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded. “Dinner’s not for hours. ’Deisha, why aren’t you at the calving?”

Nyctasia had been examining the backs of the books, all of which, she noticed, were dusty from neglect. She started guiltily. “But I’m not—” she began.

“What mischief are you two about now? And at harvest time too! Who’s *that* great creature?” she continued, noticing Corson.

When Raphistain could get in a word, he bowed and said, “Aunt, allow me to present our guests. Mesthelde brenn Vale ar’n Edonaris—Corson brenn Torisk and Nyctasia brenn Rhostshyl ar’n Edonaris.”

She frowned. “What nonsense is this? We’ve no time for games and foolery. What have you done to yourself, ’Deisha? You look like a ghost!” She approached Nyctasia as if she intended to take her by the collar and drag her off to wash her face and hands.

“Madame, I—” said Nyctasia. “Permit me—”

The woman peered at her, squinting, then stepped back suddenly, setting the keys jangling. “Sacred

Name of Creation! Who is this?"

"But I've just told you, my good aunt," said Raphistain, enjoying the scene. "Our cousin Nyctasia has come all the way from Rhostshyl to pay us a visit. And you greet her with a scolding—what will she think of us?"

Ignoring him, Mesthelde sat down again, still staring. At last she said, "Have you sent word to your father, Raphe?"

"Not yet. I only just—"

"Then go fetch him, boy! He'll be at the coopers' yet. Don't waste time. I'll see to our guests."

He sighed. "Very well, I suppose it will be best if I go myself. I shall see you all at dinner, I trust. Mind, Aunt, you're not to frighten them away."

Mesthelde looked them up and down with obvious suspicion. "Well, if it must be, it must. Come along. As you're here, you might as well be comfortable. You'll need some fresh clothes. 'Deisha's are sure to fit you," she said to Nyctasia in a tone which implied that the resemblance was a piece of wanton deceit. "But I'm sure I don't know what we'll find for *you!*" She looked up at Corson and shook her head in disapproval of such immoderate height. Nyctasia endured this treatment with unaccustomed forbearance. Corson had rarely seen her so abashed and silent.

Their hostess showed them to spacious rooms in the newer part of the mansion, promising to send maids to see to their needs and fetch them to dinner. Her manner made it clear that they were not expected to show themselves before they were summoned to the evening meal.

Corson was pleased with the chamber allotted to her. It was large and well furnished, but simple enough to make her feel at home. She was accustomed to sharing servants' quarters or the crowded barracks where guards were housed. So this was what it meant to be a guest, not a mere hireling. But then, these Edonaris were vintners and tradesfolk—the local gentry, perhaps, but not of the highest aristocracy like the Edonaris of Rhostshyl—not too proud to treat a common swordswoman as a guest in their home.

There was therefore no reason, Corson assured herself, to worry about how she should conduct herself here. But ... what did one do with ladies' maids? She wished Nyctasia were with her. What would *she* do?

As soon as she had asked herself this, Corson knew exactly what to do. When two girls arrived, one bearing bed-linens, the other a tray of grapes and cheese, Corson instructed them to prepare her bath, quite as if she had been giving orders to domestics all her life.

But she did not know that the maids would stay until they were dismissed. It never occurred to her to say, "That will be all," and as a result she was attended with every possible service while she bathed. The ladies' maids washed her hair and feet, scrubbed her back, fetched more water, and stood about waiting to rub her dry, then wrapped her in a capacious robe. When they took away the tub, Corson thought she was rid of them at last, but one soon came back to dress her hair for her. Corson managed not to show her surprise, but she was glad she had the fine silver comb and brush Nyctasia had given her, which were fit for any lady.

The maid exclaimed over her long, glorious hair, and Corson began to feel more comfortable with her new station in life. As she was enjoying the rare luxury of having her hair brushed, an older woman entered and looked at her critically. "Oh, it'll have to be the gold, no question," she said, and went out again, leaving Corson mystified.

"The gold what?" she asked the girl, before she could remember not to display her ignorance.

"It's the cloth she means, mistress—we're to make you a gown straightaway. There's a length of gold silk from Liruvath that's long enough."

Corson was appalled. A gown—! She'd never worn such a thing in her life. Perhaps she should go find Nyctasia and ask her how she ought to behave, after all.

Nyctasia dismissed the maids as soon as her bath was ready. She had always preferred privacy to constant attendance, and she had much to think about.

I oughtn't to have come here, she brooded. I knew better. I was a fool to imagine for a moment that

I might find a welcome among strangers simply because they bear my name. These folk want no part of me, and I can't blame them—they must have heard what poison we are, we Rhostshylid.

She pressed the water from her sleek, close-cropped hair and felt it trickle down her face like tears, making her somehow sadder. I'll leave them in peace, she decided. I'll ask nothing of them but a night's lodging, and say that we came because of that strange Cymvelan paper. The thought of the list was comforting—she had, after all, some legitimate reason to be here. She quickly dressed in the elegant clothes the maids had laid out for her, meaning to go at once to look for Corson, but just then the girls returned to tell her that the Lady Nocharis had summoned her.

She was shown to a tapestried drawing-room where the family was gathered, obviously to discuss what to do about her. "But if she's come on her own account—" she heard, before they fell silent at her entrance. Only a few gasps of astonishment greeted her appearance, and she too was taken aback at the uncanny resemblances to some of her near relations in Rhostshyl.

Raphistain performed introductions, but Nyctasia soon lost track of the names and the web of kinship. She gathered that the grey-haired Diastor was Raphistain's father and Mesthelde's brother by marriage, that Leclairin was away on business, and that Tepicacia was someone's younger sister. She met Mesthelde's cousin Nesanye, his wife Ancelin and their son Nicorin. There was a Great Uncle Anseth and an elderly cousin by marriage named Heronice, but Diastor and Mesthelde seemed to be the heads of the household.

"I was told that Lady Nocharis wished to see me," said Nyctasia, puzzled.

"So she shall," said Diastor, "but you'll hear what we have to say, first."

"Willingly, sir." She gratefully sank into the chair that Raphistain placed for her.

Diastor frowned. "For generations the Edonaris of Rhostshyl have refused to acknowledge us because we dealt in trade. All of our advances to them were met with threats or with silence, and the family gave up the attempt long ago, before my time."

"I know nothing of that," said Nyctasia. "I was never told that there was another branch of the family. Perhaps my parents didn't even know it."

"Nevertheless," he continued, "we hear news of the coast from time to time, through travelers' tales. We know that the House of Edonaris is at war with the Teiryn, and we'll have no part in it, mark me well. You'll find no allies here for your blood-feud. If we're not good enough to mix with the noble Edonaris of Rhostshyl, we'll not send our young folk there to die for them!"

"That's for us to say!" One of the younger men spoke out boldly. "Some of us want to see Rhostshyl once in our lives. We've the right—it's our heritage. Rhostshyl's our homeland as much as the valley is."

"Oh, but—" gasped Nyctasia.

"Corin's right," said a girl who looked no older than sixteen. "We've no call to turn our backs on our kin just because their ancestors scorned our ancestors. It's our duty to defend the House of Edonaris, with our blood if we must!"

"Nonsense!" thundered Diastor. "Children's notions! Hold your tongue, 'Cacia, you know nothing about it."

"You youngsters only want some excitement," Mesthelde said witheringly. "You think you can be lords and ladies and live at court instead of doing honest work in your own home. But you'll only make fools of yourselves, if you're lucky, and get yourselves killed if you're not—all for a lot of strangers who care nothing for you!"

Nyctasia was aghast. "But I'd never—"

"Why didn't you send her away before they heard about her?" Diastor demanded of Mesthelde.

"Too late for that, others had already seen her. And what was to keep her from coming back? It's best to have it out now and be done with it."

"True," he said, glaring at Nyctasia. Everyone was now looking at her. Raphistain caught her eye and grimaced ruefully.

Nyctasia took a deep breath. "You mistake me, I assure you. Never would I counsel you to take part in the madness that afflicts Rhostshyl! I myself am in exile because I opposed the feud." She turned to the youth who'd spoken before. "Believe me, the Teiryn are not the enemy—it's the feud itself that will

destroy the House of Edonaris, and the city with it. You must have nothing to do with it, I beg you!" Her voice trembled with undisguised passion.

There was a stunned silence on all sides, but at last Diastor said, "Come, it's time you met the Lady Nocharis."

## 9

A GIRL SAT sewing in an alcove window, while a young child crawled at her feet, playing with a wooden horse. But when Nyctasia and the others entered, she picked up the baby and quietly left.

Lady Nocharis received them sitting up in bed. As the eldest in the family, she held the purely ceremonial title of matriarch. She was a small, frail woman, almost ghostly with her pale skin and stark white hair, but the warmth of her smile and the wisdom of her clear grey eyes dispelled all suggestion of lifelessness.

Nyctasia bowed respectfully and kissed her hand. "Madame," she said, "you do me honor."

The old woman smiled, amused at Nyctasia's stately courtesy, which seemed quaint and old-fashioned to her. "What pretty manners you have in Rhostshyl," she murmured.

Nyctasia realized her mistake at once. This was not the court. "We're a formal lot, I'm afraid," she apologized, "but I mean to leave that behind me now." She bent and kissed Lady Nocharis on the cheek instead. The others withdrew, leaving them alone, and the matriarch patted the edge of the bed, inviting Nyctasia to sit near her.

"So you've come to stay with us, instead of taking us away with you?" she asked gently. But it was not truly a question.

Until this moment, Nyctasia had not dared to think seriously of settling here in the valley, but suddenly it seemed to her to be possible. To one of her station, kindred was all-important, and the bonds of blood were the hardest to break. "I hardly know why I've come," she said slowly. "It matters little where I go, since I cannot go home. When I heard there were Edonaris here, I was curious to know whether they were kin to me. It was no more than that."

"And now you know."

"Yes indeed. You resemble my great-aunt, the matriarch Mhairestri."

"And you, truly it is remarkable, child. You could be one of my own daughters."

Nyctasia smiled sadly. "I wish I could," she said.

"That place is still in your heart. But you were in danger there, I think."

Nyctasia looked away. "Yes ...," she said, faintly disturbed by a shadowy memory she could not quite capture. Why did she feel that Lady Nocharis's words held a warning for her? Did these folk know more about her than she had supposed? She shook her head, impatient with herself. What did it matter? They had every right and reason to be wary of her—but she must trust them, if she was ever to learn to trust anyone. She had not come away from Rhostshyl only to continue in her devious and suspicious ways.

"Yes, grave danger," she said simply, "and the greatest of all was the danger to my spirit." For the first time, Nyctasia saw that the true danger had never been that she might be killed, but that she might live to become more and more like Lady Mhairestri with every passing year. She shuddered.

Lady Nocharis stroked her hand. "My poor child, I think you had best stay here for the time, don't you?"

"If you'll have me," said Nyctasia, with unwonted humility. She felt close to tears, but instead she returned the old woman's smile. A Vahnite ought never to weep.

Raphistain arrived to escort Nyctasia to dinner, and the serving-girl followed with a tray. Lady Nocharis, who was lame, and bedridden much of the time, often did not dine with the rest.

"You must come and chat with me again, my dear. Perhaps between us we can discover what our degree of kinship is."

"I shall," said Nyctasia. "I'd like that."

She felt unusually carefree and lighthearted, as if relieved of a crushing burden. At last she truly

believed that she had been right to leave Rhostshyl, whatever the cost. It seemed a long time since she'd known such well-being and freedom from doubt.

Raphistain too was relieved. If Mother 'Charis accepted Nyctasia, the others would be satisfied. He led her on a tour of the parts of the house she'd not seen before, and Nyctasia was pleased with everything she saw.

"Nyctasia, I ..."

"Please, call me Nyc."

"With pleasure. And I'm Raphe, if you will. Nyc, I must apologize for the reception you've had here. You see, ever since we learned of the feud in Rhostshyl, there's been mad talk among the youngsters of going to the defense of the House of Edonaris. And now the rumors of war are wilder than ever, so when you appeared everyone was sure you'd been sent to make allies of us. I *did* suggest to my father that we might ask you your intentions, but the day he heeds my advice will be the day it rains roast potatoes. I hope we've not offended you beyond redress."

Nyctasia laughed. "We trust no one, and we don't expect to be trusted. I quite sympathize with your suspicions, I assure you, and I share your apprehensions as well. I'll do all I can to discourage your young folk from running off to Rhostshyl."

"For that my elders will call you daughter—but I fear my young cousins may call you traitor."

"I'm accustomed to that. My own family called me so, because I wanted to settle the feud by treaty."

He shook his head. "They want us to muster an army and march to the coast, all to prove to our Rhostshylid relations that we've true Edonaris blood in our veins."

"I fear they are right about that, at least, cousin. In Rhostshyl they say that all the Edonaris are crazy."

Corson's gown was really no more than a long, straight sheath that fell to her ankles and gathered at her waist with a sash. Nothing more elaborate could be stitched together in so short a time, even with the seamstress and two maids all working together. But the richness of the heavy, cream-gold silk was shown off all the better for the simplicity of the garment. No sleeves were needed in the late-summer weather, but an edge of the cloth was draped in graceful folds over Corson's wide, proud shoulders. The maids insisted that she leave her hair down, though they fastened it back with the ivory clasp and wove it with ribbons cut from the same gold material.

Corson accepted a pair of sandals that laced up above her ankles, and she strapped a small knife to her calf, among the leather thongs. She could not very well wear her sword-belt, but the gown would hide the knife from sight. The thought of going about almost unarmed made her uneasy, but she reminded herself firmly that she was a guest, not a guard. She need not hold herself ready to attack or be attacked at the blink of an eye.

When she was summoned to dinner, Corson found it almost as hard to leave behind her money-pouch as her weapons. In the sorts of lodgings she was accustomed to, she would never have let it out of her sight for a moment. But to carry it with her would look like mistrust, and she had been long enough with Nyctasia to know that these folk would take it amiss, "Well, if I'm robbed, *someone* will pay for it," she thought grimly. "I wish this wretched rag had some pockets!"

She dropped her belongings in the chest with feigned indifference and strode to the door, but her swaggering gait was much hampered by the long skirt. Before she could catch her balance, she fell heavily to the floor and lay sprawled in a tangle of honey-colored silk.

Corson forgot her fine manners. "Curse this rutting cocoon and the dung-worms that spun it and the bitch's whelp who wove it!" she stormed, struggling to her feet. She glared at the waiting-maids. "Laugh at me and I'll tear your tongues out!"

"Oh, no indeed, mistress," said one respectfully. "Are you hurt? Let me just tidy your hair."

"There, the seam's not torn a bit," said the other with satisfaction, straightening the folds of the gown.

"Don't fuss at me!" Corson growled. She felt pinioned and harried and defenseless, but she took a deep breath, drew herself up to her full height, and said with dignity, "I'm ready, lead the way. I mustn't keep everyone waiting." She proceeded down the corridor at a rather more restrained and ladylike pace.

THE WHOLE COMPANY rose to its feet when Corson made her entrance, though most of them had no idea who she was. Even Nyctasia did not recognize her, for a moment, in her finery and her dignity. The elegant cut of the gown gave her height new stateliness, and the pale gold silk perfectly graced her dark gold skin and the red-gold glow of her hair. The golden earrings she always wore might have been meant for just this occasion. By torchlight and candlelight Corson was a glorious golden candle herself, and all who saw her rose instinctively to do her honor.

She was absolutely terrified.

How was she to acknowledge this unexpected reception? Should she curtsy? How? It was all she could do to *walk* in this dress without falling on her face! Petrified, she looked desperately to Nyctasia, who came forward at once to her rescue. "Allow me to present my companion," she said, taking Corson's hand, "Corson brenn Torisk, the most beautiful mercenary on the coast, and the most dangerous."

"Most beautiful in the Midlands as well!" someone called from the foot of the table.

"Most dangerous too—she has conquered me without striking a blow."

Nyctasia led her to the table, and Raphistain made room for her to sit between them, "I saw her first and am already captive to her charms. You are too late," he declared, winking at Corson.

"Indeed, we all surrender," said Diastor. He bowed to Corson, and the company resumed their seats, still showering her with welcome and flattery.

Corson began to feel much more at her ease.

Then another latecomer suddenly claimed their attention. She came dashing into the dining-hall, shouting, "Listen, Cloud's had *twin* calves—two beautiful little heifers! It must be a sign. We'll see marvels this season!" Two large dogs had run in with her and were racing around the table eagerly, thrashing their huge tails and greeting the family with noisy enthusiasm.

"Deisha, take those creatures out of here at once," snapped Mesthelde. "And go get yourself washed. You're late already, and you stink of the barnyard."

"At once, Aunt," laughed 'Deisha. "but first I must see the mysterious visitor everyone's talking about. Where—" She stopped short and gazed at Nyctasia, openmouthed.

Nyctasia too stared, forgetting everything else. The two were identical, save that Nyctasia's skin was ivory-pale, 'Deisha's dark from the sun. And 'Deisha's hair was not cut short but plaited in a long, untidy braid.

"My sister Frondescine," said Raphe. "'Deisha, this is our cousin Nyctasia from Rhostshyl."

"*Vahn*, as if 'Deisha weren't trouble enough, now we have two of them," someone groaned.

"And she's a 'Tasia, too. We'll go mad."

"Why, call me Nyc, then," said Nyctasia. She rose and turned to 'Deisha, smiling. The dogs sniffed her and Corson and barked, excited by the unfamiliar scents. One tried to climb into Corson's lap, which it was much too large to do, and only succeeded in sweeping a few things off the table with its wildly wagging tail. The other reared up on its hind legs and planted its paws on Nyctasia's shoulders, almost knocking her over, and thrust its great muzzle affectionately into her face.

"Be quiet, you curs! Get down!" Raphe pushed them away, and 'Deisha swatted each on the nose sharply, ordering them to lie down and be still. They collapsed to the floor at once, tails thumping, and looked up worshipfully for her approval.

Blushing brightly, 'Deisha faced Nyctasia, stammering apologies. "They're very well-behaved as a rule ...."

"They're nothing of the sort, they're wild beasts!" said Mesthelde indignantly. "I've told you dozens of times not to bring them in—you can take your meals in the kennels in future, if you can't bear to be parted from them."

"Just the place for her," agreed one of the older men. "The little mongrel's not properly house-trained."

The youngsters were delighted. “She-wolf, you mean,” one shouted.

“What he means’s bi—”

“Enough! We’ve guests at table!” roared Diastor, slamming his fist on the table.

Nyctasia stifled her laughter. “But they’re beautiful animals!” she cried, holding out her hands to the disconcerted ’Deisha. “I used to raise hounds myself.”

’Deisha approached her, but then, seeing her own grimy hands, she thrust them behind her and mumbled, “I must go wash, I’m filthy, excuse me. I won’t be a moment ....” She fled, abashed, with the dogs galloping after her. Mesthelde sighed and signaled the servants to bring in the dinner.

Corson decided that her manners would be quite adequate to the occasion, and enjoyed her meal thoroughly, though many of the dishes were strange to her. She was accustomed to much plainer fare, but it was not difficult to appreciate the rich sauces of cream and wine, the fowls stuffed with sausage and berries, or the pork baked with plums. She felt that she could easily get used to food like this, and it was a simple matter to imitate the way the others used their tableware. Corson took note that one only picked up a bone to gnaw at it after cutting away the meat that could be reached with knife and fork. And one wiped one’s mouth with a napkin afterward.

Nyctasia too followed her hosts’ manners—it wouldn’t do to show that her own were considerably more refined. These folk would never learn from her that their behavior would be thought low-bred at court.

A very rare old vintage wine was served in their honor, from a lot laid down by the Edonaris lord who’d come from Rhostshyl long ago to settle in the valley. But its subtle savor was wasted on the guests, for neither Nyctasia nor Corson had a taste for fine wines. Corson heard Nyctasia’s hissed whisper, “*Sip it slowly!*” in time to prevent her from emptying her glass at a gulp, but she found the drink bland and tasteless compared to the cheap, harsh wine served in taverns. “I’ve never had wine like this,” she said quite truthfully, wishing she had a strong ale instead.

Nyctasia, in accordance with Vahnite Discipline, rarely drank spirits at all. One wine was the same as another to her, and plain water would have suited her better. But she smiled and declared the vintage “worthy of the name of Edonaris,” much to the satisfaction of the household.

They did not guess how shamed Nyctasia felt, to think of her family’s name sullied by commerce, branded on kegs that anyone might buy—as if the House of Edonaris were no better than a dramshop. But she pushed away such thoughts and forced herself to ask her newfound kin about their Edonaris ancestor.

It was he, Mesthelde told her, who had begun the winery. When he’d married into the family they had been merchants who dealt in fine wines and other luxury goods. But with the wealth he’d brought from Rhostshyl he had purchased land, and persuaded some of his bride’s family that it would be more profitable to produce and market their own wares. Nyctasia understood his actions perfectly. A nobleman would naturally feel that he must live on his own land, establish a domain. She would have done the same, even if it had meant taking part in trade.

“He was Raphistain Elwys Jhaice brenn Rhostshyl ar’n Edonaris,” Mesthelde continued. “Raphe’s named for him, of course, because he has the look—we get a few in every generation who look like you. Both my sisters have the Edonaris features, though not so much as Raphe and ’Deisha. No, you don’t see them here. Andelsy lives at Tezroth with her husband’s kin, and Leclairin’s away at Osela. But my mother looked much like ’Deisha, they say, when she was a girl.”

“It’s Lady Nocharis you mean?” asked Nyctasia, trying to remember who was whose child.

“Yes, the title’s come down to her. I was her first child, so I’ll inherit, and ’Deisha’s the oldest girl of the next generation.”

Corson was puzzled. “Why won’t it come to Raphe? Was it a woman’s title before the first Raphistain received it?”

“The title of Jhaice doesn’t descend strictly in the male or female line,” Nyctasia explained. “Now that a woman holds it, it will stay in the motherline so long as there’s a girl in the next generation—daughter or niece. But if it passes to the fatherline, it will stay there until there’s no son or nephew to inherit. It is rather confusing.”

“What of your own title? Does it work the same way?”

“No, a Rhaicimate must remain in the original line as long as possible, even if it must pass to a sibling or cousin instead of descending to the next generation. If I’d no daughter or niece, my title would go to my sister, even if I had a son. But if there were no female heir, and a man succeeded to the Rhaicimate, it would have to revert to the female line in the next generation to produce a female heir.”

Corson had lost interest by this time, but the others were more attentive than ever to Nyctasia’s words. They had not suspected that she held such a high rank, and even Diastor was awed at first to learn that they had a Rhaicime in their midst. If they had been willing to have her settle among them before, they now became eager for her to do so.

Unsealing another carafe of wine, Diastor called for a toast, first to a bountiful harvest, as was customary, and then to the guests of the house.

Raphe seconded him. “To the irresistible slayer of hearts,” he said, bowing to Corson; Then he turned and raised his glass to Nyctasia. “To your homecoming, cousin.”

At his words, the festive, firelit scene seemed suddenly unreal to Nyctasia, like a painted mask hiding the features of an enemy. Now she saw that the tapestries hung in blackened tatters from the roofless walls. Mhairestri, not Mesthelde, sat at the far end of the table, and it was her brother Emeryc who proposed the toast. Her hand trembled as she lifted her glass, spilling a few dark drops of wine on the snowy table linen.

## 11

THE SPELL WAS broken by the return of ’Deisha, without the dogs, her face glowing from repeated scrubbing, her hair still damp and shiny, twisted into a neat wreath. She wore a colorful blouse embroidered with vines and blossoms, and a full flowing skirt over green hose and sandals with golden buckles. “Have you saved me anything to eat?” she asked, laughing, quite recovered from her earlier dismay. She hastily kissed her father, and swatted one of her younger brothers in passing, in payment for his previous remarks. Crowding in beside Nyctasia, she helped herself plentifully to goose, then proceeded to dominate Nyctasia’s attention throughout the rest of the meal, clearly enamored with her elegant foreign cousin.

Seeing them together, no one who knew either woman could have long mistaken one of them for the other. ’Deisha, radiant with warmth and good spirits, made Nyctasia seem cold and distant by contrast, her words restrained, her very movements deliberate, as if she were somehow less alive than the impulsive, affectionate ’Deisha. Though life often amused Nyctasia, she had never known what it was to abandon herself fully to present pleasures, untouched by regret for the past or anxiety for the future. There was a faint air of weariness about her that made her seem older than her inexperienced cousin, though she was actually several months the younger. ’Deisha much admired her polish and breeding, while Nyctasia was drawn to ’Deisha’s frank and vital nature. Before dinner was over, they had discussed everything from fine needlework to recipes for curing mange.

At the end of the meal, servants cleared the board and brought out bowls of chopped apples, raisins and nutmeats. Nyctasia had a weakness for sweets, and she praised the large, succulent, yellow raisins especially. “I’ve never seen raisins this color. Are they made from your own grapes?”

“Ah, those are Raphe’s affair,” said Diastor. “A southern strain of golden grapes he’s been nursing for a new wine. We’ll be opening the first casks of it soon.”

“I have great hopes for it,” Raphe said earnestly. “It should be a rough wine, rather sweet. I left the skin on while it aged, to give it a dark gold color. Come and see the vines—it’s a fine evening, I’ll show you over the grounds as well.” He rose and offered his arm to Corson.

’Deisha caught at Nyctasia’s hand and jumped up. “Yes, and come see my new heifers! One’s white with black patches, and the other’s black with white ones.”

“We’ll name them Day and Night, then,” one of the children called out. “Day for you, ’Deisha, and Night for Nyc there.”

The suggestion met with general approval, and Corson was particularly satisfied with it. “I always



said you were a mooncalf, Nyc,” she declared, and her wit was much applauded.

To 'Deisha and Raphe's disgust, their younger brothers and several cousins invited themselves along for the walk through the fields. Jenisorn, one of the brothers, offered to serve as Nyctasia's escort. "You'll need protection from the twins," he told her, with a grin. "They've no doubt laid a wager already to see who'll seduce you first."

Nyctasia smiled. "I'd say it's Corson who's caught Raphe's eye."

"Oh, I meant the both of you, of course, but your friend looks well able to defend herself."

"So she is," said Nyctasia, "and so am I." But she did need to be rescued soon, not from the amorous designs of Raphe or 'Deisha, but from the endless questions of the younger ones. Strangers were a welcome change in the valley, and foreigners from the coast were especially rare. But Nyctasia—an exiled noblewoman from far-off Rhostshyl—was an unheard-of figure of glamour and romance to her young kinsfolk.

They'd heard of Rhostshyl all their lives, as the ancestral home of the Edonaris, a city of palaces and wide, paved thoroughfares, noble courts, jeweled swords and deadly duels. It had always seemed to them a place half-mythical, like a city of legend, but now a real Rhostshylid had come among them, and they meant to make the most of the marvel. Their curiosity was boundless. Had Nyctasia not been the image of 'Deisha, they might have been less forward with her, held in check by her lofty rank, but she looked too much like one of themselves to inspire them with much diffidence.

"Nyc, do they hunt with hawks in Rhostshyl?"

"Sometimes," said Nyctasia, who never had enough of hunting. "But I prefer hounds." She showed them the faint scar on her temple from a *graika*'s talons.

"Have you been on a sailing ship?"

"Once. I was seasick for days. I desperately wanted to die."

"Did you ever fight a duel?"

"When I was younger, and very foolish."

"Why were you banished from the city?"

"For asking impertinent questions!" snapped 'Deisha, rounding on them fiercely, and displaying a marked family likeness to Mesthelde. "Let Nyc be, and stop making a nuisance of yourselves. You've the manners of wild swine!"

"You're a fine one to talk of others' manners, 'Deisha. *We* didn't set the dogs on her!"

"My dogs are better trained than the lot of you." 'Deisha drove them off at last, with threats, and led the way through the barn to the calves' stall. The others fell behind, indifferent, as Nyctasia and 'Deisha engaged in a serious discussion of the merits of different kinds of feed grains. The Rhaicime was a disappointment, but they were better satisfied when they joined the cluster of questioners around Corson.

Warriors too were a novelty in the Valleylands, and everyone was eager for accounts of Corson's prowess in battle. Some, indeed, hoped that she'd teach them to fight with sword and shield, though they knew that their elders would never permit it. Corson, for her part, was more than willing to boast of her daring exploits. She'd drunk a good deal of wine at dinner—wine far stronger than she'd suspected from the mellow smoothness of it—and under its inspiration she held her listeners spellbound with bloodthirsty stories till Nyctasia and 'Deisha returned from the dairy.

"If you've finished boring the Lady Nyctasia with your barnyard lore," Raphe said, "we might get on to the vineyards before dark."

"You must excuse him," 'Deisha told Nyctasia, in tones of pity and tolerance. "He's incapable of taking an interest in anything but grapes. It's exceedingly dull, I know, but he can't help it. The poor fellow has no use for living creatures, though grapes can do nothing but grow, and have no use except at table."

"My dear sister, you have admirably expressed my exact sentiments about livestock. What is more, the very air we breathe contradicts you." He gestured toward the vine-covered slopes they were approaching. "Compare that aroma"—the fragrance of the grapes was intoxicating—"to the stench of the stable and the barn, the sheepfold and the fowl-yard."

"You see ...?" Jenisorn whispered in Nyctasia's ear. "The both of them showing off for your benefit."

“Charming,” murmured Nyctasia discreetly.

“The grapes,” Raphe concluded, “are pure and unsullied, fit for human hands to hold, not stinking of their own filth and crawling with lice!”

’Deisha objected vehemently to this description of the animals she raised, which, she protested, were clean and well-groomed creatures, every one of them. But she was outnumbered. Wine-making was the chosen profession and the passion of most of her kinsfolk. Even those who longed to see something of the world outside the valley could not really imagine a life without the seasonal rhythm of budbreak, berryset, ripening, harvest and frost.

“Anyone could see that this land’s meant for grapes, not grazing,” said Nicorin. “You know it well, ’Deisha.” They had climbed a hillside which gave a striking view of the surrounding vales and three of the valley’s many small lakes.

“I never denied it,” ’Deisha countered. “Oh, it’s country for grapes, right enough. The best there is.” The pride in her voice was unmistakable. Though she spent most of her time tending the animals of the estate, ’Deisha too had winemaking in her blood.

“Why is that?” asked Nyctasia. “I thought it was sunshine and rainfall that made the difference.”

“They do, but grapes need slopes like these as well,” ’Deisha explained, “to let the damp and cold flow away. And breezes on the heights keep the fruit dry.” Nyctasia was already making notes in her commonplace-book, while Corson made a polite effort to look interested. Most of the others drifted away again.

“And warm air blows off the lakes, you see,” Raphe added. “Protection from frost. Everything needed is here—the soil is rich, and these hills are riddled with caves that are perfect for aging and storing the wine. We’ve rarely had to dig cellars for it ... Ah, here’s what I wanted to show you.” He cut a small bunch of ripe grapes from the vine for Corson and Nyctasia. The plants on either side were heavy with purple-black fruit, but these were the color of sunstruck amber with a frosty bloom, glowing among the dark clusters that grew from the same vines.

“I brought these from the south, from Esthairon,” Raphe said proudly. “They’re too delicate to grow by themselves in colder climes, but I’ve grafted them to a hardier rootstock, and now they’re thriving here. I think they’re really doing better here than in their native soil. I suspect that an old strain may sometimes be improved when it’s joined to a flourishing new stock.”

Nyctasia knew that Raphe meant these words for her. She smiled at him and sampled a few of the golden grapes he’d given her. They were warm from the sun, and piercingly sweet.

“I’ve been playing about with different changeling stocks for years,” he remarked, “but there was never space enough to plant a whole crop of them until we acquired the Cymvelan lands.”

And it was only then that Nyctasia remembered the reason she’d meant to give for her visit to the valley.

## 12

WHEN THE OTHERS turned back to the house, Corson lingered in the darkening garden, to let the cool night air clear her head. She was still lightheaded from the wine—which was not unpleasant, but it made her feel restless and somehow unsatisfied. “I *won’t* think about Steifann,” she swore, tossing her head like a skittish filly and nearly falling over a low stone bench.

Impatiently gathering up her skirt, she sat down on the bench and closed her eyes, savoring the sweet smell of the ripening grapes. She was not much surprised when Raphistain came back to join her.

“How does my fair guest?” he asked, bowing.

“Well, good sir,” Corson replied, amused at his courtly speech, and at her own mimicry. As he bent over her, she was struck again by his resemblance to Nyctasia. He was taller, of course, and darker, his skin weathered from years spent working out of doors. His rugged, broad-shouldered frame was nothing like Nyctasia’s slight figure either, and Corson noted with approval that his limbs looked strong and well muscled. It was his features that revealed the Edonaris blood, and the Edonaris were a handsome lot. She suddenly found it easier not to think of Steifann.

Raphistain sat down beside her. "Does what you see please you, my harvest queen?"

Corson pretended to admire the view of the fertile hills and fields. "It seems a lush and inviting land, though I speak as a stranger," she said innocently, though there was no mistaking her meaning.

"You must become more familiar with it. I would have you feel at home here, and learn all there is to know."

"It has always been my delight to find new countries to explore. But no land holds me for very long."

"I too, though I have spent all my life in the valley, am a keen explorer. Let me tell you my theories about how it should be done."

"You are Nyc's kinsman, and no mistake," Corson said drily.

"You flatter me. I am but a tiller of the soil, and she is, in her own place, a ruler of the highest rank."

"Blood will tell, they say. You've many of the same ways about you." It seemed to her that he preened himself a bit at this last remark. What strutting peacocks these provincial gentry are, she thought. They're worse than the true nobility any day.

"Mind what I say, Corson," said Raphistain. "We were speaking of exploration. Now, my question is, if one were to travel this whole world of ours, what would be the best way to go about it?"

"I think you have an answer to your own question."

"But I want your advice. You have so much more experience than I. First, I think, it would be well to start in the northernmost climes—what are said to be the coldest places." He stroked her hair softly.

"It sounds as good a plan as any other."

"Just so. Then, one would be wise to travel southward, but slowly. It would be a shame to miss any of the sights, and subtler delights do not reveal themselves to the hasty voyager."

"That I agree with, to be sure."

He smiled. "It heartens me that my ideas find favor with you."

"I think you know what you're about."

Raphistain took her hand. "Perhaps that is because the lands I now want to explore seem fairer to me than any I've ever imagined."

"We're still in the north," Corson reminded him.

"So we are. Now, it has also been my experience that as we go southward, the climes begin to grow warmer."

"Then the southernmost point is the hottest?"

"No. In fact, I believe that the central regions are the most torrid."

"So I have found," said Corson, who was beginning to grow bored with the game.

"But I mustn't let you think that I would neglect what lies to the east and the west. If one is to be a daring adventurer, all the extremities must be explored. Therefore, though the general direction is southward, there should be many pleasant excursions to see what is to be found on either side."

"It sounds like a lovely journey," said Corson, yawning. She stood up suddenly, and pulled Raphe to his feet. "Yes, there's no doubt that you're a true Edonaris, my friend. Nothing but talk, everlasting talk!"

Raphe was so startled at Corson's challenge that he dropped his pose of detached amusement and looked her directly in the face. "Corson, you're the most desirable creature I've ever met," he said with ardent sincerity, and clasped his arms around her waist, drawing her close. Corson kissed him, and he responded with passion, pressing her to him as if afraid she might escape, caressing her silk-clad body with hungry hands.

"He tastes of the grapes," Corson thought, biting at his lip gently. She whispered, half singing:

*"He who would be my mate*

*Must be of the roving kind,*

*And follow, to find his fate,*

*Where the wandering roadways wind."*

They both laughed. Then, with their arms about each other's waists, they walked back to the house in silence.

Nyctasia was dismayed to discover that there was no bar for the door to her room. Watchdogs

guarded the yard, and of course the main gates and portals were barred at night, but there was no reason to sleep behind locked doors. No doubt a maid would come in at dawn to rekindle the fire, before Nyctasia was awake. In a great stone house like this, mornings would be chill all the year around.

Nyctasia understood this well enough, but she was accustomed not only to a locked room, but to having armed guards on duty while she slept, to keep watch for her enemies. Though there was no danger here, she could not help feeling uneasy and vulnerable in this undefended chamber.

But for her, as a guest, to request a bar for her door would be to imply mistrust of her hosts, and etiquette forbade that she commit such a breach of courtesy. The *vahn* knows I do trust them, Nyctasia thought, as she tossed restlessly about in the canopied feather-bed. This is absurd. I've nothing to fear here. But she could not bring herself to draw the curtains around the bed and hide the unguarded door from view. She slid her dagger under the pillows, feeling like a fool, but still she did not sleep.

Would she ever feel secure enough, she wondered, to go about unarmed, as the Edonaris of Vale did? They carried knives, yes, but useful knives sharpened on one edge only—tools for cutting, not weapons for stabbing. A dagger, with its double edge, was highly impractical for anything but murder.

Finally, Nyctasia rose and wrapped herself in the white pearl-silk robe—'Deisha's, no doubt—that she'd found neatly folded on the bed. She would spend the night in Corson's room, she decided. With Corson at hand she'd feel safe sleeping in an open field. Corson took up most of any bed, she pulled away the bedclothes, and she snored like a wild boar, but she was an exceptionally reliable bodyguard.

But outside Corson's door she hesitated. Had she heard voices within? If Corson was not alone, she'd hardly welcome another visitor. Nyctasia peered through a crack in the door and smiled at the genial firelit scene that greeted her.

Corson, still in the golden gown, was sitting on the edge of a bed piled high with feather mattresses and colorful quilts. Raphistain knelt at her feet, unlacing her sandal, and both were laughing quietly.

"I thought you said the north was the ideal starting place," said Corson, lazily stretching out one bare foot to touch his hair.

"Under a strange sky, one cannot steer by the stars, madame. North depends on how you lie. Is not this as good a point of departure as any other?" He kissed the arch of her foot, then her ankle, and lightly caressed the back of her calf.

Corson lay back on the bed and said a little huskily, "Mind you don't lose your way, friend—"

"No fear," whispered Raphe, sliding the silk dress up above her knees.

Nyctasia stole away noiselessly and returned to her own room. Good breeding prevented her from spying any longer at Corson's door.

Back in her bed, she resolutely refused to lie staring at the unbolted door. She had nearly succeeded in falling asleep at last when a faint sound from the threshold suddenly woke her again. Heart racing, she groped under the pillows for her dagger. It was not merely her fancy this time—the door *was* being pushed softly open.

## 13

"NYC," WHISPERED 'DEISHA, "are you asleep? May I come in?"

Nyctasia began to breathe again. "By all means," she said shakily, "as long as you haven't brought your dogs."

'Deisha chuckled and crossed the room quickly on bare feet, to perch on Nyctasia's bed. "I couldn't sleep for thinking about you. I never had you to myself all day. You must keep that robe—it suits you far better than me. Aunt Mesthelde says it's a waste to put fine clothes on me, and she's quite right." 'Deisha wore only a threadbare night-dress of what had once been delicate layers of lace. Her long hair was loose and wild, and she looked altogether enchanting. Brushing the shimmering silk at Nyctasia's wrist, she went on dreamily, "But you're like the Lady of the Moon in it .... Your skin's so fair and smooth I can hardly tell where the silk leaves off." She stroked Nyctasia's arm lightly.

What a brazen flirt, thought Nyctasia, amused. Jenisorn had certainly been right. "I was thinking of you too," she lied gallantly. "I've dreamed of having a twin all my life. There are always twins in the

Edonaris line. My younger sister and brother are a pair.” There was no need to mention Thierran and Mescrisdan.

“Like Raphe and me. I used to wish Raphe was a girl—four brothers, after all! But now I have you for a sister I’m quite satisfied,” ’Deisha said with a most winsome and alluring smile.

Nyctasia refrained from asking, “And is it the custom in these parts to seduce one’s sisters?” and remarked instead, “It’s as well Raphe was a boy, perhaps. There might have been dreadful confusion over succession to the Jhaicery.”

“I never thought of that. Nyc, the others say that you’re a *Rhaicime*—is it true?”

“Alas, yes. If I weren’t of Rhaicime rank, I wouldn’t have so many enemies in Rhostshyl.”

“Well, I’m glad of it, if it’s brought you here. Now I’ve found you I shan’t let you go back to Rhostshyl unless you take me with you. You know, you’ll simply have to marry Raphe. Father would give anything to have another title in the family.”

“Doesn’t Raphe have a say in the matter? He might prefer to marry Corson.”

“He’s much taken with Corson, who wouldn’t be? But it’s you he’ll pay court to, you’ll see. He doesn’t really mind that I’m to be Jhaice, and not he, but all the same I know he’d be pleased for a child of his to inherit the rank of Rhaicime. And you could do worse than Raphe,” she added loyally.

“Do you promise he’ll not murder me in childbed to let his firstborn succeed at once to the title?”

’Deisha grinned evilly at her. “What’s your full formal title?” she demanded.

“Oh, no, not formally ...? That would be—let me think—Hlaven Nyctasia’v Teselesq Rhaicime AesTirre wys Gwethrad-Moir brenn Rhostshyl ar’n Edonaris, I believe.” She paused for breath. “I rarely need to use it all. For the usual business of the Rhaicimate the standard form of address is sufficient.”

“You’ll have to teach me these things, Nyc, I thought I was to be Lady Frondescine Clairin Jhaice brenn Vale ar’n Edonaris. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, but Formal Address is different. For one thing, the Old Eswraine word is used—‘Hlaven,’ not ‘Lady.’ And since the title doesn’t descend from your mother—her name is Leclairin?”

’Deisha nodded, fascinated.

“Then you’ll be Hlaven Frondescine Leclairina’v Mesthelde Jhaice brenn Vale ar’n Edonaris, do you see? Of course I’d have to study your family records to be certain. There may be further distinctions.”

“*Vahn*, I hope not. It’s difficult enough as it is.”

“Your aunt could style herself Lady Mesthelde now, if she liked, since she’s the heir apparent.”

“I know, but you mustn’t call her that, it only annoys her. She says it’s all foolishness and won’t get the eggs to market.”

Nyctasia smiled. “I’ve not heard that old saying for years. She’s a wise woman.”

“Oh, the household would run to ruin without her. My mother and Uncle Aldrichas only want to travel and trade at the market fairs, and Father’s had to take on most of the duties of the vintnery since Great Aunt Heladis died. Raphe and Nesanye help, of course, and I—”

“Look after the livestock,” Nyctasia supplied, wondering where she herself could fit into this design. She knew a good deal about farming, and the other responsibilities of an estate, but she had never thought to devote her life to such duties. Was there work for her here? And would she really be satisfied to abandon her scholarly pursuits and live as lady of a manor? She quite loved her new kin already, but could she ever be one of them?

“Well, no matter what Aunt Mesthelde says. I mean to learn a lady’s ways from you, Nyc. I’ll not have you shamed by my ignorance. We must seem like a clan of savages to you.”

Nyctasia put aside her doubts as best she could, the better to enjoy ’Deisha’s sly game. “I think you’re a rogue and a flatterer, my girl,” she retorted. “That’s what I think, if you much want to know.”

“Oh, but I—” wailed ’Deisha.

“Nor shall I try to make a lady of you,” Nyctasia continued firmly. “I’d be better pleased if you could make a vintner of me. As for you. I think you’re quite perfect just as you are.”

Even ’Deisha was speechless at this—but not for long. She plucked at the tatters of lace at her throat, blushing. “Nyc ... is Corson ... are you and she ...? I mean, we could give you a large room together, if you’d rather.”

"I thank you, but I'm very comfortable here indeed. And I'm sure that Corson has no complaints about her quarters. The hospitality of the house could not be faulted."

This was not what 'Deisha meant, and well Nyctasia knew it. 'Deisha looked down, at a loss, daunted by Nyctasia's mockery. "My grandmother made this quilt," she said at random.

"Lady Nocharis?" asked Nyctasia, interested.

'Deisha nodded, still not meeting her eyes. "For my mother. Look." She turned back a corner of the bedclothes to reveal the embroidered eye on the underside of the quilt, an old custom meant to protect the sleeper from evil spirits. "Nyc!" she gasped, "what do you want with this? Are you mad?" She had uncovered the dagger, which Nyctasia had hastily pushed out of sight at her entrance.

It was Nyctasia's turn to feel awkward and embarrassed. "It's foolish of me, I know, but I've not slept in an unlocked room for so long that I was fearful. When you came in, for a moment I took you for one of my enemies."

'Deisha leaped up from the bed, laughing. "Rogue I may be," she cried, "but no assassin! See for yourself, I haven't a weapon hidden anywhere about me—not so much as a pin." She pulled off the night-dress and tossed it away, holding out her bare arms to Nyctasia coaxingly. "There, you see, I'm not dangerous."

Nyctasia gave in. 'Deisha's brash charm was indeed irresistible. "I admit that you're unarmed," she said, "but I can't allow that you're not dangerous." She seized 'Deisha's strong, brown hands and pulled her back onto the bed.

'Deisha tumbled across Nyctasia's lap and lay looking up into her face, suddenly serious. They gazed long and silently, lost in wonder at each other's being. Their features were so similar that it was like looking into some mystical mirror that showed, not what one was, but what one might have been.

What grace of bearing she has, thought 'Deisha wistfully. So elegant and refined, exquisite ... am I too old to learn some polish, so I won't bore her?

How frank and free she is, Nyctasia mused, as I've never dared to be. Not afraid to be trusting and unwary ... Is it too late, I wonder?

'Deisha drew Nyctasia's face down to her own and lightly kissed her mouth and eyes. "I'm so very certain that you belong to me," she whispered, "I can't feel that I'm wronging Corson. Would she mind?"

Nyctasia laughed softly, leaning over 'Deisha and tracing her lips with one finger. "I'm very fond of Corson, but she's a wanderer. She'll be on her way soon, and I daresay I'll never see her again. And unless I much mistake, she has your handsome twin in her bed right now. I passed her door not long ago, and heard them laughing. That's another reason to lock one's room at night, you see—not only for protection but for privacy."

"You'll not want for protection here, Nyc. My dogs guard the grounds all night, and I'll watch over you while you sleep." As she spoke, 'Deisha loosened the sash of Nyctasia's robe and slid it from her shoulders, letting her hands glide down Nyctasia's arms and over her white thighs. Pulling Nyctasia down beside her, she pressed against her and drew the bedclothes over them both, "And you know nothing can harm you under Mother 'Charis's quilt."

'Deisha did want to protect her delicate, gently bred cousin. Nyctasia had spoken little of her past, but 'Deisha knew that she'd been wounded by sorrows, and she longed to heal those wounds, to shield Nyctasia from all further suffering. She held her as tenderly as if she were some fragile spray of blossoms, liable to bruise. Her own work-hardened hands seemed to her unfit to touch Nyctasia's milky skin. Lying naked side by side, they were more than ever like mirror images of one another—identical, yet opposite. 'Deisha kissed Nyctasia's soft palms, and her smooth throat. "My polished, pale reflection," she murmured.

Nyctasia smiled to herself, in the darkness.

*"See in this enchanted mirror  
Images reversed, but clearer.  
Seek your nature and your kind,  
But beware of what you find,"*

she recited, nuzzling 'Deisha's ear. She too felt protective toward her bewitching twin, who seemed sheltered and ingenuous to her. 'Deisha was trusting because she had never known betrayal, bold because she had never known despair. Nor would she ever know them, if Nyctasia could do anything to prevent it.

Their kisses were soft and lingering at first, their caresses slow and dreamlike. They drifted in a haze of sweet, trembling contentment, then grew more ardent and playful, each knowing from her own pleasure what would please the other. 'Deisha pillowed Nyctasia's head between her breasts and wrapped her arms and legs around her tightly. "Now do you feel safe, sweet cousin?" she teased.

Nyctasia was seized with a sudden fit of giggles. "How could I not feel safe," she gasped, "in the very bosom of my family?"

'Deisha yelped in outrage and began to pummel Nyctasia with a pillow. Nyctasia tickled her under the ribs, where she herself was most ticklish, and they rolled about the bed wrestling and swearing till they both lay spent and shaken with laughter. But then Nyctasia crushed 'Deisha to her in a fierce, hungry embrace, half-sobbing, "Yes, protect me, 'Deisha—protect me from myself! Don't let me go back, don't let me go on as I am!"

'Deisha cradled Nyctasia in her arms, astonished at her distress. She did not understand a word of her desperate plea, but she promised, nevertheless, not to let her go.

## 14

"WHERE ARE you going?" Corson complained, as Raphe climbed out of her bed at dawn, waking her up. "Now the bed's cold."

He was already pulling on his clothes, but he paused to bend over Corson and lift a long lock of her hair to his lips. "Good morrow, fair guest."

"Morrow yourself. It's still night."

"Nothing of the sort. It's nearly light, see for yourself." He crossed to the window and pulled back the draperies and shutters to reveal the transparent darkness of early dawn.

Corson groaned and pulled the bedclothes up around her ears. "Nearly light! Do you take me for a dairymaid? Close that window or I'll throw you out of it. I'm half frozen as it is."

"Poor lamb. Never mind, there'll be hot weather today, by the look of it, and a good thing too. The grapes need it." He took a last, satisfied look at the clearing sky, then came back to sit on the bed and put his boots on.

Corson toyed with the hair at the back of his neck, then let her fingers trail slowly down his bare spine. "If you were a good host, you'd stay here and help me get warm," she chided him. "Surely your first duty is to the comfort of your guests."

"The duties of hospitality are sacred," Raphe agreed, leaning back to kiss her arm. "In fact, I can think of no duty I would so willingly fulfill, if work did not call me away. I want to have half the pruning done before the sun's high. By midday it will be too hot, I hope and trust. All that heavy rain's had me worried, I can tell you. Too much water can make the fruit split and spoil, but if today's fair all will be well." As he finished dressing, he told Corson a great deal more about the perils of rot and mold to the ripening grapes, but she fell asleep again before she learned much.

Nyctasia had been lying awake for some time, trying to remember what it was that she'd dreamt that night. The words of a song echoed in her memory, just out of reach ... had there been something about a tower ... ?

'Deisha rose, stretching, and slipped into her night-dress again, then sat on the edge of the bed, braiding her hair quickly and carelessly. When she bound the end of the thick plait and tossed it over her shoulder, Nyctasia snatched it and tugged gently, pulling 'Deisha back down and into her arms.

"I didn't mean to wake you, sweet cousin," said 'Deisha, snuggling against her.

Nyctasia kissed her invitingly. "I've been waiting for you to wake, my dear."

“Alas that I must go and see to the cows now.”

“That is a pity. But we can wait, and cows can’t. I’ll go with you.”

“Oh, no, stay here and rest, Nyc. I’d no right to keep you awake half the night, and you tired from your journey.”

But Nyctasia pushed back the covers and reached for her robe. “I couldn’t sleep more. There’s so much I want to see. The kennels, for one, and the stables. And all the land—field and forest. I hope there’s good hunting.” She threw wide the window and drew a deep breath of the cool, grape-scented morning air.

Before her stretched a splendid view of the surrounding hills, their crests still wreathed in mist. The distant foothills of the Spine Mountains had begun to show the golden and scarlet hues of autumn, while the nearby slopes were carpeted with vines. Small children were running up and down between the grape-rows, clattering wooden noisemakers and shouting, to keep the birds away. “Do you know what I’ve seen from my windows all my life?” Nyctasia asked quietly. “Walls. The walls of the palace, and beyond them the walls of the courtyard, and beyond those the city walls. But the mountains are your fortifications here. The valley is protected, but you are not the prisoners of your own barricades and bulwarks.”

To ’Deisha, who hoped to see its towering ramparts one day, the walled city sounded mysterious and exciting, but she said only, “You’ve come at a good time to see the hills at their best. Soon the colors will be glorious.” She joined Nyctasia at the window and took her hand. “And you’ve brought us luck too—the weather’s turned at last. We were afraid the rain would ruin the harvest, but yesterday you and Corson appeared and brought the sun with you. Today will be clear and bright, the damp’s burning off already. There’s a fine crop of mist.”

She pointed to a newly tilled field in the distance, where the tall plumes of fog rising from the fresh-turned furrows did look rather like rows of ghostly grain. A crop of mist ... thought Nyctasia, frowning. It was a local turn of phrase that pleased her, but it reminded her again of the dream and the song she had tried in vain to recall, The mists of morning ... ? Was that a part of it? But it wasn’t quite right. And surely there was a bell—

“Deisha,” she said abruptly, “where’s the land that belonged to the Cymvelan Circle? Can we see it from here?”

“We could if not for the mist. The temple was on top of Honeycomb Hill, over there. Most of the roof has fallen, and some of the walls, but when it’s clear you can see the remains. And the bell tower’s still standing. Nyc, what is it?”

Nyctasia had suddenly left her side and hastened to seize her harp, which hung front a scone on the wall near the bed. “Wait—it’s come to me,” she said excitedly, snatching up her pouch and spilling out its contents. ’Deisha looked on in amazement as Nyctasia scattered a fortune in jewels and gold across the lid of a chest and picked out the silver tuning-key. She tightened a few strings then slipped the key around her neck on its silver chain, leaving the other things where they lay. To a ripple of high, icy notes, she sang:

*“White mists veil the fields at dawn  
In the pale, pearl, early hour.  
Shall I seek for peace or power?  
Shall I stay or journey on?”*

*Sunlight warms the fields at noon.  
Will the bell, high in the tower,  
Peal for peace or peal for power?  
Has the midday come so soon?”*

*Dews fall on the fields at eve,  
Whispering without surcease,*



*'Peace or power? Power or peace?  
Will you linger? Will you leave?'*

"Or was it, 'travel on'?" Nyctasia said doubtfully. She sounded disappointed.

"Nyc, what is that song? What in the *vahn*'s name does it mean?"

"Not a great deal, I'm afraid," sighed Nyctasia, "but I'd best make note of it anyway. One can never be certain of these things." She swept her valuables back into her pouch and tossed it into the chest. From her satchel she fetched a flask of ink and a quill, and began to record the song in her commonplace-book. She seemed to have forgotten 'Deisha's presence completely.

'Deisha leaned over her shoulder. "How beautifully you write!" she exclaimed, admiring the evenness of Nyctasia's quill-strokes. "Like a trained scribe. I can write, after a fashion, but I always finish with more ink on myself than on the page."

"I've had considerable practice," said Nyctasia absently. "I daresay you haven't."

What had Nyctasia had to write that she wouldn't trust to scribes, 'Deisha wondered. She felt again like a callow farm girl. "Nyc, will you teach me to play the harp?"

Without looking up, Nyctasia replied, "If you like. It's not difficult."

"Well, I'd best go look to my cows ...." There was no response. "Will I see you at breakfast?"

"Oh, yes, certainly," said Nyctasia, still intent on her task. When she finished, she read over her work carefully, weighing each word, then shook her head doubtfully and put away her book and writing utensils. She returned to the window and looked out over the landscape again, but the sun was just breaking over the horizon, and the hilltops were still hidden in mist. Suddenly feeling weary to the bone, Nyctasia went back to bed and slept soundly till a maid came to summon her to breakfast.

Raphe was gone by the time a maid came in, bringing Corson a basin of warm water to wash with. Corson ignored her and sank into sleep once more, to be awakened for the third time by Nyctasia splashing the now cooled water on her face.

"Idiot! If I'd had a weapon at hand I'd have cut you in two before I half woke."

"I know. I made sure there was none handy. Get out of bed, you indolent lout."

"Why should I? I don't have to answer to anyone here." She stretched slowly and settled back with her hands behind her head. Her long, thick hair lay in sleep-tousled waves about her.

Nyctasia threw her clothes at her. "It's discourteous not to come down to breakfast on the first morning of a visit, unless you know your hosts well."

"I know *one* of them well," said Corson, grinning. "Intimately, you might say." But the thought of breakfast moved her to rise and dress.

"And I thought you were pining for that faithless fellow in Chiastelm."

"He's not thinking of *me*," Corson said angrily, jerking on her sword-belt. "Why should I worry about him. Raphe wants me to stay for the Harvest Festival. Maybe I will, maybe I won't. I'll go back to Chiastelm when I please, and not before."

Corson's bluffing was so obvious that Nyctasia turned away to the window to hide her amusement. Pulling open the shutters, she leaned out to admire the bright, serene morning again. In the yard below, two children were twirling a skipping-rope while a third jumped over it tirelessly. Gradually, Nyctasia made out the words of the rhyme they were chanting together.

*"On the hill top stands a tower,  
Strike the bell and sound the hour:  
One, two, three, four ..."*

So much for my premonitions, Nyctasia thought, smiling to herself. I must have heard them in my sleep.

The sunlight was already bright and powerful, and the mist had lifted from the highlands. On the crest of a nearby hill, the remains of stone walls were now visible, and a tall stone tower stood stark against the

pale morning sky.

Corson finished braiding her hair and pinned it up with the ivory clasp. “Besides,” she continued, “as long as we’re here, I’d not mind just having a look for that treasure.”

## 15

“I TRUST YOU didn’t pay too dearly for this,” said Diastor with a smile, handing the page of riddles back to Nyctasia. “I fear you were tricked. Treasure-hunters have combed the place for years, and nothing’s ever been found. Outlanders will still buy treasure maps, though. It’s an old game.”

“No, it wasn’t costly,” Nyctasia said. “Newt hadn’t much choice but to sell it to us.”

“You think he knew it was worthless, then?” Corson broke in. “By the Hlann, I’ll wring his scrawny neck if I see him again! But what of the innkeeper at Ylna? He recognized the thing.”

Diastor shrugged. “He was probably party to the scheme. If there’s a fortune to be had, it’s in convincing others that there’s a fortune to be had, believe me. I’d wager there never was a treasure. The Cymvelans weren’t rich—they lived on the land, never even ate meat, from what I’ve heard.”

“I’ve always heard they were bloodthirsty wizards who sacrificed to demons,” Corson remarked, helping herself to sausage.

“It’s easy enough to say such things,” said Nyctasia, who’d been called much the same in her day.

“They were a peaceful, scholarly lot,” one of the older men said firmly. “My uncle was sent to them for lessons when he was a boy. They were known as great teachers who’d never turn away a pupil, peasant or noble. The attack on the Circle was a disgrace.”

“What made folk turn on them, then?”

“Well ... some do say that the talk against them was started by lords of the great Saetarrin estates, during the drought. The crops had failed and folk were desperate for food. They knew the Saetarrin had reserves of grain, and in time they’d have torn down the storehouses—and maybe put torch to the manor-houses as well. The nobles feared for their lives.”

“If the grain had been given out, as it should have been, they’d not have gone in fear of their own people,” said Mesthelde. “You can’t hoard corn while folk are starving.”

“They preferred to sacrifice the Circle—so it’s said. I daresay it was easy to persuade people that the Cymvelans caused the drought—they were foreigners and their ways were strange. It was even rumored that some of their gardens were still green while all others were withered. With the blame laid to them, the Saetarrin were left in peace.”

“And it was the Lord Saetarrin who’d sold them the land, when they first came to Vale,” Jenisorn put in. “And after the massacre his heirs reclaimed it. They said there was no proper record of the sale, and who was there to contradict them? If there was ever a treasure the Saetarrin made off with it before they sold us the place!”

“Idle talk,” said Diastor, with a warning look at Jenisorn. “Lady Saetarrin gave us the land at a good price because it’s thought to be unlucky now, and it’s hard to find folk enough to work it.”

“The land was unlucky long before the Cymvelans came,” said the elderly Heronice. “It’s always been an ill place. But Avareth ar’n Saetarrin was glad to be quit of it because she knows how her grandsire recovered it. We all know that.” Diastor frowned, but did not contradict her.

“Well, it’s been lucky enough for me,” said Raphe complacently. “The ghosts haven’t troubled my grafted vines. But I’ll pour them an offering of the first lot of new wine, to appease them.”

“Stop that sort of talk,” said Mesthelde sharply. “It’s no joke. People have disappeared in those ruins, even in my day. Wise folk still shun them.” She made a sign to ward off evil, which was repeated by several of the others.

The youngsters, who had all explored the ruins, against their elders’ orders, grinned and winked at each other.

“All the same, I mean to have a look at the place,” said Corson, “with your permission, of course.”

“By all means,” said Raphe, “I’ll take you there. But I warn you, there *is* danger. Since the fire, much of the timbering’s given way. There’s not much roof left to fall, but the flooring’s not solid underfoot, in

places. You could fall through if you're not careful where you step. With all respect to my Lady Aunt, that is probably what became of those who've disappeared there."

"Then why weren't they found? And what of the screams folk have heard there, and nobody to be seen? It's those who perished in the fire, mark my words. Oh, I know it's no use talking to you young fools—you'll please yourselves anyway."

"I'd like to see the temple myself—and the tower," Nyctasia admitted. "I'm curious. I confess."

Diastor nodded assent, "I shouldn't put too much stock in that paper of yours, though," he cautioned. "You'll be disappointed."

"I never did believe in it. Not in the story of treasure, that is. It was the name Edonaris that concerned me. I didn't know you owned the land, you see. Even so, it might be interesting to see. We'll be very careful."

Mesthelde only sniffed in disapproval, her expression clearly declaring that they would have only themselves to blame when disaster befell. "And what hole has swallowed up your sister this morning?" she asked Raphe. "It's no more like her to be late for breakfast than to be on time for dinner. She's always up before us all to tend to her flocks."

"Perhaps she didn't sleep well last night," said Jenisorn, looking mischievously at Nyctasia from beneath half-lowered lashes.

"She said she'd be in to breakfast," Nyctasia volunteered, and then reddened, realizing that she'd just confirmed the surmises of most of those present. Jenisorn looked away pointedly, and bit into a piece of bread and honey, smacking his lips. Nyctasia reminded herself to strangle him at the earliest opportunity.

She was relieved when one of the children spoke up. "I saw her come in from the yard when I brought in the eggs."

"She must still be washing, then," said Mesthelde. "Remarkable! It appears that you have a civilizing influence on her, my dear Nyctasia."

"At last we agree on something, Aunt!" said 'Deisha, hurrying into the room and seizing a honey-roll in each hand. "*Vahn*, I'm hungry! Arrow's shoulder is much better, where the boar gored him."

The family greeted her appearance with stunned silence, too occupied with staring even to reply. The reason for her tardy arrival at breakfast was now apparent. She had cut off her hair, cropped it as short as Nyctasia's. Her wide brow, high cheekbones and slender neck now showed to full advantage, and she and Nyctasia were more alike than ever.

"I must say, it suits you," Raphe said at last. "But of course you knew it would. You'd only to look at Nyc."

"And it will be far less trouble this way," 'Deisha said, through a mouthful of ham. "I can't think why I didn't do it long ago."

Clearly a gesture on Nyctasia's part was called for, and she was not one to neglect a duty. She took off one of her silver earrings—Erystalben's gift—and gave it to 'Deisha, whose obvious delight reconciled her to its loss.

The proposed visit to the Cymvelan temple also met with 'Deisha's approval. "We might go today," she suggested, "if you're not needed here, Raphe. It must be soon, you know, before the crush."

He nodded. "In fact, I have to go up that way, as it happens. The golden grapes seem to be ripening a little earlier this year."

"The crush?" queried Nyctasia. "That sounds ominous."

"When the bulk of the grapes are brought in to be pressed," 'Deisha explained. "The different strains ripen at different times, but when the first are ready the rest don't wait long."

"It's a backbreaking job to keep up with them," said Nesanye glumly. "Once they reach the perfect flavor they have to be gathered then and there. They're tested every hour, day and night, for ripeness. Even a few hours' delay can affect the taste of the wine."

"And then you have to press 'em right away, too!" a small child chimed in from the foot of the table, proud of knowing something that a big person like Nyctasia didn't. "Else they lose their flavor!"

"That's right, 'Lorin," said Nesanye, and turning to Nyctasia, added, "The crush should begin at any

time now, and once it does there'll be no rest for anyone."

Several of the others groaned in agreement, but the younger folk asserted that the crush was the best time of the year, more fun than a fair or festival.

"It's exciting," insisted 'Cacia, "everyone racing around, and all the confusion and noise—"

"And lights burning all night."

"... dinner outside, at all hours ..."

"It sounds like preparation for a siege," said Corson, without enthusiasm.

"So it is," laughed Diastor, "defense against the invasion of time and decay. We guard a golden moment of perfection, safely sealed in, deep in the cellars. Time may hammer at the casks, but cannot despoil the wine, only improve it. We not only wage war with time, we conquer, and make time serve us! Who can make that boast but a vintner?"

This speech was met with cheers by young and old alike. On certain things all the Edonaris of Vale could always agree.

## 16

HALFWAY UP HONEYCOMB HILL, Nyctasia demanded a rest and collapsed on a stone ledge, panting and exhausted. She prided herself on her stamina, but she had never tried to ascend such a steep slope on foot before.

'Deisha offered her a drink from the water skin at her waist, and Raphe brought her some of the golden grapes to refresh her. The entire hillside was terraced with his grafted vines.

Corson grinned down at her. "Shall I carry you the rest of the way, milady?"

"We can't all be muscle-bound monstrosities," Nyctasia said serenely.

"Oh, like 'Deisha here?"

"I've climbed these hills all my life!" 'Deisha flared. "Nyc's a scholar, she—"

But both Corson and Nyctasia were laughing now. "Don't mind Corson, love," Nyctasia chuckled. "She just likes to put me in my place. And furthermore, she's right, though I hate to encourage her effrontery by saying so." Nyctasia's tone became more serious. "I *ought* to be able to climb this hill as well as you can—it's a violation of the Balance—"

"Oh no," said Corson, "I've started her off. I should have known better."

"—between the Dwelling and the Indwelling," Nyctasia continued. "That I should be so weak shows that I haven't done my duty to this Dwelling." As she spoke, she made the Vahnite sign for the body, touching both hands quickly to her heart and crossing them on her breast. "Look at those people, some of them twice my age and more, and no whit wearied by this climb. It shames me!" She pointed to a group of vine-workers who'd walked straight from their encampment at the foot of the hill to the top rows of vines without pausing, only waving a greeting as they passed. The harvesters camped near the crops at this season, pruning and weeding and keeping off the birds, but mainly waiting to be at hand, ready for the crush.

One of the overseers approached to confer with Raphe, and they drew aside to talk undisturbed. 'Deisha, meanwhile, attempted to apologize to Corson for her sharpness, but Corson only laughed. "Nyc may be weak, but she needs no champion in an argument," she assured 'Deisha. "Her tongue's as able as anyone's."

Corson was in a fine humor that morning. She'd made an excellent breakfast in good company, the prospect of a treasure-hunt was still before her, and Raphe's continued attentions were a source of satisfaction to her as well. He was a rich man, after all, and if not titled himself, he was at least brother to a future Jhaice. She'd show Steifann that she was welcome under other roofs than his! When she returned to Chiastelm she'd let him know that she found favor with the gentry—even Rhaicimes pursued her ....

Raphe returned, and they began their climb again, only halting now and then as he pointed out to the workers where the trellis-cords needed tightening or where bushy new shoots near the ground should be

trimmed.

"Ansen says there have been more thefts," he reported to 'Deisha. "A hen is missing now, and some coils of rope." He sounded worried. "And of course they say it's the ghosts' doing."

"Is she sure it was someone from outside the camp?"

"Well, so she says, and we've always found her honest."

'Deisha sighed. "Very well, I'll send them a hen—and a good watchdog to guard the encampment. That should put a stop to this business."

"Thanks, that would be best, I think. We daren't take chances, so close to crush." He turned to Corson and Nyctasia, explaining.

"We must keep these people satisfied, you see. It's hard to find harvesters enough to work this hill—most folk won't venture so near to those cursed ruins. I'm glad you suggested this expedition, Corson. It may give them confidence to see us going there."

"But we needn't worry about ghosts and demons while Nyc is with us," Corson said wickedly. "She knows all about such things."

Nyctasia winced. Not only was she secretive, from force of habit, but it was not always wise to let it be known that one was familiar with spellcraft. There were many lands where all magicians were regarded with distrust. "I have made a study of thaumaturgy," she conceded stiffly, "but I've also made a study of philosophy, astronomy, history and botany, Corson makes a point of it because she has a superstitious dislike of magic."

"Ha!" Corson snorted, "she got us both thrown out of an inn in Hlasven because she threatened to raise a demon. Take care she doesn't change you both to—"

"Don't let folk hear you talk like that, even in jest," Raphe cautioned, looking about uneasily. "Not here."

"Well, she did," Corson said, in a lowered tone.

"Corson, I would gladly turn you into a wild ass, if some other wizard had not been beforehand at it."

"Ah, mind what you say, Nyc. You've convinced your kin here that you've a sweet temper. It won't do to let them see what an evil-tongued shrew you really are."

"The gentlest nature would lose patience with your insupportable insolence!"

"Enlighten me, I beg you," Raphe interrupted. "However did the pair of you travel all the way from the coast together without murdering one another?"

"Through the grace of the *vahn*," said Nyctasia.

"By luck," said Corson, at the same time.

They sat on the remaining stones of a fallen wall and ate the grapes they'd brought with them, enjoying the cool breezes on the heights. From the summit of the hill they could see most of the valley, the vine-covered slopes, the neat golden squares that were fields of grain, the pale, light green stretches of cornfields and the dark black-green masses of woodland. Through this varied landscape wound the Southern Trade Road, and glimpses of the lakes shone a clear blue between the hills, reflecting the sky.

Nyctasia leaned back to look up at the great bell-tower looming over them. Most of the doors and lower windows had been boarded over. "Is the bell ever rung?"

Raphe shook his head. "Never since the fire. I expect the rope's rotted through by now. The whole structure's none too steady—a high wind rocks it."

Nyctasia was surprised. "But the walls are so thick. Look." She pointed to one of the high windows. "It ought to be sturdy enough. We couldn't climb it, I suppose?"

"No," said the twins together, and 'Deisha continued, "Mother 'Charis says she climbed it as a child, and saw all the way from the mountains to the river. But it's said to be far too dangerous now."

Corson, who hated heights, quickly changed the subject. "How much of this land belonged to the Circle?"

Raphe pointed down the hillside and across the intervening fields. "Those were their living quarters and kitchens, down there, across the way. There's not much left to see of them, just some tumbledown halls and an old well. There were cornfields and wheatfields in between—they were torched—and greengardens. And this was the temple, of course. There's an open courtyard inside that must have been

beautiful once.”

“Where was the library?” Nyctasia asked. “Here, or near the living-quarters?”

“Library? I don’t know—do you, ’Deisha?”

“I’ve never heard tell of one.”

“There must have been a library of some sort, if they were scholars and teachers,” Nyctasia said, disappointed. The neglected and fragmentary library of the Edonaris household was yet another thing that made her feel out of place there. Her newfound family had little leisure or inclination for study.

“Wherever it was, it’s sure to have been burned.”

“Of course,” sighed Nyctasia.

“Those orchards were theirs as well,” Raphe continued, “I mean to have those trees looked after, next year, if I can find the time. I want to try to press some of the fruit for wine, or blend the juices with grape. The family think the idea’s an outrage, of course, but I can’t see why other fruits besides grapes shouldn’t make a good wine—apples, say, or pears.”

“Peaches,” said Nyctasia. “They grew peach trees here somewhere.”

“Yes, but how did you know that?”

“We spent a night in those ruins on the way here,” Corson explained, “and helped ourselves to some of your fruit for our breakfast.”

“Why, of course—that’s where we must have been,” said Nyctasia. “But I was thinking of this.” She took out the worn paper and read aloud:

*“Wholesome is my fruit and sweet,  
Fit for nourishment at need,  
But within the savory meat  
Ever hides the deadly seed.*

“What could that be but a peach? You can brew a mortal poison from the pith of a peach-stone.”

“You *would* know a thing like that,” said Corson.

’Deisha was studying the paper now, with Raphe looking over her shoulder. “Do you think this might really have to do with the Cymvelans, then?” she asked in surprise.

“There’s a riddle about the bell-tower too,” Corson pointed out.

Raphe remained doubtful. “What of this one? It’s senseless, listen—

*“Builder, brewer, confectioner, chanter, chandler,  
Ever-armed guardian of garden’s golden guerdon,  
Envy of alchemy, apothecary, artisan and architect.*

“Now what does that mean, I ask you?”

Corson glanced at the riddle. “The answer’s in plain sight, for anyone who can read,” she gloated, in a creditable imitation of Nyctasia. “It’s about bees.”

Nyctasia gave her a withering look, and explained the key to the riddle to Raphe and ’Deisha.

“‘Ever-armed’ I see,” mused Raphe, “but why ‘chandler’?”

“Beeswax candles,” suggested ’Deisha.

“And ‘apothecary’?”

“Honey’s used in the preparation of certain medicaments,” Nyctasia offered.

“‘Brewer’?”

“Mead,” said Corson promptly.

“And I suppose ‘envy of alchemy’ means that bees create gold from baser elements, if we allow honey to be gold? Rather farfetched, if you ask me.”

“It’s not particularly profound, I agree,” said Nyctasia. “In fact, it’s a poor effort altogether—I suspect that it’s more an exercise in composition than a true attempt at verse.”

“Because it doesn’t rhyme properly?” ’Deisha hazarded.

“No, actually it follows a highly complex pattern of consonance. You see, the vowels have alliterative value as well as—”

Corson recognized the absorbed, pensive tone of voice that always foretold one of Nyctasia’s learned discourses. Privately, she thought of these as ‘fits.’ “It’s one of her fits coming on,” she said gloomily. “Don’t pay her any mind or she’ll go nattering on like that for hours. What I want to know is, did they keep bees here or didn’t they?”

“I’ve no idea,” said ’Deisha, but Raphe nodded. “There are hives at the far edge of the orchard. I saw them once when I was looking over the fruit trees.”

“And were there, by any chance, wind-harps in any of the trees?”

Raphe stared at her, then looked back at the page. “Harp ...!” he breathed, “and the well’s here, too. ’Deisha, look at this—‘Within four walls and yet beneath the sky!’”

“Why of course!” cried ’Deisha.

“What is it?” asked Corson and Nyctasia together.

’Deisha was already on her feet. “The inner courtyard, this way!”

Raphe grabbed her. “Not so hasty—the floor’s liable to give way in there, you know. Mind where you walk.”

The two led the way through a gap in the wall, where there had once been a doorway. The room beyond might have served well enough as answer to the riddle, for the wooden roof had completely burned and fallen in. They picked their way cautiously over beams and around the building-stones that littered the tessellated floor. Where the pattern of tiles was intact, it showed parts of the sign of the Cymvela, the interlaced circular design here set into a great four-pointed star that reached to the four corners of the room. “Only step where the tiles are whole,” Raphe cautioned.

Nyctasia stopped and looked closely at the tiles. “The pattern is scuffed. I think they must have danced here.” Mesmerized, she began to walk around the design, trying to find the path through the maze. “A right, then another, then ... no, wait ...” she murmured. “Did I turn this way yet? Left ...”

Corson watched her uneasily, trying to imagine the room filled with people, dancing and singing. What had they been like? Probably no better, or no worse, than the rest of us, she decided, for whatever that’s worth. And no more deserving of such a cruel end than anyone else. Hlann preserve us from the fate we deserve. Surprised at her own thoughts, she shrugged them off and bent to peer through a hole in the floor. “Have the cellars been searched?” she asked.

“Time and again,” said ’Deisha, passing through an archway to an inner chamber, and beckoning for the others to follow.

The next room was smaller and narrower, also roofless, but with more of its walls standing, still displaying bright mural-work on their cracked and blistered plastering. Some of the paintings had been scarred by fire, but their colors were still rich and unfaded, and the figures seemed to leap out at the viewer, alive and vivid. Astonished, Corson and Nyctasia walked all around the room, stopping first at one scene, then at another.

One that held them both depicted a dance of sorts. Men and women had joined hands in a ring, and they circled around a great tree burdened with golden fruit. Their wide, uplifted eyes gazed at the branches, which were intertwined to form the mark of the Cymvelan Circle. The roots were also drawn clearly, gnarled and twisted, but they did not seem to form any pattern. The dancers who faced outward were all drawn alike, and their expression was solemn and severe.

Many of the drawings were renderings of the maze, drawn in all sorts of fanciful ways. One that Corson especially liked showed a flock of long-tailed birds wheeling in the sky. Standing back from it a bit, she saw plainly that their flight traced out the labyrinth.

“Mazes are a common sign of the devious paths we follow in our search for experience,” Nyctasia pondered. “Many peoples have used them to represent the difficulties and confusions that beset wayfarers on the perilous journey we all make—”

Raphe winked at Corson, who snickered lustily.

“The spiritual journey,” Nyctasia amended, “that *some* of us make, from ignorance to knowledge.” She crossed the room to examine the painting on the opposite wall.

Nyctasia stood long before this last picture. The others had awed her with their beauty, but this one was different, and disturbing. It seemed to be an older drawing than the others, more crudely drawn, its colors duller—but it was not the less arresting for that. It too depicted a dance, but instead of the stately figures portrayed in the first painting, this one showed creatures half-human, half-bestial, shambling around the body of a slain animal.

The naked dancers were men and women below the waist, but their hands were taloned like hawks' feet, and their mouths were long, cruel snouts. Nyctasia paced back and forth between the two paintings, silently comparing them. What has gone before will return again ... she thought, frowning to herself. It is so. We do not live only in the present.

There were doorways on all four sides of the room, and 'Deisha pointed out the one across from the entrance. "The courtyard is through there," she said impatiently. "You can look at these moldering paintings another time." She had pulled Nyctasia away from the grim scene and toward the door, when Corson stopped her and motioned the others to wait.

"Listen—" she whispered, "music. There's someone in there."

## 17

THE FOUNTAIN, BEING of brass, had been blackened by the fire but not destroyed, and its beauty was still quite evident. Around the rim of the broad, shallow basin was a ring of slender stems of brass, curving gracefully inward then arching back toward the edge, each crowned with a pendant brazen lily. Two inner circles of stalks rose above the first, the innermost arching high over the heads of the four viewers. A tracery of delicately crafted reeds and leaves wove between the tall flowers, complementing the stark grace of the design.

But it was not only the beauty of the fountain that made it unique. More remarkable still was the haunting melody that filled the air when the wind blew through the open courtyard. Each bronze flower was a bell that chimed gently, stirred by the breeze, and flutelike tones of varying pitches rose and fell as air was forced through holes bored in the hollow stems.

"I believe there'd be some sound even when water flowed through it," said Raphe. "But in winter they'd have stopped the water, and then they must have heard it like this—a wind fountain."

"And during the drought," said 'Deisha solemnly.

"Yes, and ever since the fire—giving rise to tales of ghosts here in the temple. A storm or high wind would probably produce quite shrill, piercing notes, and that, I suspect, is what accounts for the shrieks heard here, though I wouldn't dare tell Aunt Mesthelde so."

Nyctasia slipped between two of the stalks in the outer ring to admire the workmanship of one of the swaying lilies in the middle row, which reached almost to the height of her heart. The floral bell hung down at a natural angle, opening slightly outward, and the veins of each petal had been carefully molded by the sculptor. Nyctasia fit one small hand within the bell and found that even the inside of the flower had been reproduced in some detail. Beneath the back of the stamen-shaped clapper, she felt the opening to the hollow stem. "So the water came right from the throats of the flowers," she guessed, imagining the interlocking arcs of bright water leaping and crossing in the sunlight to fall and fill the dry, dirty pool at her feet. "We have some fine fountains at home, but nothing like so complex as this. It must have been magnificent."

"I'd like to have it repaired," said Raphe, "but we'd have to send to the Imperial City of Celys for artisans with such skills. There'll never be money enough for a thing like that."

"There would be, if we found the treasure," Corson reminded the others impatiently. She had tested the fountain in several places, with the edge of her knife, and found the metal all too hard to be gold. "Here we are, neither out of doors nor in, and what are we supposed to find? There's nothing here but that rut—wretched, tricky fountain, and it's only brass. Is that the whole of the mystery?"

"It wouldn't seem so," said Nyctasia. "We can all see the fountain. What is it that's in plain sight that we can't see?"

They all looked about them in bewilderment. The courtyard was empty save for the fountain and a



scorched dead tree. The ground was unpaved, overgrown with weeds and tall, rippling grasses.

An idea occurred to Corson, a solution so hideously fitting that she groaned aloud. “Not ‘in plain sight’, but ‘*unhidden*,’” she said in deep disgust. “It’s nothing but the *wind!* It’s found in here because the fountain makes it known, but no one can see it. I might have guessed the treasure would be something worthless. Curse the Cymvelans and their ruttin’ riddles! Stop laughing, Nyc, you bitch!”

Nyctasia tried to oblige, but without much success, for Raphe and ’Deisha had joined in the merriment. “Sorry, Corson,” she gasped, “but I’m afraid you’re right. Rowan told us these were rhymes for children—but it should console you to know that you’re the cleverest child of us all.”

A gust of wind set all the chimes jangling melodiously, and even Corson smiled, if rather sourly. “I’d be more consoled by the ‘wealth beyond a lifetime’s spending.’ Let’s see the rest of this fool place, since we’ve come all this way.” She ducked through one of the other doors and disappeared into an adjoining chamber.

“Wait for us,” called Raphe.

The rest followed, still chuckling. “A web to catch the wind,” said Nyctasia. “I begin to like these Cymvelans.”

’Deisha read:

*“Neither in the open air  
Neither in a dwelling  
Seek, if so be that you dare,  
Riches perilous and rare  
Danger beyond telling,  
Where the earth doth secrets keep  
For the wellspring’s weal lies deep.  
Wealth beyond a lifetime’s spending  
Power beyond measure  
Everlasting, never-ending  
Treachery or treasure.”*

“That’s all there is,” said ’Deisha. “It sounds like the courtyard again.”

“It’s bound to be something else that’s not worth a straw,” Corson predicted. “Fire, I daresay—or more likely water. There was plenty of water in that courtyard once. Those two riddles are a pair, mark my words, wind and water. They both have to do with the fountain.”

“That’s probably it,” Raphe agreed. “Water is a never-ending source of power. Waterwheels turn most of the mills in the valley, along the River Sheivohn.”

“And it can be treacherous, especially at spring thaw,” ’Deisha said thoughtfully. “When there’s too much rain and melting ice at once, the river can overflow its banks, and the valley fills up like a bowl. There have been seasons of flooding that carried off homes, and drowned people and livestock .... Drought or flood, there’s always danger of both. Every spring, year after year, folk worry—will there be enough rain? Will there be too much? Most years all goes well, but the danger is always there. I think Corson’s right—water.”

“Winter turning into spring, children dancing in a ring,” recited Nyctasia. “And here we are, back where we began.” For the temple itself was round, a ring of rooms about the inner courtyard. All the doors led either to the center or, finally, back to the entranceway.

The rest of the rooms had been a disappointment, empty and littered with debris. In the last room they passed through they discovered the remains of a fire, and the bones and feathers of a hen. “It seems that the ghost who haunts the harvesters’ encampment has a healthy appetite,” said ’Deisha.

“That one would be a ghost soon enough if I had my way,” Raphe vowed. “Alarming the workers at a time like this! Well, we can tell Ansen that the mystery is solved—it was only some vagabond, after all.”

“By all means, let’s have no more mysteries,” said Nyctasia. “We’re all agreed about the final riddle,

thank the *vahn*. I only hope we're right about it."

"I don't," said Corson.

"I know, but I didn't care for the threatening sound of the thing. All that about danger and treachery—it hardly seemed the kind of search one would set for children—But if it's only water ... That solution has at least the virtue of safety."

Corson spat. "The real reason the Cymvelans were slaughtered was that folk grew sick of their stupid riddles! Let's get back down where there's some shade. Water isn't my idea of treasure, but I wouldn't mind having some just now."

"You shall have all you want," Raphe promised. "We'll go to Lake Teseren for a swim, if you like. It's barely an hour's ride."

"I don't hold with swimming," said Corson. "It's against nature. People have feet, not fins."

"As to that," said Nyctasia, "the earliest Eswraine myths say that people once lived in the water, like frogs. In fact, the word for 'ocean' and the word for 'womb' in Ancient Eswraine are very nearly—"

"But on a day like this," Corson interrupted, "I could soak in a stream with pleasure, I admit."

"All the children will want to come along," 'Deisha warned.

"Let them come," said her brother. "They can all swim well enough, even 'Lorin and Sparrow."

"I can't," said Nyctasia.

Raphe and 'Deisha stared at her. Raised on the lakes, they could hardly remember a time before they knew how to swim. "But you come from the coast!" 'Deisha protested.

"The borders of Rhostshyl are inland, a day's ride from the sea at best. We've made common cause with the Maritime cities, but we're not a port. Indeed, I've only seen the shore a few times in my life—I never had a reason to learn to swim."

"It's time you did then," cried 'Deisha, delighted at the opportunity to teach something to her accomplished cousin. "Fancy such ignorance, and you an Edonaris! Come along straightaway!"

The descent was not difficult, but the sun was directly overhead now, and beating down unmercifully. They were all glad to rest halfway down, in the shade of the same shelf of rock where Nyctasia had stopped before. Beneath the protruding stone a shallow recess cut into the hillside, one of the many caves that were common to the region. The chill, dark shelter was a welcome relief in the midday heat, and they crowded into it gratefully. The laborers had retreated to the shade of trees and tents at the foot of the hill for the long noon rest, not trusting the shelter of a cave on the haunted hill.

"No sun has struck here for a thousand years," said Raphe with satisfaction, reclining comfortably with his head in Corson's lap. "It would be perfect for a wine-keep if it were only deeper. We'll need more cellar-space in a few years if my plans bear fruit."

"What of the cellars at the temple?" Nyctasia suggested, leaning lazily against 'Deisha.

"They might do. I've not explored them properly. But I doubt we could find enough workers willing to set them to rights. It's hard even to get harvesters for the hill."

"Asye! If the place is so troublesome why don't you tear it down?" asked Corson.

There was a moment's shocked silence. "We couldn't do *that*—" said 'Deisha.

"Why not?"

"It would be ... disrespectful to destroy what's left of their sacred place. It would seem like defiance, as if we'd dared the Cymvelans to do their worst. Oh, I don't hold with the tales about the temple, but if something did happen we'd be blamed for it. Folk would say we'd brought down the wrath of the Circle, you see. It would be risky."

"I'd chance it," said Corson decidedly. "If you ask me, folk would thank you for ridding them of the bane. You lot are just like Nyc—you think too much. You dream up new troubles before you've done with the old. Sometimes it's action that's wanted, not ideas." She tweaked Raphe's nose spitefully. "Remember?"

He tried to bite her fingers. "That's all very well, my wild swan, but suppose we decided to raze the temple, where would we find people willing to do the work? No one in these parts would dare have a hand in it. So there we are."

"Aside from that," added 'Deisha, "think how distressed Aunt Mesthelde would be. She'd never

know a moment's peace, waiting for ghostly vengeance to strike the family, foretelling disaster at every turn, warning folk away—there'd be no peace for the rest of us either.”

“Now that is truly a terrifying notion,” Corson acknowledged. “It would be a braver one than I who'd dare cross Lady Mesthelde's will. Let the temple stand!”

They all laughed, and no more was said of the matter, but Nyctasia wondered whether the twins had really explained their reluctance to tear down the temple. Beneath their glib arguments, had they in fact been frightened at the idea—and were they aware of it themselves? But, after all, what was there to fear?

As 'Deisha had foretold, their party increased in number appreciably before they set out for Lake Teseren that afternoon. Everyone who could be spared from the work in hand was in favor of the idea and hastened to fetch food and fishing nets and blankets for the outing. Those who were too little to ride alone were taken up behind the others or perched almost on the necks of the great patient workhorses ridden by the older children. Even 'Deisha's two favorite dogs came running alongside, barking and excited.

There were races along the way—which were strictly forbidden, of course—and halts to pick wild berries or to show some feature of the landscape to Corson and Nyctasia. Goats barred the path and had to be shooed away, a child was stung by a bee and comforted, but in time they reached a high bluff that divided the lake into two arms and sloped steeply to the shore on either side. Here they tethered the horses, and the children scrambled and slid down to the water's edge, disregarding the steps cut into the stone at intervals. The others followed more carefully, but Nyctasia lingered there, gazing out over the wide vista of rich green hills and bright water. The day was so clear that she could see the River Teseren and the towers of Amron Therain in the distance. All during the ride through the peaceful countryside, she had been possessed by a sense of heart's ease and contentment, kindled by a longing she could not put a name to. The delicate, dappled branches of young trees in the open meadows were patterned so perfectly against the dark mass of ancient woodland that they seemed to hold a message for her—a meaning that she might read if only she looked long and hard enough. Summer's infinite shades of green blended seamlessly, as far as the eye could see, illumined here and there by the red-gold flames of autumn's beginning, or haunted by the slender specter of a white birch. Nyctasia felt somehow both humbled and exalted by all that she saw.

“What has gone before, will return again,” she sang softly, unheard. How could it be doubted that Harmony was the Governing Principle of life? Even flood, even drought, were part of the design. The deep, serene waters of the lake below reflected these truths to her more fully than her studies had ever done.

“Nyc? Aren't you coming?” asked 'Deisha anxiously.

Nyctasia smiled in reply, and they started down the steep stairs of rock together. “It is no wonder that the valley has known peace for so long,” she said. “You Valleylanders live all your days in the midst of a vast manifestation of Balance.”

“I've not been raised a very good Vahnite, I'm afraid,” 'Deisha said apologetically. “I don't really understand the Principles of Foundation, much less the Balances and Influences and all the rest. My people have never taken the Discipline much to heart.”

“You understand the Principles well enough, my dear,” said Nyctasia. “You understand them better than I do.”

Nyctasia was unfamiliar with the etiquette of a swimming party, but when she saw that the others simply stripped off all of their clothing and stepped into the water, she did the same with no hesitation or show of surprise. The only possible course of conduct for a lady to adopt, under the circumstances, was to behave as if she had been accustomed to such ways all her life. And the shock of discovering how ice-cold lake water could be on such a hot day soon drove all other considerations from her mind.

Everyone was interested in teaching her to swim, including the dogs, who ran along the shore barking wildly, then even swam out a way to watch and offer encouragement. The children demonstrated their skills with a great deal of shrieking and thrashing about, until 'Deisha chased them out of the way. They splashed her furiously and went off to hunt for water-lizards under the large, flat stones along the shore. The others made free with suggestions and advice while Corson stood by and watched critically.

Nyctasia was first taught to float on her back. “You can never sink so long as you do this,” ’Deisha assured her. “Any time you’re tired you’ve only to turn over and drift in to shore. I’ve never understood how people can possibly drown when all they have to do is float to stay above water.”

“That’s because you only know these calm valley lakes,” said Corson. “If breakers are beating at you, or ocean currents dragging you under, you can’t just drift to safety. You have to fight, and you’ll probably lose. You can’t trust wild waters.”

“Dangers beyond telling’ indeed!” said ’Deisha. “But Teseren’s not treacherous, I promise you—though you might be bitten by a turtle if you don’t watch where you step.”

Corson looked down hastily. The lake bed was mainly shale, and the water brilliantly clear. There were no turtles underfoot at the moment.

“And there are leeches out farther, where the water-weeds begin,” Raphe said matter-of-factly, “but only quite small ones. They usually drop off if you douse them with vinegar.”

“Or touch a live ember to them,” someone else put in.

Corson was already striding toward the shallows. “People weren’t meant to swim!” she declared. “It’s against nature! I knew it was so!”

Raphe splashed after her, calling, “And beware of sea serpents too! Great scaled snakes with sawtooth fins and four rows of fangs!” Corson made a determined effort to drown him while ’Deisha showed Nyctasia how to tread water.

“Now if you just do the same thing, on your belly, you can swim the way the dogs do, but it’s a lot of work without getting very far. It’s more practical to lie on your side and use your whole arm and leg, like this.” She swam in a slow, graceful circle around Nyctasia, turning from side to side. “Now you try it. I’ll hold you. You needn’t keep your head up.”

When Nyctasia had mastered the sidestroke after a clumsy fashion, ’Deisha said, “Now watch this,” drew a deep breath, and dove under the surface, heading out into the deep water. Nyctasia followed with her eyes for a surprisingly long time before ’Deisha finally resurfaced for air and disappeared again. Underwater, she moved with a flowing silken ease, gliding effortlessly toward Nyctasia through the bright, sunlit lake to leap up beside her and drape her with an armful of white and golden water lilies.

“Teach me to swim like *that*,” said Nyctasia eagerly.

But there was little to learn. Though she had never imagined that human eyes could look up through water to the light, it seemed perfectly natural now, like something she had done before. She was strangely surprised to find that she had to rise to the surface to draw breath. Small, sun-yellow fish darted away from her, and she felt as sleek and swift as they. All the while there was a pulsing roar in her ears, which she took for the sound of waves beating on the shore till she remembered how still and calm the lake was. Soothing and somehow familiar, the rhythm echoed in her blood, “The true spring’s *weal* lies *deep* ... Neither *less* nor *more*, neither *sea* nor *shore* ... neither *earth* nor *air* ...”

When she next came up to breathe, she was alarmed to find herself at such a distance from shore, and panic seized her like a strangling hand. She couldn’t possibly swim back so far! She floundered helplessly for a moment that seemed an eternity, but ’Deisha was beside her, treading water, reminding her calmly, “Float if you’re tired, *float*.”

Nyctasia at once fell onto her back, stretching out, balancing her weight, letting the water bear her up. She lay still, resting, only stirring her arms gently to propel herself slowly toward land. She drifted in lazy serenity, watching the crazed, crimson flames that the sunlight kindled behind her closed eyelids, and after a time she let herself drop down again and confidently made for shore. ’Deisha raced her and won, but not by much.

They surfaced together, gasping and laughing, to wade through the shallows with clusters of silver minnows tickling their ankles. Now it was the water that felt warm, and the air chill against wet skin. Nyctasia shivered and sneezed.

The younger children ran up to show them the shiny stones they’d collected, and the dogs galloped over to greet them and shake spray from their coats in all directions. Nyctasia stumbled painfully on the sharp stones underfoot. The others’ feet were hardened from years of running barefoot, but every pebble seemed to cut Nyctasia cruelly. Finally she sat down on one of the great flat boulders, half in and half out

of the water, and refused to take another step until someone fetched her sandals. The children scampered off to find them, each eager for the honor, with the dogs chasing after them. 'Deisha knelt in the water before Nyctasia to rub her bruised and aching feet. "A dainty, lady's foot, tender as a baby's," she said, smiling, and kissed it playfully. "We'll have to take better care of you."

"I shall have to adapt," said Nyctasia seriously.

"I think you're taking root very well," said Raphe, wading up to them in waist-deep water. "Come talk sense to Corson, she won't listen to me."

"No one can make Corson listen if she's not of a mind to," Nyctasia assured him, but she was glad to slip back into the lake and follow, drifting and swimming out to the rocky point of land where Corson was stretched out on the warm stone, sunning herself. Nyctasia held to a low boulder and pulled herself partway out of the water to reach up and splash Corson liberally. "Aren't you coming for a swim at all, you lazy great slug? The water's splendid here!"

Corson rolled over and looked down at her balefully. "You're welcome to it. I watched you—you might have drowned out there, fool!"

Nyctasia looked at her a moment, puzzled, then exclaimed in astonishment, "Why, you can't swim, Corson, can you?" At once she was sorry she'd spoken, knowing how Corson hated to ask for help or admit to any sort of weakness. But it was too late to recall her words.

Corson glared at her. "What of it?" she demanded. "I only know what I learned in the army. They thought it enough if we could fight on foot and on horseback. I wasn't trained for a fisher!"

"But this is sport, love," urged Raphe. "You'll enjoy it."

"We'll teach you—it's easy. Nyc's doing well already," 'Deisha said encouragingly.

But Corson would not be coaxed out into deeper water, and Nyctasia soon put a stop to their teasing. "Let her be," she said, climbing up beside Corson and waving to the children who were carrying all her things about in search of her. "Corson has a cat's nature, and hates the water. And I'm rather tired myself."

"Well, it is time we thought of getting back," said 'Deisha. "Nesanye's left already." She joined Nyctasia and shook herself like one of her dogs. "Let's see if any of the brats has been eaten by a pike." She surveyed the pack of children who soon surrounded them. "Where are Bean and 'Lorin?"

"Uncle N'sanye took Lorrie home," Sparrow volunteered, and someone else accounted for Bean to 'Deisha's satisfaction. Most of the others had gone already, and the rest soon followed, rounding up the children and their own scattered clothes. Nyctasia found that she really was tired, though she had only said so to keep the twins from pressing Corson to swim. They had come too close to discovering what Nyctasia had realized only just in time—that Corson was deathly afraid of the water. She'd never forgive me if I'd given that away, Nyctasia thought soberly.

The afternoon of swimming, after the morning's hard climb, had taken its toll of Nyctasia's strength, and by the time they reached home she was fit for nothing more than collapsing across her bed in exhaustion. Her legs and arms ached to the bone, and there was a fierce, smarting pain across her shoulders.

When she failed to appear for dinner, both Corson and 'Deisha went in search of her. "It's discourteous to your hosts not to come to meals," Corson reminded her. "Get up, you indolent lout."

"Summon the guards," Nyctasia groaned. "Take this woman away, throw her in a dungeon, disembowel her, get her out of my sight. Let me die in peace."

"My poor Nyc, shall I bring you some dinner then?" cooed 'Deisha.

"Thank you, no. I'm not hungry. I can hardly move, I'm stiff as stone."

"Exercise is the best thing for that—up you get," said Corson cheerfully, grabbing her by the arm.

But Nyctasia shrieked so feelingly that Corson let go at once. "Sweet *vahn*, my back—!"

"What is it?" cried 'Deisha. "Let me see." She carefully pulled Nyctasia's shirt down over her shoulders and revealed the angry red-scorched skin. "Oh, no—how sunburnt you are! I should have thought of that, and you with that fair complexion. I'm so sorry, Nyc. Don't stir a finger, I'll fetch some unguent of arrowleaf right away."

Corson held a hand over Nyctasia's back and gave a whistle. "Hot as an oven! Is it very sore?"

"I feel as if I've been lashed with leather."

"No you don't," said Corson, who'd been flogged more than once in the army. "But it does look something nasty. Can't you heal a thing like that with your spells?"

"If I must. But arrowleaf will do it better. A burn will mend of its own accord. It's unwise to create an Influence where none is needed—Natural healing leaves one stronger, but spell-healing can weaken instead, if it's not used with caution. You ought to understand that, Corson, since you're such a champion of nature."

Corson shrugged. "No doubt you know best. I'd better be off. They expect me at table, and it doesn't do to keep one's hosts waiting. There's fresh lake trout with dinner, by the way."

"I hope you choke on a bone," Nyctasia muttered into her pillow.

'Deisha returned with a clay pot sealed with wax and filled with a white salve. When she cut through the seal, a sharp, tangy fragrance pierced the air for a moment.

"That's mint, not arrowleaf," said Nyctasia.

"No, look," 'Deisha showed her the impression of narrow, pointed leaves that had been pressed into the side of the pot before the clay was baked. "It's only been scented with mint leaves to sweeten the smell. It was Aunt Mesthelde's notion."

"And a good one," said Nyctasia, with admiration. "I've never thought of it." It was the last thing she'd have expected from the tart, practical Mesthelde. No doubt there was a lesson in that, she thought.

"Oh, she's the clever one, to be sure. She makes most of our medicaments herself. This will soon put you to rights." 'Deisha began lightly to smooth the creamy ointment over Nyctasia's raw, stinging shoulders. It had a cold, tingling feel at first that soon gave way to a welcome numbness. 'Deisha worked with a gentle, circular motion of her fingertips that Nyctasia found restful and soothing.

"You have the touch of a healer, cousin."

"Oh, after tending to hurt animals, nursing a person's easy."

"Not always," said Nyctasia, remembering the days she'd spent with the ailing Corson in Lhestreq.

"I'll gladly nurse you anytime." 'Deisha leaned forward to kiss the nape of Nyctasia's blistered neck, very carefully. "Tomorrow your skin will peel off like a lizard's. Thank the stars you swam underwater much of the time."

"I thought Rhostshyl was a dangerous place," Nyctasia said sleepily, "but I'd no idea how hazardous the world outside the city was. The sea makes you ill, the sun flays you alive—it's a wonder anyone lives to an old age."

"We're a long-lived family."

"Unless we're murdered," Nyctasia agreed. It was true, the Edonaris often lived well past fourscore years, especially in the female line.

"To listen to you, one would think you did nothing at all but murder one another in Rhostshyl."

Something in her tone made Nyctasia ask sharply, "'Deisha, *you* don't think of going there?"

"Well, I don't mean to take part in a war, of course .... But I would like to see the city someday. I think we all would."

"So would I," murmured Nyctasia, "someday ...." She was silent for so long that 'Deisha thought she'd fallen asleep, and quietly slipped from the room, stepping softly and stealthily.

Nyctasia let her go. She was too tired for more talk, and 'Deisha must surely be starving for her dinner. She'll be late again, Nyctasia thought, smiling. Rousing herself sufficiently to sit up, she dipped her fingers into the salve, which 'Deisha had left at her bedside, and dabbed a little of it on her nose and cheekbones. She winced as she rubbed some into her collarbone, which felt scraped even by the touch of the pillow. But to her relief she found that she could now lie on her back, as long as she stayed quite still. Cautiously stretching out her arms, she let her weariness wash over her, and she felt that she was again floating languidly on the lake, warmed by the sun, cooled by the fresh water, and fearing no treachery from either. She could almost feel the gentle rippling of the waves beneath her, and the golden glare of sunshine again played in mad patterns upon her eyelids. She drifted into sleep, lulled by the ceaseless murmuring of the waters.

In her dreams a great iron bell was tolling a warning that grew louder and more urgent by the

moment. Nyctasia ran weakly the rest of the way to the tower, exhausted by her climb but desperate to know what catastrophe had demanded the sounding of the tocsin after its years of silence. But then it was she herself who was pulling with all her strength at the bell-rope, and she knew without question that it was her duty to warn those below of the coming flood. Each swing of the heavy bell nearly lifted her off her feet, and each time she brought down the rope a searing pain racked her shoulders, but she dared not leave off. If the deluge took the valley unawares the deaths of all its folk would be on her hands. The bell swung ever more wildly overhead, tearing at the rotted beams that held it aloft.

“Fool, it will fall and crush you! Come away!” a man shouted from somewhere behind her.

The very foundations of the tower seemed to be shaking, but Nyctasia grimly kept on with her task. “The fountain is working again, don’t you see?” she cried. “None of our artisans knows how to stem it at the source—the whole valley will be flooded!”

“Let be, the earth is parched,” he called, and Mhairestri agreed, “Only thus will the drought be quenched ....”

Nyctasia sobbed in pain and confusion. “But blood is as salt as brine, it will kill the crops, all the young vines—” She woke with a cry, her shoulders still throbbing with pain, the sound of the bell still thundering in the air. She knew but a moment’s relief that she had only been dreaming, for she realized at once that a warning bell *was* ringing loudly in the dead of night, somewhere nearby. Her first waking thought was, *War!*

## 18

NYCTASIA SEIZED HER dagger and raced out into the corridor, where she found Corson, half-dressed and sword in hand, coming to meet her. There was a great deal of shouting and confusion below. “You’re all right?” said Corson. “What—”

’Deisha burst upon them, still pulling on her shin, and laughing in excitement. “Put away your arms!” she cried. “I thought you’d be alarmed, but there’s nothing to fear. The Royal Crimson are ripe! The crush has begun! I *must* hurry—” She hugged Nyctasia wildly and darted away, not hearing her gasp of pain at this assault on her sunburned back, Corson and Nyctasia stared at each other and started to laugh.

“I suppose they need every able hand,” sighed Corson, “but you’d think it could wait till morning ...!”

“They’ll not expect you to join in the work, Corson, you’re a guest. No one would think the worse of you if you went back to bed.”

“Who could sleep with that ruttin bell ringin, and all the carryings-on? I might as well be in the thick of it.”

“Well, it’s good of you, but please come rub some more salve on me before you go, will you? I shan’t be joining you, not tonight. My back’s a blazing brand!”

\* \* \*

Nyctasia woke toward noon to find that she seemed to be completely alone in the house. It was not difficult, however, to follow the sound of voices to the courtyard, where long tables had been set up in the open and covered with food and drink. No one was seated at them, though. The harvesters—the Edonaris and their hirelings alike—came and went in a steady stream, standing about long enough to wolf down a quick meal, then hurrying back to their labors. Nyctasia saw that most of the food had been prepared beforehand, to spare even the kitchen workers for the all-important task of bringing in the grapes for pressing. There were huge platters of smoked meats, bowls of pickled vegetables, pots of preserves and mounds of dried fruits, along with rounds of cheese as big as cart-wheels. But the bread was fresh and plentiful, and immense casks of ale stood at either end of the main table, to wash down the smoked meat and salted fish.

As soon as the platters were emptied, they were snatched away to the kitchens to be loaded again and returned, often by children who looked to Nyctasia much too small to carry them. Mesthelde was everywhere at once, filling pitchers, carving meat, giving orders and supervising all other activities at once.

She nodded curtly to Nyctasia and said, "Have something to eat, and keep out of the way or you'll be trampled. And stay out of the sun."

"I thought I'd go help with the harvesting," said Nyctasia rather diffidently. She was still stiff and sore, but now that she'd rested she felt well enough to take part in the work somehow. But could she really do anything to help?

"Nonsense, you'd not last half an hour at the gathering. If you want to be of some use, cut up this joint." She waved a sharp carving knife in Nyctasia's direction and stalked off to attend to something else.

Nyctasia was by now feeling the lack of her last night's dinner. She chopped a thick slice from a warm loaf and poured honey on it, fresh from the comb. It tasted better than anything she'd ever eaten.

Between bites, she began energetically to slice the meats and loaves so that the harvesters could snatch up their food all the more quickly and carry it off with them. There were no mealtimes, it seemed, or any of the regular rhythms of daily life. Though the harvesting was in fact a carefully ordered and harmonious effort, it had all the appearance of chaos, nonetheless, and it was easy to see why the children looked forward to it every year.

As she worked, someone handed her one of the wide-brimmed straw hats they all wore, to keep the sun from her face. Nyctasia found that there was plenty for her to do. She fetched food, she helped took after the smaller children, she carried water to the workers, she scrubbed platters and bowls at the well with the other scullions. No one would have asked a Rhaicime to perform such menial tasks, but finding her willing to set her hand to anything, the others accepted her as one of themselves and treated her accordingly.

Nyctasia had never done the sort of labor that not only required no thought, but indeed kept her too busy to think, and she threw herself into it gladly, for there was much that she didn't wish to think about. Caught up in the frantic whirl of activity, she laughed and chatted with the rest, encouraging the pickers and speculating about the success of the crop. She soon lost all track of time, of days, often working far into the night, for the harvesting and pressing would not stop for a moment till the last of the juice had been sealed in casks. Everyone slept in snatches, and Nyctasia heard some of the harvesters boast that they could pick grapes in their sleep without missing a single one.

"Aunt Nyc!" One of the children stood tugging at her sleeve as she poured out mugs of ale in a row. It was one of 'Deisha's nephews, who had decided that Nyctasia too must be an aunt, since she looked so much like 'Deisha.

"Hungry, little one?" Nyctasia offered him a peach, which he accepted readily, but instead of running off he stayed at her side, still demanding her attention. She must come with him, he insisted, dragging at her arm. Mama Nona wanted her.

No one else seemed to be looking after the child, so Nyctasia allowed him to lead her away, out of the courtyard and up a flight of stone steps to one of the upper terraces, where he said Mama Nona was waiting.

"You're getting so brown, my dear, soon we won't know you from 'Deisha."

"Lady Nocharis! Fool that I am, I didn't realize it was you he meant. How good to see you." She offered her hands to the old woman, who was seated in the shade of a tall flowering tree at the edge of the terrace. At her feet were a few of the children, busily braiding together strands of straw to be woven into more of the light sun-hats. Lady Nocharis had a half-finished hat on her lap, and she went on twining and turning it as she spoke.

"You must call me Mother 'Charis like the others. How are you getting on? Let me look at you—you seem rather peaked, I think."

"Oh, I'm very well. I've never felt so well. Is there anything I can fetch you?"

"I'm excellently looked after, I assure you. Just sit down and rest for a little, and hear me company. I've watched you slaving away at ten things at once, like Mesthelde. You'll wear yourself to a shadow if we let you."

"The others all worker harder, I think." But Nyctasia obediently sat down on the stone balustrade and began to try plaiting a few pieces of straw. From here she could see many of the slopes, the main



courtyard, and even the yard, around the corner of the house, where the immense barrel-presses had been set up. Grapes were being loaded into them constantly out of the carts filled by the pickers, and the dark, almost black, juice flowed out steadily through the spaces between the lower slats of the great barrel, into the circular trough that surrounded it. From there it was scooped up with lipped vessels and emptied into waiting casks on a low wagon nearby. I could do that, Nyctasia thought, but she said only, "So you watch over all of us from here."

"During the crush, at least—one must feel a part of the harvesting somehow, you know. I've been watching you both. That is your friend, is it not, the giantess trying to turn a press all on her own?"

Atop each of the presses was a platform, reached by a tall ladder, where people walked in slow, endless circles on either side of the central shaft, pushing the cross-bar that turned it and lowered the press-wheel. Corson was not really trying to do this by herself, but she was alone on one side of the shaft, while there were two or three people on both sides of all the others.

Nyctasia laughed. "Yes indeed, that's Corson. She does like to show off. Do you know, I've always believed that people crushed grapes with their *feet*?"

"So they do, when there's only a small crop, to make wine for the household. It wouldn't be worthwhile to keep a large press for that. But it's far too slow for our ends, and too much fruit is wasted that way." She had finished the hat, which she now gave to one of the children. "You've done very nicely, 'Kadri. Run and put this with the rest now. And you 'Risha, tell Liss that I'll go in to rest soon. Then both of you go right to the kitchen for your milk, yes?"

"Yes, Nona," they chorused. When they had each kissed her and scampered off, she turned and beckoned to Nyctasia.

"And what am *I* to do, Mother?" Nyctasia asked, smiling. "I've had my milk this morning."

"You sit here by me, my dear, and tell me some more about this friend of yours. We don't often see a sword-for-hire here. You trust this woman?"

"With my life," said Nyctasia without hesitation. So that was what the matriarch hadn't wished to say before the children. "I trust her absolutely, and I do not give my trust lightly."

"Ah." The old woman searched Nyctasia's face carefully. "So she is not dangerous? Mesthelde swears she'll cut all our throats one night and make off with everything of value in the house, but Raphe, now, declares that she's a lamb." She smiled as she spoke, but Nyctasia knew that the question was asked in earnest.

"She is most certainly dangerous," she answered promptly, "and I daresay she's no stranger to brigandry, but this household has nothing to fear from her." She gestured toward the yard where the presses were turning steadily. "That same pride that makes her flaunt her strength thus would never let her betray the trust of those who've befriended her. Perhaps she does not know herself how honest she is, but I stand warrant for her, upon my own honor. Would you have me speak of this to Lady Mesthelde? Will she be satisfied with my word?"

"I am satisfied. Leave Mesthelde to me. Indeed, now that she's seen how hard this cutthroat is working, I daresay she'll be better disposed to her."

"Unless I mistake, Corson will soon be on her way, at all events. She wants to get back to her people at Chiastelm before winter."

"Then she's given up her quest for the treasure?"

The matriarch obviously knew everything that was said or done in the household. "Poor Corson! She wasn't such a fool as to have much hope for that treasure, but still it does seem hard on her." Nyctasia recited some of the riddles for Lady Nocharis, and related their disappointing solutions.

"The fountain, how well I remember it. What a marvel—I often played in it as a child, and I believed it was magic that made it sing. The water was always fresh and cold, like well water. The source, I think, must have been a spring deep within the hill ...."

"Did you go there for lessons? I'd like to hear about that one day."

"No, I was too young for lessons then. My older brother was sent there to learn his letters, and I went along to play. Children were always welcome there—the Cymvelans believed that children were sacred in some way, and rather spoiled them. The courtyard that you saw was just for the children to

play in—there was a swing in the tree that *whistled* when it went fast, and a little tree-hut ....” She sighed. “All burned down now, of course.”

“Play on these and play you may!” said Nyctasia softly.

“We envied the children who lived there, but they envied us as well, because we lived in a grand house and had fine clothes and servants. Well, they say that some of the children were spared, so perhaps they came to have those things at last, and no one regrets that enchanted garden but me .... Ah, there you are, Liss—”

Nyctasia recognized the girl she’d seen in Lady Nocharis’s chamber at their first interview. “You wanted me, milady?”

“I’m going in to lie down for a little, and you shall sit at the window and spy out everyone’s doings for me. Bring your festival dress, and I’ll show you the wreath-stitch. Just hand me my stick, child. Your arm to lean on, Nyctasia my dear?”

“Do you want to take a turn at this, Nyc? I’ll make room for you!” Corson shouted down mockingly from the platform of the press.

“No, ox’s work suits you so well, I’ll leave it to you,” Nyctasia called back, then turned to watch the workers emptying the juice-trough. She had been breathing in the smell of the crushed fruit for days, but here it was so powerful she could almost taste it.

She drank a little of the foaming juice out of her cupped hands. It did not look at all like wine yet. The seeds and skins would be strained out of it later. Raphe had explained, after the color of the skins had set in the clear juice. But its flavor was already so rich and strong that Nyctasia could only sip it a bit at a time. She licked her fingers greedily then set to work, taking up one of the lading-vessels and copying the motions of the others. Her arms soon grew tired, but the Discipline of Toleration was one of the first precepts mastered by a Vahnite, and almost without trying, Nyctasia had soon withdrawn her will from the efforts of her limbs. She fell into a rhythm of bending, lifting and turning, that had no beginning or end, but carried her along as the water of Lake Teseren had carried her, floating, half-dreaming.

The work itself never stopped, only the workers changed. When Nyctasia joined the laders, one of the others left to get a meal, and when Raphe came looking for Corson he sent two people up to the platform to replace her before calling her to come down.

“Do you mind helping to harvest my Esthairon grapes? The rest of them must be gathered now or they’ll pass their prime on the vines, but more pickers have refused to work near the ruins, plague take them! There were more thefts, and now some silly brat says he’s seen lights in the temple at night. I’ve told them it was only some vagabond thief’s cooking fire, but it does no good. I need everyone I can muster who’s not afraid of a pile of old stones—let the fools turn the presses.”

Corson stretched her arms and back, cramped from bending to the bar. “I told you you should have that heap torn down. But I don’t mind it—harvesting will be sport after this. Hey, Nyc, come along with you! Raphe needs us to pick those yellow grapes of his.”

Nyctasia was startled, having noticed neither Raphe nor Corson. “What is it?” she asked, in a dazed tone.

“Asye! I just told you—Raphe needs harvesters for the haunted hill. The ruin’s scared his people away. Are you coming?”

“Oh. Yes, of course.” She saw that no lading-vessels were lying empty by the trough. “There are enough workers here without me.”

“Well, it would be a help,” Raphe said hesitantly. He hadn’t thought of Nyctasia as a possible harvester. “But you’re not to do more than one or two rows, Nyc. There’s no shade on the slopes, and you’re not used to such strong sunlight.”

The vines still to be harvested were those nearest the temple, nearly at the crest of the hill, and Nyctasia was already worn out by the time she reached the site, far behind the others. But she was pleased to have made the climb without stopping to rest. The track had not seemed quite as steep and strenuous as before. When she had caught her breath, she took a hip-basket from the pile and a newly whetted knife from the old man who sat by the path all day sharpening the small, curved blades on a whetstone.

She watched the way the others lifted the heavy clusters of grapes, sliced them neatly from the vines and dropped them into their baskets, all in one smooth motion, with no wasted effort. There was, she saw, a pattern to this too, not so different from the way she had been taught to pull an arrow from her quiver, nock it, pull back and release, without pause or hesitation. Nyctasia was quite a skilled archer, and she made up her mind now to become a skilled harvester. She chose an empty row and began to strip the vines, starting in the middle as she saw the others do, so as to be always working toward the carts waiting at both ends to take the grapes.

“Nyc, go easy!” ’Deisha called to her from a few rows away, with hardly a pause in her quick lifting and slashing motions.

There were several of the family among the harvesters, but most were hirelings—a mixed lot of all those bold or desperate enough to take work on unlucky land. Some were ragged and careworn and silent, others hearty and cheerful, singing as they worked. There were people who carried babies at their chests, or had small children trailing beside them, and some seemed to Nyctasia not much more than children themselves. Most were barefoot, and many worked stripped to the waist, men and women alike, but all wore the wide straw hats to shade their faces.

How, Nyctasia marveled, could they let this relentless sun beat down on their bare backs, or stand to have the rope basket-straps cut into their skin? Already the rope chafed Nyctasia’s neck, even through her shirt. As the basket grew heavier, toward the end of the row, the shoulder that supported it ached fiercely, and sweat ran into her eyes and down her neck. The glare of the sun and the increasing weight of the basket made it harder and harder to concentrate on the rhythm of her work. The rope seemed to be digging a furrow in her collarbone, rubbing raw the skin newly healed from sunburn. It felt like an eternity before the waiting wagoner took the basket from her and emptied it. Nyctasia drank deeply from the barrel of water by the cart, and splashed some on her face.

“Hey, leave some for me, greedy beast!”

Nyctasia looked up, startled. There was certainly plenty of water for everyone. One of her young cousins handed over a heaping basket and bounded up to her, laughing, his shirt flapping behind him, knotted about his waist. Bare-chested and brown and graceful, he looked to Nyctasia like a young faun of the hillsides. But his grin faded when he approached and saw her face to face.

“Oh! Pardon me, Lady Nyctasia—I—I thought you were ’Deisha. I didn’t mean—I was only joking—”

Nyctasia flicked drops of water at him. “I’m Nyc to my kin. Remind me, which one are you?”

He bowed. “Nicorin, son of Nesanye, and yours to command.”

“Is that so? Then let me have the loan of your shirt, if you will.”

He untied the sleeves at once and handed it to her. “Surely,” he said, puzzled. “But you can’t very well be cold—?”

“Alas, no. I can’t remember what it is to be cold.” She folded up the garment and stuffed it into the shoulder of her own shirt to pad the basket-strap. “Ah, many thanks, lad, that’s what I need. I wasn’t very well prepared. I didn’t expect to be picking grapes today.”

“I should hope not!” he exclaimed, indignant on her behalf. “It’s a fine hospitality that makes a guest labor in the sun like a peasant!”

“It seems to me,” said Nyctasia mildly, “that I’m laboring in the sun like an Edonaris.” She shouldered her basket again and smiled. “And it’s done me good, besides. My appetite’s improved no end since I came here!”

Nicorin made a face, not at Nyctasia, but past her, in Raphe’s direction. “I’d best get back to work too. Raphe’s giving me a look that would turn wine to vinegar. And we’ve him to thank for this day’s labor! We’d be through for the season if not for him and his outlandish new grapes.”

They went together to the middle of a new row and worked side by side, gradually moving away in opposite directions. The basket was so much easier to carry that Nyctasia even found the sunshine more bearable. “So the crush is nearly over?” she asked, when they met in the middle of the next row. “Raphe’s grapes are the last?” She was exhausted again, but still determined to keep pace with the others.

“Well, the harvesting’s most done, not the pressing. And there’s plenty to do after that, but it’s not as urgent. We’ll get a rest, and then we’ll hold Harvest Festival—that’s best of all. But after that we’ll be back to the same dull chores again, every day.” He sighed.

“Nicorin ...,” said Nyctasia thoughtfully, “you’re one of the warmongers, aren’t you?”

“I don’t *want* to go to war,” he insisted, “but I don’t think it’s right for us to stand by idly while our kin fight for the honor of our House, in Rhostshyl.” He slashed fiercely at the vines with his harvesting-knife, as if they had refused to yield their fruit.

Nyctasia could not help smiling at the bored youth’s notion of idleness. But she said only, “I hope you will go to Rhostshyl one day. I believe that the likes of you could well be the saving of the House of Edonaris.” She paused to wipe her forehead with her sleeve, her shoulders sagging. “You *are* needed in Rhostshyl, but not to fight for the honor of the family—if it comes to war, Nicorin, it will not be to our honor, but to our shame. Oh, the Edonaris will win, you may be sure, with or without your help. We’re stronger than the Teiryn, and everyone in the city knows it. But we’ve no more right to sole rule of Rhostshyl than they! Some of us would seize it simply because it lies within our grasp, no matter the cost to our honor, to the city—the lives lost, the law defiled.” Nyctasia’s voice shook, but she went on with her picking steadily, as if she were only passing on family gossip to her young kinsman.

But Nicorin had forgotten his work. “But ... but, then, why—”

“For power, neither more nor less,” said Nyctasia wearily. “My brother Emeryc would tell you it’s for the good of the city, and I think he believes it. The matriarch Mhαιρεstri claims it is the foreordained destiny of our House, and I know she believes it. Call it what you will, it’s all the same—the lust for power that devours the spirit—that drives us to crimes against the *vahn*—I *know* ...” She heard her own words tumbling out hysterically, uncontrolled, saying far more than she’d intended. “*Why?*” she whispered, turning to face the bewildered Nicorin. “Only because the Teiryn can’t *prevent* us from taking power—that’s why the Edonaris want war! Because we’d win—!” Her basket fell to the ground, spilling ripe grapes at her feet, and she clutched at a vine-pole for support.

“Nyc ... ? ’Deisha, ’Deisha! Nyc’s sick, hurry!” Nicorin yelled, his voice cracking. He took Nyctasia’s arm, and she grabbed him by the shoulders suddenly, shaking him and shouting.

“We’ll win, never doubt it. We don’t need you, but we might be willing to use you. We’ll become the undisputed rulers of Rhostshyl, and you might be allowed to share in that victory, but you’ll also share in the disgrace—remember that!”

“Nyc, what is it? Are you all right?” ’Deisha asked anxiously, putting her arm around Nyctasia’s waist.

Nyctasia staggered against her. “Yes, I ... no ... I’m sorry, I don’t know what’s come over me—”

“I do. You’re sunstruck, dear, that’s what ails you. Come with me.”

“Here, give her to me.” Corson easily lifted Nyctasia in her arms and carried her to the porch of the temple, where a bit of remaining roof gave some shade.

Nicorin brought a dipper of water, and ’Deisha bathed Nyctasia’s face and wrists, even soaking her hair. While she sipped the rest, Nyctasia heard Raphe say wretchedly, “I told her not to do more than a row or two—”

“She oughtn’t to have been here at all!” snapped ’Deisha. “And I shouldn’t have let her stay.”

“It’s my fault,” Corson began, “I brought her along—”

Nyctasia spoke up as firmly as she could. “It’s my own fault, and no one else’s. I wanted to come, but I’m only in the way here, only causing trouble ... here you all are wasting time caring for me while the harvest ... the grapes ...”

“I don’t care about the rutting grapes!” said Corson, whose anxiety, as usual, had quickly turned to anger, though she was not at all sure whom she was angry at. “I’m taking you back to the house now.”

“No, I’m all right now, and you’re needed here. I can go back with one of the carts.”

Corson started to protest, but ’Deisha agreed with Nyctasia. “She’s better off resting in the shade than carried in the sun, Corson, I don’t even want her on a wagon till the sun’s lower—they’re too open. The best thing is to stay out of the light altogether for now. I’ll stay with her, don’t worry.”

“Back to work, the lot of you!” said Nyctasia. “I won’t be responsible for the loss of the crop. Away

with you!”

They moved off unwillingly, Nicorin lingering with a guilty feeling that it was really his fault somehow. Shaken and ashen-faced, he looked much more ill than Nyctasia.

She smiled weakly at him. “Did I frighten you?”

He nodded mutely. He knew she was not referring only to her attack of sunstroke.

“Good. Then perhaps I’ve done my work here after all.”

“That ... that was all true then? You meant what you said about the Edonaris?”

“I didn’t mean to say it all, but it was true, I’m sorry to say. And, Nicorin, I feel far worse about it than you do, believe me.”

“Well, at least I understand now why you were banished from Rhostshyl,” he said ruefully, and they both laughed.

“You go along, too, ’Deisha,” said Nyctasia, gently pushing her away. “I’m fine now. I only feel bad that I can’t help to save Raphe’s grapes, but I’ll feel worse if I keep you from it as well. I’ll wait here if you like, but there’s no need for you to stay.”

’Deisha agreed reluctantly. “Very well, but mind, Nyc, you’re not to move. Keep to the shade here.”

I’ll keep an eye on her, ’Deisha thought. And when she next came to empty her laden basket, she took another dipper of water up to the temple for Nyctasia—but she was gone.

Nyctasia did feel better, but before long she was unbearably thirsty, as much, it seemed, from the sweet juice she’d drunk as from the heat. She felt quite well enough to fetch herself more water, until she stood and took a few steps down the hill. Then a violent wave of dizziness struck her, and she stumbled back to lean against the temple wall, faint and dismayed. She certainly could not walk as far as the water barrel unaided, but she was determined not to give more trouble. If only she weren’t so thirsty!

From within the temple the musical, purling ripple of flowing water reached her, and she thought with relief of the fountain. Hadn’t Mother ’Charis said that its water was always fresh and cold? It wasn’t far to the courtyard, and she needn’t let go of the wall on the way.

At first she could see the water, but when she dropped down beside the fountain she found only an illusion woven of light and the swaying shadows of the brass bells, wavering on the polished marble basin. The bells chimed softly, like water striking stone, though there was hardly a hint of a breeze to relieve the heat.

Neither was there a hand’s breadth of shade in the courtyard. Nyctasia forgot her thirst in her desperate desire to escape from the glaring sunlight that burned her eyes and maddened her senses. She could only think of the cave, halfway down the hill, where it was cool and dark. She could wait for the others there, if she could only reach it. But the sun seemed to bear down upon her bodily as she struggled to rise. When she gained her feet the dizziness was worse than before, and she fell heavily to her knees again. Formless, blurred shapes appeared and disappeared in the air before her, now dark, now dazzling.

Nyctasia rubbed at her eyes, and one of the cloudy shapes grew clearer and seemed to take on human form, but she could not make out who it was at the heart of that blinding light.

She reached feebly for the dark figure. “The cave—” she gasped.

“These hills are riddled with caves, riddled with caves, *riddled* with *caves* ...” The voice echoed hollowly around the courtyard, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere.

“Raphe ... ?”

“No riddle has only one answer.”

“Why do you always keep your face hidden?” whispered Nyctasia.

“You who are Mistress of Ambiguities must know that.”

“Ben? ’Ben, I can’t see, I can’t stand—”

“No matter, ’Tasia, we’ve not far to go. I’ll carry you.”

“Yes, take me with you,” Nyctasia cried, and fainted.

“Nyctasia! Nyc, where are you?” But there was no answer, and ’Deisha ran to question the carters. Finding that no one had taken Nyctasia downhill, she called to Corson, “I can’t find Nyc, she’s vanished! Do you know where she’s gone?”

Raphe hastened to her and pulled her aside, “Keep your voice down, for *vahn*’s sake! I’ll lose the

rest of the pickers if they think people have started disappearing now.”

Corson strode up to them, her half-loaded basket banging at her hip. “What do you mean she’s vanished?” she demanded. “She was right there, she can’t have gone far.”

“Corson, not so loud, I beg you,” said Raphe anxiously.

’Deisha turned on him furiously. “Will you think of something besides your precious grapes for once! Nyc’s missing, don’t you care?”

“Of course I do, fool! But there’s no need to alarm everyone.” The overseer Ansen stood to one side, listening. A few of the others had gathered behind her, talking among themselves and shaking their heads or making signs to ward off evil. Raphe turned to her and ordered, “Get these folk back to work, there’s nothing to tear. The Lady Nyctasia was sunstruck, that’s all, she hasn’t vanished or anything of the sort.”

“Perhaps if she were found and they could see her ...” Ansen suggested uneasily.

“Then what are we standing about for?” said Corson.

“Aunt ’Deisha!”

“Not now, ’Lorin!”

“The lady,” insisted ’Lorin, tugging at her hand, “the lady like you.” Everyone stopped and looked at him.

“Did you see where she went?” ’Deisha demanded breathlessly.

The child nodded, filled with importance. “In where the golden spider is,” he explained.

“Spider ... ?” said Corson.

“Talk sense, ’Lorin!” said ’Deisha impatiently. “Where?”

Daunted, ’Lorin retreated to his mother’s side and pointed toward the ruins. “In the middle,” he whispered shyly.

’Deisha frowned. “The fountain? It is rather like a big spider, with those long stalks. But if Nyc were in there, she’d have heard me call.”

“I’ll go have a look anyway,” said Corson. “She might have fallen into one of those cellar holes, curse her.”

’Deisha hurried alongside, barely able to keep pace with the long-limbed Corson. “Why would she go in there?” she worried.

“Asye knows,” said Corson. “Asye knows why Nyc does anything she does!”

## 19

CORSON AND ’DEISHA had been unable to rouse Nyctasia when they found her lying at the foot of the fountain, and this time they carried her home without delay. She did not wake on the way, nor even when ’Deisha bathed her face with cold well-water, and Mesthelde scorched feathers and pungent herbs under her nose.

Corson counseled them to let her be. “She’ll come to herself when she’s ready, and not before. That one knows what she’s about, when it’s a matter of healing—she’s probably holding a pleasant little chat with the Indwelling Spirit right now, or something of that sort. Don’t worry.”

But ’Deisha fretted so much over Nyctasia that Mesthelde finally chased her from the sickroom. “Get out from underfoot, both of you,” she ordered. “Go back to the harvesting where you can be of some use.”

Raphe had stayed behind to rally his remaining workers, but when Corson and ’Deisha trudged back up the hill, he came to meet them and asked after Nyctasia, not meeting ’Deisha’s eyes.

“She’s not wakened yet,” said ’Deisha heavily.

“But that’s all to the good,” Corson assured them. “Those healing-spells of hers seem to work best that way. I once saw her with a wound that I thought would be the death of her, and she healed it overnight. It would take more than sunstroke to do away with that one. I don’t claim to understand the whole queer business, but she’ll be well in no time, you’ll see. Just don’t ask her to explain it, whatever you do!”

Raphe nodded. “They say that secrecy is the source of a magician’s power—that spells lose their might if they’re spoken of. I daresay Nyc had to swear oaths not to reveal the workings of her spells.”

“No such luck! She’s more than willing to explain all about it to anyone who’ll listen. And once that one starts in explaining, she won’t stop for wind or wild weather.”

Raphe smiled. “It must be an Edonaris failing. I’m like that myself, no?”

“We all are,” said ’Deisha. “Headstrong, the lot of us.”

Corson saw that they were speaking to each other more than to her, although neither had said a word directly to the other. She wisely decided to leave them alone to discuss their differences. “You’re right,” she said, taking up a new harvesting basket, “all the Edonaris I ever met were as stubborn as stone.” As she walked off, she heard them both starting to speak at once.

While she worked, Corson pondered the morning’s events. Why *had* Nyc gone into the temple? Had she merely been wandering, or was she still searching for something there? Corson looked over at the ruin and was surprised to see some of the children napping in the shade, with ’Deisha’s two dogs keeping watch over them. If no one could be spared from the harvesting to look after them, why not send them home in one of the carts? Or was this the Edonarises’ way of showing the other laborers how harmless the temple was after all?

Well, Corson still had a question or two about the temple herself. As soon as the harvesting was done she’d have another look at the place, she decided. There was yet one riddle not answered to her satisfaction.

Later in the afternoon, Raphe called her to join ’Deisha and Nicorin at one of the carts. When the wagoners had taken their baskets, Nicorin waved and trotted off down the path, whistling. Raphe picked out some of the freshly gathered grapes, offering them to ’Deisha and Corson to sample. They tasted perfect to Corson, but ’Deisha shook her head regretfully. “Too sweet. Sorry, love.” There remained no trace of tension between the twins.

Raphe shrugged. “It’s no great matter. The bulk of them have been pressed. I want another load of these for blending, and the rest can go for raisins—but there’s no hurry now, so I won’t need you two here any longer. I thought you might want to go see how Nyc’s getting on.”

’Deisha smiled at him. “I’ll go down with the wagon. What about you, Corson? Have you had your fill of harvesting?”

“Nyc doesn’t need me fretting over her. But there’s time enough before dark for me to look through the temple again.”

“Why? What is there to look for?”

“The golden spider,” said Corson, and started off toward the ruins.

Raphe followed, curious. “Surely the fountain—”

“Maybe. But there was a bell for the bell-riddle, and bees for that riddle. Peaches. Harps. A well. Why haven’t we found a spider somewhere? A picture or carving of some kind, I’d guess.”

“There might have been one that was destroyed,” Raphe pointed out.

“There might. But how would ’Lorin know about it then?”

“Hmmm. The riddle could refer to real spiders that nest in the courtyard garden, I suppose.”

“Golden ones?” said Corson. She scooped up ’Lorin, who was painstakingly planting an orchard of twigs in the shade of the temple wall. Settling him on her shoulders, she suggested, “Let’s go see the golden spider, sprat, shall we?”

’Lorin shrieked assent in Corson’s ear, delighted to be up so high, taller than anyone in his family. They reached the courtyard without falling through the floor, despite ’Lorin’s wriggling and tugging on Corson’s braid. She was not sorry to set him down again. “Can you show me the spider?” she asked, with more patience than she felt.

To Corson’s disappointment, ’Lorin pointed up at the fountain. “There!”

“This, do you mean?” said Raphe, touching one of the tall, overarching stalks.

“Is that its leg?” said Corson.

’Lorin looked disgusted at their stupidity. “Not *tree*,” he said scornfully. “Spider, inna web! Right *there!*”

He pointed again, so confidently that Corson crouched down beside him, the better to follow his small, unwavering finger. After a moment she grinned and beckoned to Raphe. The brass spider in its web of delicate brazen threads was indeed in plain sight—from a child’s-eye point of view—on the underside of a broad bronze leaf. From this vantage point, other details of the sculpture became visible—a butterfly clinging with folded wings beneath a blossom of brass, a tiny lizard climbing up the back of a thick stem—all waiting to be discovered by the children for whom the courtyard was created, though no man or woman was likely to see them.

But Corson was indifferent to these secret charms of the fountain. What claimed her interest was one of the hanging, flower-shaped bells. From below, she could see into its heart, and with a shout of triumph she seized the clapper and wrenched it out, holding it up to show Raphe. There was no possibility of doubt. What she had found was a large brass key.

Despite Corson’s assurances, the family had been nonplussed at Nyctasia’s quick recovery from sunstroke. Mesthelde had insisted that she rest in bed for another day, and Nyctasia had been quite willing to obey when she heard that the worst of the crush was over. But no amount of persuasion or dire warning could keep her from joining Corson on another climb up Honeycomb Hill on the following day.

There were regular meals once more, and during breakfast that morning everyone reasoned or remonstrated with her. “The clappers of all the other bells are shaped like stamens,” Raphe argued. “We searched the whole fountain. There’s nothing more to find.”

“Oh, but—”

“You’re mad, Nyc, to think of going out in the sun so soon, healer or no!” Deisha scolded, seconded by Mesthelde.

Nyctasia had to raise her voice to be heard. “But we’re not going up to the temple, and I shan’t be in the sun,” she protested. “Our destination is that small cave on the hillside, where no sun has shone for a thousand years. I ought to be safe from sunstroke there.”

“Nyc thinks the lock to this key may be there somewhere,” Corson explained. “If the ‘key to mystery’ was really meant for a key, maybe the other riddle will yield some ‘wealth beyond a lifetime’s spending,’ who knows?” It didn’t seem very likely, even to Corson, but the key must unlock something, after all.

“Why the cave, though? How does that riddle go?”

“Neither in the open air, neither in a dwelling,” Nyctasia recited. “We all assumed that it meant the courtyard, but it could as well be a cave, and that’s the nearest one—probably the only one the children were allowed to explore freely.”

“Yes, but I know that cave—it’s empty,” Raphe objected. “It doesn’t reach in much farther than you saw, and there’s nothing there save rock and earth.”

Corson and Nyctasia exchanged a knowing look. “The earth doth secrets keep,” Nyctasia reminded him.

“For the wellspring’s weal lies deep,” Corson added. “I’ll wager you’ve never tried digging there, have you?”

## 20

THE OTHERS WERE still taken up with the harvest, but there were laborers enough for the remaining tasks, and the guests of the house could no longer be allowed to take part in the work. Corson and Nyctasia had the whole of Honeycomb Hill to themselves. They explored the interior of the cave with lanterns and candles, but found only the sign of the Cymvelan Circle, crudely scratched in stone. There was nothing for it but to dig.

The cave was too small to allow Corson to swing a pick, and she could barely stand upright to put her full weight behind a spade. There was not room for two to dig, but Nyctasia knelt and troweled the dirt and loose stones out of the way, sifting through them for clues, “Don’t stay too long in one spot,” she advised. “If there’s anything here, it shouldn’t be too well hidden. They expected children to find it.”



“Probably *only* children can find it,” Corson grunted. “I should have brought ’Lorin along instead of you.”

It was slow work, but they had not been at it long when Corson’s spade struck with a hollow thud against something unexpected. “Wait!” Nyctasia scraped a space around the edge of the spade. “This is wood.”

They both set to, clearing the shallow layer of soil from the planks beneath.

“I think it’s a chest.”

“It’s not a coffin, is it?”

It was neither. Before long they had uncovered most of the wooden flooring of the cave, and in the center was a small trapdoor. When they tugged it open, a cold wind came rushing up from the blackness below to strike their faces with a disconcerting chill. A lantern lowered into the hole revealed stairs cut into the stone, leading down into darkness.

“It’s a doorway for children, that’s certain,” said Nyctasia. “I might squeeze through, but you couldn’t possibly.”

For answer, Corson thrust the edge of her spade between two of the old boards and stamped it down with all her strength until the plank next to the open trapway began to break loose. Gripping the free side, she pulled up on the loosened board and tore it out with a crack of outraged joinery. Nyctasia stepped cautiously down the stairway far enough to push up on the next board while Corson wrenched it free from above. Corson tossed it aside and grinned down at her. “Now it’s wide enough for someone of a decent size, eh?”

“Yes, and even for a monstrous creature like you.” Nyctasia took up her lantern again and started slowly down the stairs.

Corson seized the other lamp and hastened to follow her. “Out of my way, mite, or I’ll step on you.”

## 21

THE PASSAGE WAS just wide enough for Corson and Nyctasia to walk abreast. They moved slowly, uncertain of their footing in the dim glow of the lanterns. Even their words were hushed by the dense gloom that stretched ahead of them endlessly, unbroken by any light or noise. They soon fell silent, listening, but heard only the sound of their boots scuffing the stone. They had not been walking long before the passage branched into two corridors, one continuing straight ahead but narrowing, the other angling off to the left. Corson turned into the roomier passage, but she soon regretted her choice.

It was clear that this part of the tunnel had served a definite purpose. On either side of them, long rectangular niches had been cut into the walls, some left empty, some closed over with clay tiles, their edges sealed with mortar. Although Corson had never seen their like before, she immediately knew that they were graves.

“And we came to the city of the dead,” Nyctasia recited, “wandering long among those dark corridors, and past the innumerable and silent host that dwell there. How humbled we were and awe-struck. What were all our travels but a path to this last, final journey before which all our adventures paled to country jaunts on a summer’s day?”

“What are you babbling about?”

“That’s from the memoirs of the Lady Ghystralda. She was always going to one place or another, and then filling scores of books with her experiences and the old travelers’ tales she heard. The woman had the most commonplace ideas, and she talked about them as if they were gems of learning and understanding, but when I was a child I thought them most profound. I read her works over and over, wishing I could run away from Rhostshyl and see the world .... This place is very similar to one she described, though, except that it was teeming with ghosts, according to her. It’s interesting to see some of the same customs in such different parts of the world.” She held her lantern close to one of the graves to study the tile, which was decorated with the sign of the Cymvela. Some of the tombs bore portraits of the departed, showing them sleeping serenely in a boat on calm waters, or reunited with their loved ones in a sunny garden. Others were ornamented with colored porcelain, brass medallions or terracotta lamps.

There were even small crystal perfume flasks pushed into the mortar, and a sweet scent still lingered in the air, as faint and fragile as the memory of a long-faded flower.

“You don’t suppose there really are ghosts here, do you?” Corson asked.

Nyctasia grinned at her. “Who can say what restless spirits walk these shadow-haunted halls?”

“Stop spouting bad verse at me!” Corson was glad of her rising anger, which made her forget how the place frightened her. “Here’s one I’ll wager you don’t know,” she said, and sang in a cracked, off-key voice:

*“Sing hey, sing ho, if we will or no,  
To the worms below must our journeys go.  
If you can’t pay, then you must owe.  
And death makes equal the high and the low.”*

“I learned that in the army. Write it down, why don’t you?”

“I shall. Corson, if you want to go back—”

“No! Why should we? Let’s see what there is to see.” She wanted desperately to go back, but she would rather risk the ghosts than admit it to Nyctasia. The place seemed more eerie and unnatural to her with every step—and less likely to lead to any treasure. The ditty she had sung for Nyctasia ran through her head in a mocking refrain. Unbidden, images of death rose before her, not the peaceful death these tombs promised, but the cruel, bloody death of the battlefield. Her own ghosts haunted her, if no others.

“Corson, come look at these!” Nyctasia called.

“What now?” Corson demanded. “If it’s not coin or loot I don’t want to see it.”

Nyctasia had come to the end of the passage, a smooth wall on which a remarkably realistic arched doorway had been painted. An inviting landscape of meadows and mountains lay beyond, and far in the distance a procession of men and women could be seen approaching. But Nyctasia was pointing to the ceiling of the crypt-chamber, which, Corson now saw, was also painted.

“More of their cursed daubs,” she snarled.

“These are different. They’re much older, and I don’t think they were done by the Cymvelans.”

The drawings were of grotesque beasts, much like those in the temple, but even more vivid and alive. They were drawn in a helter-skelter fashion all over the ceiling, and each figure seemed absorbed in some private but violent dance. The light of the lanterns plucked the painted surfaces from the darkness and the distorted, wildly gyrating creatures appeared to move, as if they had come to life.

Nyctasia softly said, “The Cymvelans lived in the light, but it was the darkness that secretly nourished them. It was that they were trying to show in their temple paintings, I think. The tree was the sign of their belief, which was rooted in darkness but spread its crown wide under the sky, and thrived in the sunlight. And all the while these crypts, with their prancing monsters, lay beneath the temple, and perhaps their rhythms were really the heart of the dance.”

“I know which side I’d wager on,” Corson said harshly, “in a contest between these”—she gestured toward the capering figures—“and those dancing poppets the Cymvelans painted. These speak for what’s truly in the blood. The rest is just some sort of children’s game, like your muzzy notions about the Indwelling Spirit. Suppose the Indwelling Spirit is really like one of these here?”

Nyctasia caught her breath. It hardly seemed to be Corson who spoke, but some malignant stranger who sought to turn her own deepest fears against her. Forcing herself to speak lightly, she said, “Well, now I’m frightened too, Corson. I hope you’re satisfied.”

“I’m not,” said Corson. “Frightened, I mean. Or satisfied either, for that matter. I don’t want the bones of idiot wizards, or the scrawls of lunatics—it’s treasure I’m after. Let’s quit this place and try the other tunnel. These lanterns are good yet for a while.”

They began to retrace their steps, but just before they reached the main passageway, Corson stopped in her tracks and looked back. “Nyc, you don’t think the treasure’s buried back there, in one of those graves?”

Nyctasia hesitated. “I confess, the idea did occur to me, but I don’t think it would have occurred to

the Cymvelans. They had more respect for the dead than that. I think that burial chamber was a sacred place to them, not just a convenient spot to use as a treasury. And nothing in the riddles suggests it. But even if I thought it likely, nothing would induce me to open those tombs and look. You can do as you like, of course.”

“Thanks,” said Corson drily, “but you’re probably right. Let’s go on.” They entered the narrower branch of the corridor, with Corson in the lead. Here they had to walk single-file. “Still, they wouldn’t be the first, you know,” Corson continued. “During the Battle of Aylrhui, they looted the tomb of one of the old kings. There were riches in there beyond anyone’s belief. Plates of gold, chains of silver, jewels, all sorts of rich things.” She ticked them off on her fingers like a householder’s marketing.

“All part of the spoils of war, I suppose?”

“No. The robbers were caught and buried alive, as a sign of goodwill. That war was settled by truce, you see, since neither side looked like winning. It was all for nothing. A minor skirmish, they called it.” She shook her head. “Scores of us were killed. But I’ve no right to complain. I was well-paid .... You probably think it’s wrong to rob the dead, but what harm could it do them, answer me that.”

“It could not harm them,” said Nyctasia seriously, “but perhaps it could harm you.”

“Ghosts, do you mean?” said Corson, frowning. Had she heard something in the tunnel, just ahead of them? Not listening to Nyctasia’s answer, she peered into the dark corridor, trying to pierce the shadows, but there was nothing to be seen. She stopped and slowly drew her sword, motioning for Nyctasia to do the same. “I think there’s someone ahead of us,” she whispered, no louder than a sigh. “I hear breathing.”

Nyctasia heard nothing at first, but as they both held their breath to listen, the sound of heavily drawn breathing came to her out of the darkness. “Shall we go back?” she asked softly.

“No. I think I know who’s skulking down here, and I want to meet them face to face,” Corson said, with an almost wolfish grin, “This is no crew of whispers and shadows. Ghosts don’t breathe.” She blew out her lantern. “There’ll be light ahead, I wager. Stay behind me.”

As she strode eagerly up the passageway, all her fears seemed to drop away from her. For an instant, Nyctasia lost sight of her in the gloom. As she hurried to catch up, she heard Corson’s shout and the unmistakable clang of blade against blade. Someone screamed.

Corson was framed by the entrance to a large cavern lit by wall-torches. A body lay sprawled at her feet, and she was fighting with a squat, strongly built man. Nyctasia could only stop and watch in fascinated horror. She knew who would win this battle, and so did Corson’s opponent. He had the face of one who sees his own death plainly before him and knows there is no escape. Corson’s back was to Nyctasia, but she had no doubt that Corson was smiling.

There was a flicker of steel, and the man’s sword struck sparks from the stone as it dropped to the floor. He seemed to Nyctasia to take an impossibly long time to fall.

Corson stooped over him. “Take the sword from the other one, Nyc,” she said, without turning around. She was removing a ring of keys from the dead man’s belt. “Here’s the mystery of these ruins—it’s a slavers’ den. No wonder folk have disappeared here. Disappeared right into the slave markets of Celys, that’s my guess.” Swinging the keys jauntily at her side, she walked into the large cave.

Nyctasia followed, marveling at the mystery that was Corson herself. One moment she was trembling because she’d found a few graves, and the next moment she was putting other folk in their graves as carelessly as a cat killing mice. She was obviously reluctant to plunder the tombs, despite her bravado, but she stripped the bodies of her own prey without a qualm.

“See for yourself,” she said to Nyctasia, sounding very pleased with herself.

The cavern was large and cold, and the roof was very high—beyond the reach of the guttering torches. Another passageway entered it at the left. The chamber could easily have held fifty people, but there were only five, three men and two women, manacled to the wall. All of them were looking back at Corson and Nyctasia with frightened, apprehensive eyes.

Corson raised the keys and smiled. “Don’t worry, those vermin are dead. We’ll set you free.”

The prisoners twisted their necks to look at each other. A woman said something to them in a language Nyctasia couldn’t understand, but Corson’s years in the Imperial Army had made her familiar

with more than one eastern dialect. Much to Nyctasia's surprise, and rather to her annoyance, Corson answered the woman fluently, and the two began talking rapidly to each other. The others listened avidly, and one of the men started to cry. Nyctasia grabbed the keys and hastened to unlock their chains.

A slight, fair-haired man, shorter than the others, said to her, "I thank you, mistress Edonaris. How did you come to find us?" He rubbed his wrists slowly.

"By chance," said Nyctasia shortly, busy with the clumsy locks.

He followed her. "But what are they saying?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," she admitted.

Corson, looking more pleased than ever, told her, "They're from beyond the Spine. Can't you understand anything of what they say? With all your learning, I thought you'd surely be easy with their tongue."

"I have, of course, studied both Ancient and Modern Liruvathe from texts, but one learns only the literary forms that way," Nyctasia said, in obvious frustration. "If they wrote down their words, I believe I could read them, but it's not likely that they can write."

"That's not much use, then," said Corson smugly. "Now this lass tells me that all of this group except him"—she jerked her thumb at the man who'd spoken to Nyctasia—"are from Mount Eilas, in Liruvath. They were on their way to Amron Therain when they were ambushed and brought here. Probably they'd have been smuggled to Osela and sold."

One of the men broke in, gesturing wildly and shouting. The others seemed to agree with whatever it was he was saying.

Corson translated, "There's at least three more of the bastards about. He also says that they're dung-caters, the spawn of scrofulous pigs, and that they rut with dogs in the gutter."

Nyctasia shook her head, smiling. "Even if he did write that down, I don't think I could follow it. Unquestionably the vernacular, and probably a corrupt dialect. Let's get these people out of here before the rest of the misbegotten offspring of unhealthy swine return."

Her words made no impression on Corson. "They want to kill them," she said simply, handing out the weapons that had belonged to the dead guards. "Let's wipe out this rat's nest now. Why not?" The four easterners took down the torches and gathered a few large rocks.

"I can think of any number of good reasons why not, but surely—"

"Nyc, these folk want vengeance, not reasons."

"I don't," said the fair-haired man tensely. "I want to leave, and if you've any sense you'll tell them to do the same."

"He's right, Corson. Why take the risk?"

"Because if we don't catch those scum now they might get away!"

"Yes, but so might we. We're probably outnumbered. They'll be better armed than we are, and they know these tunnels." She pointed at the knot of haggard, grim-faced prisoners. "They must be weak, they're in no shape to fight. Tell them to come away now, and we'll send others to hunt down the slavers."

Corson translated her advice to the Liruvatid, but she did not need to translate their answer. One woman spoke for all of them, and Nyctasia understood her well enough. They all clutched at their weapons and stood firm. Nyctasia sighed and drew her shortsword. The woman smiled.

"Fools!" exclaimed the other man. "You've no right—"

"Go, if you want, no one's keeping you here," Corson told him sharply, but a moment later they all knew it was too late for that. There were heavy footsteps approaching down the tunnel on the left.

Barking a few curt orders to the prisoners, Corson grouped them on either side of the opening. The fair-haired man caught Nyctasia's eye, and she shrugged. They joined the others and waited.

"We should have gone while we had the chance," he muttered.

"If you don't mean to fight, stay out of the way," Corson said softly, "or you may find a knife in your gut by mischance. Now keep still."

They listened, barely breathing, as the footsteps came closer.

Despite herself, Nyctasia began to feel the same eagerness to strike that inflamed the others. She recognized the thrill of waiting, with an arrow on the string, for the great eagle to swoop lower, waiting for the perfect moment to loose the arrow and bring down the bird that would harry her flocks no longer ....

But it was people they waited to slaughter here, she reminded herself. For, although she had urged caution, Nyctasia did not really doubt the outcome of this fight. Yet the bird of prey carried off a lamb only to feed its young, while the human raptors they were hunting preyed on their own kind, for gain. If it had been her duty to kill the one, why should these be spared? Were such people fit to live?

It had seemed to Nyctasia from the beginning that these caverns somehow called forth thoughts of death and destruction, nourished them, fostered them .... But, right or wrong, her choice had been made, and she was determined to see it through.

Then the first of the slavers entered the cave. Instantly, one of the foreigners clubbed him over the head, and the others fell on him. Nyctasia turned her head—clearly, they didn't need her help. It was soon over.

She looked up to see four more of the bandits at the tunnel's mouth, and for a moment her eyes met theirs. They were heavily armed, but to Nyctasia's surprise they suddenly turned and fled back up the passage. Corson and some of the others gave chase, but they soon returned. The one large tunnel had split up into a maze of smaller ones, Corson reported, and their quarry had scattered and quickly disappeared. "Rutting cowards!" she spat. She hated to let the slavers escape, but she knew better than to run blindly into those twisting tunnels.

"It was the sight of an Edonaris that chased them off," the fair-haired man explained. "They know their game's up if the Edonaris have found them out."

"*That's* why they turned tail so quickly the morning they attacked us, Nyc. They saw you. And I thought it was my mighty prowess that drove them away!"

Nyctasia nodded slowly. "The Edonaris would search the ruins stone by stone if one of their own disappeared. No wonder the ghosts have never troubled them." She began to laugh and could hardly stop, despite the puzzled looks the others turned upon her. The fight was over, and she'd not had to do a thing. Nothing at all!

## 22

A CURSORY SEARCH of the tunnels did not reveal the Cymvelan treasure, but gold and goods belonging to the slavers were discovered, including copies of the slave-brands used by all the major and minor municipalities of the Midlands. Diastor gave orders to have them taken at once to the smithy and destroyed. "It's not lawful for anyone but the City Magistrates to possess them."

"I repent that I doubted Aunt Mesthelde," said Raphe grimly. "Small wonder if screams have been heard at the temple."

For the time, the Liruvathid captives were quartered in an encampment of their own, provided with tents and clothing and food. Nyctasia was surprised at first to find that all of them were in sound health, suffering neither from starvation nor ill-treatment. But she soon realized that this was simple common sense on the part of the slave-traders; weakness or injury would only have lowered the value of their merchandise.

"I must take this opportunity to learn how Liruvathe is really spoken," she said to the others, after the new guests had been settled. "The rift between theory and practice has been the undoing of more than one scholar."

"If that means that you don't know anything useful, it's the truth," said Corson. "I've told you as much myself."

"That's what it means," Nyctasia admitted.

"It's well for us that you're here, Corson," said Diastor. "My wife and her brother know enough Liruvathe to deal with the eastern traders at Amron Therain, but they won't be back from Osela for a fortnight."

“Do you ever travel to the imperial markets yourselves?” asked Nyctasia.

He shook his head. “It would be quite an undertaking to transport the casks so far as that. We can’t spare that many people for so long.”

“It might be a saving, though, in the end,” said Mesthelde thoughtfully. “We’d get a better price from purchasers than we do from other merchants. We should give some thought to it, perhaps.”

“A splendid idea!” urged Jenisorn. “Now if you sent me to the Imperial University, I could find out all about the markets at the capital—”

“Or me!” said Tepicacia, who was a year or two older than Jenisorn.

“We should send you both back to the nursery,” said Mesthelde. “Get along with you!”

Nyctasia smiled. “I wanted to go to the university too, when I was a girl, and my family wouldn’t hear of it either. Perhaps it’s not too late.” In truth, the idea appealed to her a good deal, and she wondered why she hadn’t thought of it before. She would be sorry to leave her new kin, but the pursuit of her studies would be work far more satisfying to her than grape-farming and winemaking.

“You won’t learn anything useful there either,” Corson scoffed. “Of all the feckless good-for-nothings born of woman, students are the worst of the lot.”

“There’s good sense speaking,” said Diastor warmly, and even Mesthelde looked at Corson with approval. “Don’t be stirring up the youngsters to long for Liruvath, Nyctasia,” he cautioned. “It’s only the tidings of Rhostshyl that’s turned their thoughts from running off across the mountains to study a lot of nonsense—”

“And live like wild swine,” put in Mesthelde. “Students! As if philosophy ever put bread on the table!”

Nyctasia winked at Jenisorn. “Admittedly, scholarship is a luxury for the few,” she said mildly, “but consider what valuable connections your young folk could make at the university. Children of wealthy and noble families—the very patrons for fine and costly wines.”

This possibility had not occurred to Mesthelde, and for a moment she weighed the commercial advantages of a university education, but they were not sufficiently tempting to change her mind. “More likely they’d fall in with a lot of tosspots and troublemakers, and take to gambling and Hlann knows what mischief. Even if they did mix with scholars of good family, they’d only pick up extravagant ways and come home in debt—if they came home at all.”

’Deisha resented her elders’ remarks, on Nyctasia’s behalf, far more than Nyctasia did herself. “Well then,” she snapped, “why not send Jen and ’Cacia and ’Corin into the Imperial Army instead? They could have a practical education like Corson’s, all at the crown’s expense. Only think of the savings!”

Diastor began to remonstrate with her, but Mesthelde cut his words short. If she was perturbed by her niece’s insolence, she nevertheless had the grace to laugh. “That’s a very good idea, my dear—it would satisfy their restlessness and teach them some discipline into the bargain. And now that we’ve settled what’s to be done with them, it’s time we decided what to do about our unfortunate guests. What’s to become of them?”

It did not occur to any of the Edonaris that they were not responsible for the welfare of the hapless foreigners. Their position clearly made it their duty to assist the victims of the slavers. “I don’t see any great difficulty,” said Diastor. “The money that was found probably belonged to them—the *vahn* knows they’ve a right to it. Divided among them, it will be enough to see them home.”

Nesanye nodded. “They can travel with Leclairin and Aldri-chas as far as Amron Therain, after Harvest Festival, and they’re sure to find their own people there. There’s always a party of merchants bound for the Spine.”

“I’ll be going to Amron Therain soon, to take a riverboat,” Corson said. “I can see them safe that far.”

“But you’re not leaving yet,” said Raphe, dismayed. “Not before harvest-fest, surely!”

The others laughed. “Well, not before I’ve had a chance to explore those tunnels more carefully,” Corson assured him. “We’ve not yet found a lock to fit that Cymvelan key, you know.”

The fair-haired man among the prisoners was himself a Midlander, who introduced himself as Garast brenn Vale. “I’ve lived most of my life downriver, but I was born in these parts,” he explained. “My

people deal in silk and Igkosian tapestry. We were on the way back from Osela fair, and when we passed through Vale I left the others, to have a look at the ruins. I had some schooling among the Cymvelans as a child, and I—”

“You must understand Liruvathe well, then, if you trade in imperial goods,” said Raphe, who’d been talking to Corson.

“Well, no, not really, but my wife ...”

“It’s strange your folk didn’t make inquiry for you when you failed to return,” Mesthelde interrupted.

“Didn’t they? But they must have,” said Garast uneasily.

“We’d have heard about any disappearances from hereabout.”

“You don’t understand,” said Garast, but he made no attempt to explain.

“We understand well enough,” said Raphe. “You’re not the first treasure-seeker to come sneaking about here.”

“The dogs catch them betimes,” ’Deisha put in. “I wonder how many others have fallen into the hands of those slavers, though, and we none the wiser.”

“They’d only themselves to blame if they did, for not seeking our leave in the first place,” said Mesthelde. “If we’d known they were there, we’d have known they were missing.”

Raphe frowned. “It must have been you stealing food from my harvesters, scaring folk away from the temple.”

Garast protested his innocence with some indignation, but Diastor silenced him with a wave of his hand. “We don’t much mind if every fool in the valley wants to waste time looking for that treasure—begging your pardon, my dear Corson—but we do object to prowlers who don’t make themselves known, thief or no.”

“I—I couldn’t make myself known. I have enemies in these parts.”

“I daresay,” said Mesthelde, folding her arms.

“Garast, you really may as well speak the truth,” suggested Nyctasia. “The Edonaris were always friends to the Circle. There’s nothing to fear.”

The others turned to her in surprise. “The Circle—?”

“It’s not true, I’m no Cymvelan!”

“No, of course not. But you were as a child, no? You see, I think I have something that belongs to you,” said Nyctasia, handing him the page of Cymvelan rhymes and riddles.

## 23

THE EDONARIS HAD no time to spare for treasure-hunting, but Corson, Nyctasia and Garast undertook a thorough search of the underground passageways without delay. A few led to empty chambers of stone, others ended abruptly in a solid wall, but there were those which opened into deep caves high in the foothills of the Spine, some of them leagues from Vale, and more than one on Saetarrin land.

“Most convenient for smuggling people to foreign slave markets,” Diastor observed, when the family was told of this discovery. “The first thing we’ll do when the pressing’s over is have masons seal the entrances on this end. I daresay the Saetarrin will do the same when they’re told of it.”

“They’ll have to,” said ’Cacia darkly, “but I wonder how much Lady Avareth knows of it already ...” From the looks that passed among them, it was clear that they all had been thinking something of the sort.

“It’s no use asking that,” said the practical Raphe. “You know we can’t afford to make enemies of the Saetarrin. If they’ve been in league with outlaw slavers, we could never prove it. We’ll have to be satisfied with putting a stop to it.”

“Yes, you’re all to keep your suspicions to yourselves,” said Diastor firmly, but he couldn’t help smiling as he leaned back in his chair, regarding the vaulted ceiling thoughtfully. “Of course, if any of the malefactors are caught, it will be interesting to hear what they have to say of their dealings with our noble neighbors. But till that happens, there’s to be no talk of the matter, is that understood?” He looked

pointedly at 'Cacia.

"Yes, sir," she sighed.

"And you three, if you must keep up this treasure-chase of yours, be careful. Take care you don't lose yourselves in a tunnel that leads right to the dungeons of Castle Saetarrin."

"And 'ware another thing," said Raphe seriously. "If any of those tunnels lead beneath the temple, remember how unsound the flooring above you is. The treasure won't do you much good if you're buried in a stonefall."

It was Mesthelde, as usual, who put in the last word. "Treasure!" she said. "If there ever was a treasure, those slavers would have found it. It's trouble you're looking for, not treasure, you mark me."

"I hate to admit it, but Lady Mesthelde is probably right," said Corson, discouraged. The tunnel they were exploring had forked into two branches, and they had taken the left way, only to come up against another dead end. "This is fool's sport. We may as well fish for hake in a hayloft."

They slowly made their way back through the narrow stone corridor and started along the other branch of the tunnel. "Fool's sport is better than none at all," said Nyctasia. "I myself have always liked the chase better than the kill. I don't even believe in this treasure, but hunting for it does pass the time."

They were surprised when Garast, who spoke little, suddenly said, "I never believed in the treasure either—none of us did who'd lived here as children. Members of the Circle worked hard and lived simply. There were no riches to be seen."

"So Rowan told us," said Nyctasia. "And the Edonaris, who knew them well, say the same."

"Then what are you looking for here?" Corson demanded.

"I don't know, but there's something here they want—the ones who survived the attack. Something they were forced to leave behind when they ran away—saved themselves and left the rest to be slaughtered."

"I suppose they escaped by means of these tunnels, then."

"They must have," he agreed. "They probably hid down here until ... until it was over, then sneaked away. My whole family was killed that night. I was the youngest—just a small child—but I remember. Now they mean to come back and claim their own. But it belongs to us—to Rowan and Jocelys and to me—not to those traitors. It's our birthright!"

Nyctasia forbore to mention that any treasure found on Edonaris land would in fact belong to the Edonaris. Time enough to deal with the rights of the matter if any treasure really did come to light. She said only. "Rowan wanted no part of it, though."

"Rowan's a coward. I know he thinks I'm crazed to come here, but he told me what he remembered of the riddles, and so did Jocelys, though she fears for her family. I don't think they'll refuse to share in the treasure when I find it."

"When *we* find it," Corson reminded him.

"*If* we find it," said Nyctasia.

"If we find it," Corson continued, "I'll not refuse to share in it either."

There was a long silence before Garast said, hesitantly, "I don't think it's anything you'll want, whatever it is, but you'll want to find it before the Cymvelans do. They mean to use it somehow to avenge themselves on the Valleylanders for destroying the Circle. I learned that much when they first sought me out, and they told Jocelys the same."

"With gold enough they could hire an army of mercenaries and lay waste the whole valley," said Corson. "The land's ill defended." She sighed, thinking of other uses she could find for such a sum.

For Nyctasia, the quest had ceased to be a game. She had lost one home, and was Vale now threatened as well? "Why didn't you tell us this before?" she asked sharply.

He stopped and turned to face her. "Ask rather why I tell you now! It's not from any love of the Valleylanders, I promise you! And the Edonaris—you call them friends of the Circle, but what did they do to help that night while their neighbors murdered the Cymvelans? I'd not raise my hand to save the whole of the valley from sure doom!"

Corson gripped the hilt of her dagger, ready to use it. There was no room in the tunnel to wield a sword. Rowan was right, she thought, he is mad.



“Very well, then, why do you warn us now?” Nyctasia asked calmly.

“Because I need your help to carry out the search. You have the favor of the Edonaris. And time is passing—the last of the Circle are to meet here at the temple on Yu Valeicu. I’ll prevent them from claiming my heritage if I can, and you’ll not abandon the search now either, if you care about the fate of the valley.”

The Turning, the harvest holiday called Yu Valeicu—the Changes—in this part of the world, was less than a fortnight away. “I don’t believe a word of it,” said Corson, before Nyctasia could reply. “You needn’t try to frighten us into keeping on with the hunt. If there’s any treasure to be had here, we’ll find it, and we’ll deal with the Cymvelans when they appear—if they do. They could be kept out of the temple, you know, even if they know a dozen secret entrance-ways. The Edonaris can post guards.”

“That’s so,” said Nyctasia, glad as ever of Corson’s matter-of-fact view of the matter.

Even Garast seemed satisfied. “That would suit my purposes. I don’t care why you help me search, so long as you do it. But for your own sake, I suggest we try to find it before Yu Valeicu, all the same.”

“By all means,” said Corson, “the sooner the better. And we won’t find it by standing about here while our lamps burn low. We’d best go on or go back, before we run out of oil.”

“I’m going on,” said Garast promptly.

Nyctasia blew out her lamp to save the oil. “We might as well go on for a way, since we’ve come so far.” They set out again, Nyctasia walking in the middle between the two burning lanterns.

“It can’t be much farther to the end,” Corson said. “We must be halfway to Osela by now. What’s that—not another blind end—!”

She groped ahead of her uncertainly. The passageway narrowed to a sharp angle overhead, but the obstruction didn’t seem to be solid stone. She pushed against it and felt it give way slightly. “This is wood!” Handing her lantern to Nyctasia, she set her back against the sloping planks and slowly forced them up and outward. A shaft of bright sunlight startled them all.

Nyctasia slipped through the narrow opening and pulled at the door from above. Garast followed her, and both held it open for Corson. They found themselves in the middle of a stand of pear trees. Garast went to investigate a nearby building.

When they let the door fall back into place, it seemed to become a part of the gently sloping ground. The boards had been covered with a deep layer of turf, its moss and grass rooted in the very wood.

“Clever,” said Corson. “Hard to find, but not too hard. And those who find it don’t come back to tell of it.”

“And their disappearance feeds the rumors that the place is haunted, so most folk stay clear of it.”

Corson spat. “A tidy profit for the slave-dealers all round. But they won’t find it so easy to smuggle their wares through the valley in future. Blood of the Hlann, I hope they’re caught! I want to see them hang.”

“Perhaps you will,” said Garast, rejoining them. “Come look at this—someone’s been hiding in the ruins here. Maybe some of them are still lurking around these parts, hoping to recover their gold.” He led them around the corner of a tall stone wall and climbed the white marble steps, now neglected and muddy, littered with leaves. “These were our living-quarters ... we were sleeping here that night, when—” He shook his head. “There, you see, someone’s camped here recently.”

“Why, this is where *we* sheltered for the night, on our way to Vale,” said Nyctasia. “It looks different by day.”

Corson looked round with distaste. “I remember that filthy pool well enough. So that’s how those bastards who attacked us got away from me—just vanished down a hole in the ground like the weasels they are. It was too dark for me to find the door.” She examined the remains of the campfire, and frowned. “But you’re right, someone has been here since we were, and not long ago.” What interested her more than this discovery, however, was that she no longer sensed the disquieting presence of magic in the place. Could it really have been a dream, after all? She wanted to question Nyctasia, but would not do so before Garast, and said instead, “More likely it’s our harvest-thief hiding here than—”

Then, as if to resolve the question, someone suddenly broke from the cover of the bushes nearby and darted behind them into the building.

They gave chase on the instant, but within the roofed entrance-way were corridors leading left and right, and just before them was an open room with another door in its far wall.

Corson cursed. "We'll never catch him. Nyc, stay here and guard this doorway." Corson ran down one corridor and Garast the other, looking into each empty room as they passed. Some still held simple wooden pallet-beds, or tables. But the roof and walls were so broken down in places that Corson saw that their quarry could easily have climbed out through a hole and escaped. Discouraged, she slowed to a walk and looked around her carefully, but saw no sign that someone was hiding in any room she passed.

The corridor finally widened to a hall, cluttered with the remains of long tables and benches. Garast was wandering through the room aimlessly, as if looking for something he'd lost. "We had our lessons here, and meals," he said.

"Are there cellars?"

He pointed to an inner room. "Beneath the kitchen. But I doubt there are any secret passages out of them—they were only used to store potatoes and preserves and such. In here, through the bakery, I'll show you."

Corson peered down the stairs to the dark cellars and considered whether to send Garast back for a lantern while she kept watch. But the very dust on the flagstone floor showed that no one besides themselves had been there for a good while. "It's no use," she said. "If he knows of a way out, he's gone already. There are probably dozens of hidden ways in and out of this warren."

Garast turned away and pushed wide the back door of the kitchen, which opened onto the large inner yard with the old well at its center. Corson now saw that there were cloistered walkways on three sides of the yard, their tapering arches supported by a colonnade of slender pillars. Where there had once been neatly laid out kitchen gardens and flowerbeds, there was now a wilderness of weeds and greenery run to seed. Nyctasia was kneeling in a tangle of overgrown foliage in the far corner of the yard, gathering sprigs of a few low-growing plants. "These were knot-gardens," she said delightedly, as they approached. "In all four corners—look, you can still see the designs."

The plants had been arranged in a symmetrical swirl of interlaced lines, Corson saw, though the pattern was now partly obscured by new outgrowths and uninvited wildweeds. "Trust the Cymvelans to make a puzzle of something simple," she said.

"Oh, this isn't a Cymvelan notion. It's traditional to grow certain herbs together in patterns. Some of the designs are hundreds of years old. This one's called Lace of Ease, because these three herbs all—"

"Why weren't you watching the entrance?" Corson demanded, dismissing the lecture in herb-lore.

"I was—you can see it from here, through the doorway. No one's gone by, I assure you."

Corson shrugged. "Never mind. He's far away by now, whoever he was. What have you got there, fresh cuttings of poisonous plants for that nasty herbal of yours?"

"Unfortunately, I left that in Hlasven. But I have an herb here that would be good for you—dumbcane. It causes muteness. A pity the effect is only temporary."

Corson grinned. "Have you got one that causes deafness? That's what I really need when I'm in your company."

"Those who will not hear are worse off than those who cannot hear," said Nyctasia sententiously, turning back to the tangled herb-bed, and pretending not to see the rude hand-sign with which Corson answered her, "It wouldn't be difficult to restore these gardens," she mused. "They must have been very well tended once."

"They were," said Garast, "and very pretty they looked, but we children didn't like them, because we were expected to help weed and water them. I used to carry pails of water from the rain-barrels for these herbs."

"Hornwort ... ?" Nyctasia muttered to herself, frowning at a curled, yellow leaf.

"Why?" Corson asked Garast.

"Why—?" he echoed.

"Why did you fetch water from the rain-barrels instead of drawing it from the well there?"

Garast looked startled. "I don't know ... I don't remember that we ever used that well ..." he said slowly.

Nyctasia looked up, then got to her feet. The three of them all started to speak at once, and stopped. Then, without another word, they dashed to the well and stared down over the edge.

They could see nothing but the silhouettes of their own heads and shoulders darkly reflected below, and the well-rope hanging down the middle of the shaft. Corson grabbed it and pulled it up easily. There was no bucket at the end, but large knots had been tied in the heavy rope at regular intervals, to serve as footholds.

“This rope’s new,” she said.

“Why isn’t it wet?” puzzled Nyctasia.

“We’ll soon find out,” said Garast, and started to climb over the side, but the others persuaded him to wait till they’d lowered a lantern into the well to judge its depth.

It struck bottom far sooner than they’d expected, and with an abrupt clatter instead of a splash. “It struck sparks!” exclaimed Nyctasia. “It must have hit stone.” In the faint glow of the overturned lantern, they could see that it rested on a flat, unyielding surface that was dark and highly polished. “Black marble?” she suggested. “Do they mine marble this side of the Spine?”

No one answered her. Corson and Garast were both straining to see into a large, dark shadow on one side of the shaft. “That must be the opening,” breathed Garast. “You two stay here and discuss it if you like—I’m going down there.”

They watched him drop to his feet on the smooth, dark flooring, take up the lantern, and disappear into the arched opening in the wall. Corson climbed down at once, and Nyctasia lowered the other two lanterns to her before following. The knots of rope were too widely spaced for her to reach easily, and she had to inch her way down slowly and cautiously.

“Hurry up, can’t you!” Corson said sharply. She felt buried alive in the narrow ring of stones that pressed in on her from all sides. Her heart pounded in panic, and her throat clenched like a fist at each breath, but she set Nyctasia on her feet before she hastened through the open archway into the stone corridor beyond.

Here, at least she could move forward, and she breathed more freely. “I am so ruttin’ sick of holes and tunnels and scurrying around in burrows like a mole,” she complained. “People belong on the earth, not under it—unless they’re dead. And don’t you tell me there’s an old Eswaine legend that folk first sprouted from the ground like carrots!”

Nyctasia chuckled. “I don’t know of such a legend, but really there ought to be one. Corson, I believe you have the makings of a genuine philosopher.”

Corson was uncertain, as ever, whether Nyctasia was mocking her. “I believe you have the makings of genuine half-wit. Come along, we’ll never catch up to Garast at this pace. I don’t trust that one out of my sight.” She stopped to wait for Nyctasia. The corridor had widened enough to allow them to stand side by side.

“I can’t keep up with those long legs of yours, you know. If you’re in such a hurry, you’d best go on without me.” But despite this advice, Nyctasia took her hand, and they went on together.

Corson soon began to feel calmer. “The worst of it is,” she said, smiling, “that Steifann won’t believe a word of all this.”

## 24

WHEN THEY CAME to the first bend in the tunnel, they made their way around the corner warily. “If it branches into two ways, I swear I’ll turn back right now—” Corson began.

But the tunnel ended only a few feet ahead of them. They stood at the edge of a terrace of sorts, overlooking a vast round cavern that stretched far into the distance in every direction. A waterfall plunged down the wall on one side, filling a wide pool and flowing on in a stream that meandered through the great chamber to disappear beneath the facing wall. The water had cut deep winding channels into the bedrock, and even pierced the masses of stone to form natural bridges in a few places.

“The whole hill must be hollow,” Corson said, and her voice echoed back to them from the empty air.

“Honeycombed, in fact.”

A low parapet wall guarded the ledge from the sheer, steep drop to the stone floor below—probably to protect the children, Nyctasia thought. Corson took one look over the side and backed away hastily. “I hate heights,” she muttered, “especially when they’re depths.”

They could not have seen so much by lanternlight, had the light not been given back a thousandfold by the facets of the gleaming gemstones that studded the walls of the cavern on all sides. Corson and Nyctasia seemed to be standing in the jeweled heart of the earth.

Corson lost no time in prying loose one of the brilliant stones with her dagger and testing it, but to her disappointment she scratched it easily. “Well, the treasure’s not a diamond-mine,” she said sadly, “This is a lot of worthless crystal.”

“Pity,” said Nyctasia. “Listen—Garast’s calling us.” She leaned over the stone balustrade to search the expanse of the great cavern. Echoes chased the sound from place to place, but she finally saw Garast standing on the far side of one of the bridges and waving for them to join him.

“How did you get down there?” she shouted, but her words were lost in meaningless noise, along with his answer.

They went on in the direction he pointed, following the terrace along toward the cascading water. They came to the mouth of another tunnel, but Garast waved them on, still pointing to the waterfall. He seemed much excited by something he’d found.

“Does he expect us to *dive* down there?” Corson said, but the ledge did lead behind the wall of falling water, and there they found the opening to a deep spiral stairway.

Nyctasia cupped her hands to catch a drink of the rushing water, and savored the clean, secret taste of ancient stone. “Perhaps the Cymvelans did have water for their gardens during the drought, after all,” she thought, as she followed Corson down the winding stairs. The descent was an easy one, since Garast had lit the wall-torches and left wide the heavy brass door at the foot of the stairs. A flagstone path bordered the broad pool, and they emerged from behind the waterfall a little dizzy, and dazed by the noise, but quite dry. Garast was waiting for them, trying to shout over the roaring of the water, beckoning them on.

The immense chamber was even more breathtaking from within than from above. They followed the curving stream as it wound across broad shallows and swirled into small, perfectly round pools. It ran through deep, straight channels and fell into purling cataracts over stairlike formations of stone. The water, cutting through bare rock, was as clear and bright as the crystals that glittered all around the chamber. Nyctasia suddenly remembered how she and her brother Emeryc had played as children, lighting candle-ends stuck to bits of bark and floating them downstream at night, to see whose would burn the longest. What games children could have in a place like this!

Strangest of all was a spring of seething hot water that bubbled up from a cleft boulder to fill a deep, steaming pool. Corson tested the water in disbelief—the pool was as hot as soup, and the spring was actually boiling at the source. “I don’t understand this,” she said, frowning. “How did they do it? It doesn’t seem like a spell, somehow, but how could it be natural?”

“No one knows.” Nyctasia said quietly. “I’ve read of such springs, but I never thought to find one. This could be the true treasure, everlasting, precious beyond measure—the well-spring’s weal. Waters like this may possess astonishing healing properties!”

“What about the danger and treachery?” asked Corson, who had begun to expect the worst of everything.

“I’ve no idea. It’s said that all the world was water once, and that these are all that remains of the Mother of Waters. There’s no telling what powers this spring may have.”

“So you know no more about it than I do. You’re just happy about all the baths you could take in it.” Corson turned to Garast. “Is this what you wanted to show us?”

“No. It’s over there.” He started across the floor toward the far wall, and was soon lost to view among the strange stone structures that hung in graceful pillars. Some had been carved by wind and water into fantastic curving shapes, others sculpted by hand into beautiful or bizarre figures. A few of these natural columns had been hollowed, filled with oil, and fitted with wicks of waxed rope to create

giants' candles which Garast had already lit. Their light flickered eerily, glinting on the crystals and casting monstrous shadows over the walls, and behind every stone form. Bats began to skitter and swoop about the cave, disturbed by the unaccustomed noise and light.

Corson and Nyctasia filled their lamps with oil and followed after Garast. Nyctasia would have liked to linger to study the detailed carvings, but he hurried them on to his new discovery, a large crack in the cave wall.

Irritated by his look of self-satisfaction, Corson shoved him aside to look through the rift herself. "There's something behind this wall. Look, Nyc, you can see all the way through to another cave."

But not even Nyctasia could fit through the fissure. "I knew I should have brought 'Lorin instead of you," Corson grumbled as they followed along the wall, looking for another way in. When they came to the end they turned back, this time climbing over the high outcroppings of rock in the way, instead of skirting them. From the top of one of these, and only from the top, they could see the dark opening into the wall behind it. Corson clambered down the other side in an instant, followed by Garast. He pushed past her and went in while she was helping Nyctasia descend.

Inside, they found a stark stone chamber, a low-ceilinged cave with none of the skillful embellishment of the crystal cavern. In the center of the floor was a small enclosure made of heaped stones, just large enough to hold one crouching person. Above it, crudely painted on the rock, were more of the bestial figures they had seen in the crypt, and they could just make out that something was stacked in small separate piles on the ground. They huddled closer to look at them and saw that they were animal skulls, dark brown with age, each lying atop a heap of bones. Finally, level with the top of Nyctasia's head, was a large hole in the wall that was clearly some sort of passage. Two slabs of stone served as stairs leading up to it.

"Where are we?" asked Corson, after a silence.

"This," Nyctasia said softly, "is the way to life and knowledge."

Garast agreed. "I remember whispers about the last part of the path—that it was narrow and arduous. That it led to the light through darkness, and to the new knowledge through the old. I was too young to understand all that, of course. We were supposed to learn the riddles first, and the dances ..."

"I'd guess that the Cymvelans used this place, made it part of their pattern," said Nyctasia, "but it must have belonged to those who worshiped here before they came. That sort of tunnel"—she pointed to the hole—"is found in a number of very old, primitive fanes dedicated to the Mother of the World. To pass through it is to be reborn, you see."

"This is all most fascinating," Corson broke in sharply, "but do you mean to say that we have to crawl through there?" The well had been nearly unbearable, but this narrow space would drive her mad. The thought of being trapped in the grip of stone, unable to move, with only the tunnel stretching before her, sent chills of unreasoning terror through her. She couldn't climb into that hole. It was impossible.

"Certainly we don't have to," said Nyctasia. "But whatever we're seeking is probably on the other side."

Ever since she'd seen the empty crawlspace, Nyctasia had felt a keen desire to explore it. She saw that Corson was horrified at the prospect, and even Garast reluctant, and she wondered how they could resist the mystery of the tunnel, which drew her as strongly as it repelled Corson.

"You don't have to, perhaps, but I do," said Garast grimly. He held his lantern up to the opening and peered down the passage, but could not see to the end.

Nyctasia climbed the stone stairs to have a look. "It's dry as far as I can see," she said, pleased.

"Oh, good," said Corson, "we wouldn't want to get *dirty*, would we? Nyc, you're not going in there?"

"I think I will ... but perhaps you should wait here, Corson. The tunnel's cut to human proportions, not to yours."

"Yes, you might not be able to get through," Garast agreed—rather eagerly, Corson thought. "It looks as if it narrows farther on."

"We'll see," said Corson firmly. They were right, she told herself. They'd come too far to turn back now. And she'd die before she'd let the others think she was more frightened than they. "Nyc, you first.

You're the smallest and least likely to get stuck before we know what's happening. You, go in after her. I'll bring up the rear." Her heart was hammering frantically, but she gave out her orders as sharply as an officer of the Imperial Army, and the others obeyed readily.

Nyctasia pushed her lamp into the tunnel then heaved herself up into the hole. "Corson, are you sure you—"

"Go," Corson snapped, "it's never going to be any easier."

It was just possible for them to move on their hands and knees, pushing their lamps ahead of them where the ground was smooth, or carrying them with their teeth. The oily taste of the leather strap made Nyctasia feel faintly ill, but she clenched her jaw tighter and crawled on as fast as she could. In places, the passage narrowed so drastically that they had to slide along on their bellies. We're in the stone throat of the earth, Corson thought. Any moment it will close and swallow us. A few times she thought she'd be stuck in a particularly tight place, and she only wriggled through with difficulty.

Once, panic-stricken, she called to the others to stop, sure that her shoulders were caught fast.

"Garast, pull at her arms," Nyctasia said calmly.

"I can't turn around," he said, "there's no room."

"No matter—Corson, dash some oil on the wall just above where you're stuck. Once it seeps down between, you'll be able to slide through easily, or pull back, at the least." She sounded so completely confident that Corson took heart and tried to twist around to follow her advice, and her shoulders came loose of their own accord.

"Never mind," she said shakily, "I'm free, keep going." No one spoke again except when Garast's boot struck Corson in the face, and she cursed him roundly, which made her feel a little better.

Soon they were crawling through a tight tunnel of solid crystal, glorious to see in the lamplight, but brutally hard on their knees and their unprotected hands. When they had to pull themselves along flat to the ground, Corson could feel the sharp facets even through her leather vest. Nyctasia was already covered with bruises. There was nothing to do but move forward slowly and painfully, and hope for an end. Corson suspected that it would be impossible for them to back up and get out the way they'd come in, but she kept that thought to herself.

Nyctasia stopped abruptly. Garast tumbled into her and kicked Corson again. "What do you think you're doing, Nyc?" Corson demanded. "What's the trouble?"

"It slopes downward just ahead, be careful. And the air's getting colder. Can you feel it?"

"It must be another cave." Corson said, "It would be warmer if we'd reached the outside. Move!"

Nyctasia wriggled forward again, more slowly. Again, there was nothing but the sounds of their bodies scraping against rock, and their tired breathing. Then Nyctasia gasped, and the light of her lantern disappeared. "What's happened?" Corson shouted, and Garast, groping ahead, said, "I don't see her. Stop pushing me! There's a—" And he vanished as well. Corson was alone in the unbreakable hold of stone.

For a long moment she froze, unable to think or feel a thing. Then, panting like a cornered animal, she began to inch forward slowly, until her fingers found the edge. How steep was the drop? How far? "Nyc ... ?" she called, in a strangled voice that did not carry far. She tried again.

"Get off me, you clumsy oaf! You'll set us both afire."

They were perhaps the most welcome words Corson had ever heard. "Nyc, where *are* you two?" she shouted.

"Wait, my lantern went out when I dropped it. There." Finally there was a light below, and Nyctasia's head and shoulders appeared, not as far away as Corson had feared. "Garast fell on me," she explained, "and knocked his head on the wall, too. He's all right now. Can you climb down here without falling, do you think? It's sloped, but quite sharply."

Unlike the others, Corson could reach to both sides of the passage to brace herself, and she managed to get nearly to the bottom before she lost hold and slid the rest of the way to the tunnel's mouth. She emerged head first into another cavern, smaller than the first, and divided by a tall wall of marble masonry. At first she only stared, without even rising to her feet. There before her, like a vision in a fable, was the end of their quest. She was lying at the threshold of a towering brazen door.

It was of a single bronze casting, molded to a masterpiece of sculptor's skill. A great tree filled the frame, its limbs laden with fruit, each leaf and petal perfect in detail. The strings of a wind-harp were stretched among the branches, and a spider's web delicately spanned two slender twigs. Golden bees clustered around the blossoms and ripe fruit, and Nyctasia saw with misgiving that the tree bore peaches.

Corson took more interest in the inscription carved in the marble arch above the door. She spelled it out triumphantly:

*"Here in the earthen embrace  
Of the last hiding-place  
Answered is every riddle,  
Run is the race,  
Done is the chase.*

"I never want to hear another rhyme for the rest of my days," she said. "But this is the end, and no mistake—we've found it. Now, we've only to—" She stopped short with a wail of dismay. "The key! I didn't bring it with me—it's back at the house!"

"Fool!" exclaimed Garast. "We'll have the whole household swarming down here now. But there's nothing for it, we'll just have to go back and fetch the key. We'll not get in by standing here staring." He crouched down and crawled back into the tunnel without another word. They heard him scrabbling his way up the incline, sliding back then dragging himself up farther, cursing and kicking.

Corson got down on one knee at the mouth of the passage, to watch his progress. "Well, it can be done," she sighed. "You'd better go first so I can give you a push from below."

Nyctasia seemed not to hear. She still stood by the great brass portal, as if she were listening for something on the other side. At last she said in a low voice, "Corson, I'd not be in too great a hurry to open this door."

"Why not, in Asye's name? Look, it spells 'hoard'—what more do you want? This has to be the treasure."

"I fear you were nearer the mark when you said, 'This is the end, and no mistake.' Don't you see that the answer to this riddle is Death? The 'earthen embrace' is the grave, the 'last hiding-place' is the tomb. It is death that answers all questions and crowns every effort. It may be a charnel house we'll find behind this door, not a treasure-chamber."

A heavy silence hung between them for a few moments, till Corson said, "That would be just like my luck. 'Neither in the open air, neither in a dwelling,' eh? But we can't come this far and not look, Nyc. I'd go mad wondering."

Nyctasia laid her hand against the tall bronze door. "You don't feel it, then?"

"What do you mean?" Corson asked uneasily.

"The power—the spell—that we sensed at the ruins on the night we camped there." It seemed a lifetime ago, somehow. "The source is here, I'm sure of it."

"You feel it still? I thought it was gone—I meant to ask you. Why don't I ...?"

"I can't say for sure, but I think it's because it's daytime now, and the Valeice isn't in the sky—the star of change."

"The Reaper's Eye... Well, I'll make sure it's daytime when we unlock this door, but I have to know what's in there, spell or no spell. Let's get out of here now, before nightfall."

Nyctasia nodded. "We must open it, I suppose. But I thought you should be warned—there's no telling what the Cymvelans regarded as treasure."

She took up her lamp and knelt before the tunnel-mouth. The urge she'd felt to plunge into it before was gone, but there was no other way back to the great cavern. With Corson's help she managed to climb the slope, gripping the knobby crystals and inching upward till she could pull herself over the edge again. Garast was already out of sight, but she rested and waited for Corson, nursing her scraped and bleeding hands. They were so painful she could hardly flex her fingers. She would have given half her fortune at that moment for a pair of thick leather gloves.

Corson followed, steadying her legs against the walls of the tunnel, and clambering up without much difficulty. Even the passage itself seemed easier to bear, now that she knew how far there was to go. Nyctasia was slower this time, but they made their way steadily back to the bone-strewn chamber and had no serious trouble until they reached the foot of the spiral staircase, hidden by the waterfall. The door had been pulled tight, even with the sheer stone wall. Garast had bolted it shut behind him.

## 25

“CORSON, I’M SORRY,” said Nyctasia. “This is my fault. You knew enough to keep him in sight, but I—”

“Quiet, there he is,” Corson whispered tensely. On the stone terrace high above them, near the tunnel leading to the well, Garast stood leaning over the balustrade, as if waiting for them to catch up with him. They walked slowly across the great hall, and Nyctasia waved up at him. “The door’s stuck fast,” she called quite calmly. “You’ll have to come back down and push it open.”

Garast did not move.

“Hurry up, man! We have to fetch that key.”

“I’m sure I can find it for myself,” he said. “I’ll not be needing your help anymore.”

“If you make me climb up there myself, I’ll tear you into dogmeat!” Corson shouted, but the echoes threw her words back at her mockingly. She could no more scale that steep stone cliff than she could fly over it, and Garast knew it. She looked desperately around the vast, shadowy cavern, outraged at her helplessness. “There’s sure to be another way out of here!”

Garast leaned farther over toward them, as if to confide a secret. “I think there is,” he said, “and do you know where? I think the only way out is through the door of the last hiding-place .... And that door will never be opened by an outsider, nor reveal its secrets to the unworthy, while I can prevent it. You’ve seen more than is fitting already, but you’ll pay with your lives for profaning the sacred places! And when you’ve starved for your meddling, I’ll return to claim what is mine. No one but I has the right to use that key.”

Nyctasia had a sickening feeling that he was right about the way out of the cavern. It suited altogether too well with the ways of the Cymvelans. But it would be a long while before she and Corson starved to death, she reflected. There was plenty of water. She herself was accustomed to fasting, and Corson was exceptionally strong. Could they eat bats? “It is only a few days to Yu Valeicu,” she said to Garast. “Have you forgotten?”

“Let the Edonaris guard my inheritance for me. When I tell them you’ve gone astray in the tunnels, they’ll comb the ruins for you, won’t they, my lady? They’ll keep watch day and night—but I don’t think they’ll seek you at the bottom of an old well. I’ll help them search, though, just to be sure.” He laughed, obviously pleased with himself. “I’ll show them just where I lost you, and I’ll direct the searchers tirelessly, I promise you—”

But his laughter suddenly swelled to a shrill cry, and then he was plummeting toward them, down the long fall from the ledge, to strike the stone floor at their feet with a hard, hideous sound.

“Watch out!” called a familiar voice from overhead. “He’s the crazed bastard we stole the pouch from—that one’s dangerous!”

Nyctasia had knelt beside the still form of Garast, but now she rose and turned away. “Not anymore,” she said heavily. “His chase is done. In truth, he found the way without our help.”

“Dead?” said Newt uneasily. “Hlann, do you mean I’ve killed someone? I thought he’d break a few bones.”

“Never mind him—what are *you* doing here?” Corson demanded.

“What do you think? I knew you’d come after the treasure with my page of clues. I’ve been here for a good while waiting for you to find it, and it’s taken you long enough! I watched the slavers, I watched you, I watched the slavers watching you, and the lot of you led me round in circles,” he complained. “And the rutting watchdogs nearly had me a score of times, too.”

“We really seem to give you no end of inconvenience,” said Nyctasia, leaning wearily against the



wall. "But might we just trouble you a little further, to come down here and open the door to the stairway? I want to get back to the house and have a bath."

Newt straddled the balustrade and grinned down at them. "Why should I? I could steal that key from your room and wait for you both to starve, like he said. Then I'd have the treasure for myself."

With a motion almost too fast to follow, Corson snatched the knife from her boot-sheath and straightened up again, arm poised to throw. "Try it, you sneaking flea," she yelled. "Make a move anywhere but toward those stairs, and I'll have a knife through your scrawny neck before you know it!"

Newt froze. "You daren't. No one else knows you're here. If you kill me, you'll never be found."

Nyctasia sighed, as if irritated at the quarreling of children. "Oh, she's mad enough to do it, I'm sure. Corson, do try, please, not to be so hasty." She pushed herself away from the wall, with an effort, and wheeled to face Newt, throwing out one arm to point at him threateningly. "As for *you*, thiefling, if you *dare* go off and leave us here, I'll cast a curse on you with my dying breath that will shrivel the flesh from your bones! Now come open that door before I lose my patience."

"All right, I'm coming!" He climbed off the balustrade and slid down to shelter behind it, glaring down at them between the stone palings. "But I don't believe you can cast a spell like that, lady. Why'd you run away from Rhostshyl if you can do such things?"

Nyctasia laughed. "You're no fool. Now why couldn't my accusers in the city take such a sensible view of the matter? The truth is that I don't know whether I can do it or not, because I've never tried. Perhaps I can't, but—"

"But we'll all find out soon enough, if you don't make haste," Corson told Newt grimly.

"Yes," Nyctasia agreed, "I don't like to be kept waiting. Stop pretending that you'll abandon us here, Newt. You're a thief, not a murderer."

"Well, I want a share of the treasure in return."

"Any treasure on this land belongs to the Edonaris of Vale," Nyctasia pointed out. "But I believe that I can answer for them. That seems fair enough to me." She disregarded Corson's muttered promise to see to it that Newt got everything he deserved.

"And there's another thing," he said suspiciously. "That one"—he pointed to Corson—"is quits with me for good and all if I help you. Your word on it!"

"Ho, I said you were no fool. But I'm afraid I can't answer for her. What say you, Corson?"

Corson spat, disgusted at the perverse, everlasting injustice of her lot. "Oh, very well. Agreed," she said.

Corson lifted Nyctasia over the lip of the well and then turned to look down at Newt as he struggled his way up the knotted rope. She chuckled. "After all, it consoles me to know that Raphistain ar'n Edonaris will have your head when I tell him it was you stealing from his harvesters."

A hollow-sounding exclamation of protest rose from the shaft, followed before long by Newt's head and arms as he climbed into view, "Thankless bitch!" he sputtered. "If not for me you'd have rotted down there forever!"

"Now, Corson," Nyctasia interceded, "Rape's so enamored of you, I'm sure he'll forgive Newt when he hears that he saved your life."

Corson shook her head. "He loves those grapes of his better than me and the whole world beside," she said confidently, delighted with the effect of her words on the dismayed Newt. Then, with a laugh, she grabbed his arm and hauled him up over the rim of the well—not very gently, perhaps, but she did it without breaking his arm.

## 26

CORSON HESITATED BEFORE the bronze door, key in hand. Now that nothing prevented her from unearthing the hoard of the Cymvelans, she felt, despite herself, that it would be unwise to go further. Though Nyctasia stood by, waiting quite calmly, seemingly untroubled, Corson could sense her apprehension and could not help sharing it. But she knew that it was too late to turn back now, no matter what lay beyond. Ever before her mind's eye was the vision of a chamber heaped with gold and precious

gems, hundreds of years in the hoarding, enough and more for a lifetime's spending ....

"What are you waiting for? Get on with it, woman, can't you?" said Newt, who harbored much the same hopes, and was impatient to commence his new life of opulence and luxury.

"Hold your tongue," Raphe said sharply. He was resigned to tolerating Newt's presence, but he did not pretend to be pleased about it. Certainly he would not allow him to speak disrespectfully to Corson. In truth, he too would have liked to tell Corson to hurry, but he was restrained by good manners, as well as a certain well-bred reluctance to reveal his own eagerness for the treasure. But he thought hungrily of the new land that could be bought and cultivated with such a fortune ....

"Yes, hush," Nyctasia said quietly. "Whatever we shall find has waited a very long time, I think. It can wait a little longer. We have time enough."

She had insisted that only the matriarch be told of their discoveries, and of Garast's death. Corson had willingly deferred to her judgment in such a matter, and Newt, indeed, had no desire to tell anybody. He refused even to accompany them to the house, arranging instead to meet them at the well next morning.

Lady Nocharis had summoned Diastor and Mesthelde to hear their tale, and they in turn had consulted with a few of the others. None of them was much inclined to join the search, when they heard how arduous it was to negotiate the passages to the locked door. Yet it was clearly impractical to entrust the affair to one of the youngsters, since all of them would insist on going along and getting in the way. In the end, only Raphe had been sent to look after the interests of the Edonaris in the matter, though he'd urged 'Deisha to go in his place. "You're smaller than I am," he teased. "You'd fit through all those ghoul-haunted holes, and dark tombs and such, better than I."

"But you're stronger, brother mine. You'll be more use for carrying out the heavy bags of gold and chests of jewels you'll find down there." She changed her mind when she realized that Nyctasia planned to return to the underground chamber with Corson, but Nyctasia discouraged her from coming along ..

"There's really very little room for us all in those passages," she'd explained, more or less truthfully. "And you're right—the stronger the better for climbing about in there, and possibly for digging too." And 'Deisha had reluctantly agreed to wait for them at the well.

Nyctasia could not honestly have explained why she felt that the practical, realistic Raphe would be less at risk among these shadows than his fanciful, romantic sister, but as she watched Corson raise the key that would unlock the Cymvelans' secret, she was relieved to think of 'Deisha safe in the sunshine above.

The door swung out easily, as soon as Corson turned the key, and the others pressed forward anxiously to follow her into the dark room beyond. They stood in a knot in the middle of the floor, their lamps raised, and stared around them at the full-laden shelves that lined the walls of the inner chamber.

They had found the library of the Cymvelan Circle.

"Books!" shouted Corson. "Nothing but a lot of moldy, old, rotting, rutting books! I might have known it would be something not worth a heap of dried dog dung—" Words failed her. Even curses failed her. Nothing could express her bitter disappointment and rancor. Had she been alone, she'd have burst into tears.

Newt had taken a quick look around, then hastened to open a pair of stout chests that stood on either side of the door. But finding both filled with rolled vellum scrolls, he slammed shut the second one, kicked it viciously and sat down on top of it, head in hands, the picture of dejection.

"I don't suppose any of these are worth anything?" Raphe asked Nyctasia, who was eagerly examining one volume after another, exclaiming over them with delight.

"Worth anything? This collection is priceless," she cried. "This *is* wealth beyond a lifetime's spending, because one could spend many lifetimes studying it." Clearly, she intended to spend her lifetime doing so.

"Oh, you could rot down here for all eternity, I've no doubt," Corson said. "You were right about that inscription—this is nothing but a tomb for old, dead words. If they're so priceless, why would the Cymvelans let children get at them?"

"The library wouldn't have been unattended in those days, I'm sure. There would always have been people here studying or writing. I imagine that once the children were clever enough to find their way

here, they were deemed ready to begin their studies—”

“Poor little mites,” Corson put in sympathetically.

“It was probably part of their initiation, the approach to wisdom. We were a sad lot of fools to think that the riddles might lead to anything else. What treasure but knowledge does one put into the hands of children? What other power can be shared with all, but never lost? Who can measure the worth of such riches?” She gazed at the precious books as if they might turn to dust and smoke if she turned her eyes from them. “Look, this is Threnn’s translation of Jostyn Vahr’s *Treatise on the Manifold Ills of the Flesh*, all seven volumes! The man knew more about diseases of the inner organs than anyone who’s ever lived. For years I’ve been seeking just for scraps of the Fourth Book—I didn’t think the last three still existed! There are books here that I’ve only read of in ancient commentaries. And there are recent works too—here’s Raine of Tierelon’s *Account of His Sojourn Among the Wolf-Folk*, and the *First Precepts* of Ispere the Mad...! The Cymvelans must have been devoted to learning absolutely, both in body and spirit, to create such a complete collection of scholarship.”

Newt, grieving over his lost treasure, listened to her transports of rapture with heartfelt loathing—“How can you *stand* her?” he asked Corson, between clenched teeth.

“I can’t,” said Corson promptly, feeling some goodwill toward Newt for the first time. “It’s enough to wear away the patience of a stone. One day I’ll tie her neck in a knot, I promise you.”

Nyctasia paid no heed to either of them. “These must be taken out of here as soon as possible, to a dry, aired room—at least until I’ve had copies made. *Vahn*, it will take me years just to record what’s been assembled here. I can’t think where to begin.”

Raphe shrugged. “We’ll have to begin by opening out the passageway, if you want to move all these aboveground. That will take some time.”

“But there must be an easier way in and out of here. They’d not have taken all that trouble every time they wanted to consult a book.”

Once they’d lit the torches along the walls, and the great lamp that hung from the center of the domed ceiling, they soon found the door they were seeking. It was half-hidden by the shadows, but had not been deliberately concealed. It was locked, however, and built of stout, unyielding oak.

“We’ll have to come back with axes,” said Raphe, when they’d tried Corson’s key without success.

Newt looked at him scornfully. “Any fledgling picklock could open this door,” he said, and turned to Corson. “Let me have the use of that clasp you’ve got in your hair.” He took it from her and knelt before the lock, peering into it and muttering. “The trick,” he said, turning to the others, “is to get all the tumblers lined up at once. This lock’s more for show than protection. I don’t think they expected thieves down here.” He inserted the long pin of the clasp and gave it a practiced twist. There was a distinct click, and the door opened a bit. Newt rose, dusted his knees elaborately, and returned the clasp to Corson, with a bow.

But instead of a way to the outside, they found another, larger chamber, surrounding a strange round enclosure with windowless stone walls that reached to the ceiling. The entrance to the inner enclosure was a gate, wrought of iron and embellished with the mark of the Cymvelan Circle. Nyctasia thrust her lamp between the bars and saw a series of walled pathways that twisted and intertwined. “It’s the maze,” she said, “I wondered why we’d never found it.” She tried the gate, but it was locked fast, “Newt, come here and—”

“No need for that,” Raphe called from the other side of the enclosure. “There’s an opening on this side, and more doors.”

They circled the maze to the point opposite the gate, and found an open archway to the enclosure, and two closed wooden doors equidistant from it, in the facing wall.

Newt had gone into the maze a little way, but quickly returned, fearful of losing the way, “This must be the way in, but then why—”

“The way out, more likely,” Nyctasia said. “I think the initiates were brought in at the other side and locked in. They were meant to find their way through the maze to this opening, and then to one of those doors, I suppose. What’s in there?” She thought she knew the answer, but she was reluctant to look.

Much to Newt’s disappointment, the first door they tried was unlocked. It opened into a long, bare

room, hewn by hand from solid stone. No attempt had been made to smooth the walls or ceiling, but the floor had been worn level in places from the tread of many feet over the years. One such path led to a large altar, made of one rough, tall stone balanced on four short stone columns. The whole was set on a natural shelf of rock, so that it was elevated above the ground. There was none of the elaborate decoration or painting that adorned the building above, but no one doubted that this too was a temple of sorts.

Nyctasia shuddered. "Let's try the other door."

Newt had already done so, since the first door had yielded nothing he could spend or sell. But the second revealed only a set of broad, easily climbed stairs, leading upward. A few faint streaks of light pierced the gloom at the top.

The flight of stairs soon ended in a strange, curved corridor no wider than the stairs, not carved from solid rock, but built of stone and mortar. "We're above ground," said Nyctasia, "but where?"

"Probably in a keep of Castle Saetarrin," said Raphe gloomily.

A few feet before and behind them was a stone wall, but on either side of the top step was a doorway covered with wood, and sunlight was seeping between the planks on one side. Corson lost no time in setting her back against the opposite side and kicking out the slats.

\* \* \*

"It's been boarded up for years," said Raphe. "Of course the whole place was searched, but they only needed to uncover the main door to do that. I daresay no one thought to look *inside* the wall."

The four of them were sitting on the low wall outside the bell-tower, regarding the doubly boarded doorway. It did not seem to conceal a thing, either from inside or outside the tower. The stairway could only be seen from the very threshold.

"Neither out of doors nor in," sighed Nyctasia. "Perhaps the Cymvelans hid the way themselves. If they feared an attack they'd have wanted to protect the library."

"The Cymvelans or the Saetarrin ..." said Raphe.

"Or the slavers," Corson suggested. "And if people did discover it, the slavers soon discovered them." She shook her head. "When I think of all the trouble we went through—that awful crawl through the tunnel ..." Her voice trailed off in disgust.

"And all for nothing!" Newt agreed in an aggrieved tone.

"This will make it much easier to reach the library," Nyctasia said with satisfaction. "We've only to break open that inner doorway, and I can start removing the books at once."

"Hurrah," muttered Corson, seconded by Newt, who wished Nyctasia joy of them. Their differences forgotten in their mutual dissatisfaction at the outcome of the adventure, the two went off to get drunk together.

Raphe stood and offered his hand to Nyctasia. "I'll find you people to carry the books," he promised. "The sooner it's done the better, I think. It's no wonder the structure's unsteady if the ground's not solid below, and half the wall's hollow. The shoring underneath looked none too healthy either. You'll have to take great care. I wouldn't like to lose my new kinswoman almost as soon as I've found her. When you're finished we'll have to seal the whole place off—especially from the little ones. The chances that someone will come to grief are too great."

Nyctasia agreed with him wholeheartedly, though she did not voice all of her reasons.

## 27

"WHY ARE YOU so set on finding this Jocelys, anyway?" Corson asked. "What's the use? The riddles are answered, you've got your precious books—what do you want with Jocelys, whoever she may be?"

Corson, Nyctasia and Newt were on the road to Amron Therain, all three traveling for different reasons. Nyctasia hoped to find Jocelys, the last of the Cymvelan foundlings on Garast's list. "She ought to be told about the library," she explained. "It is her birthright—Garast was right about that. And she should be told about his death, too. She and Rowan are as close to kin as he had."

Corson shrugged. "If she's at all like Rowan, she'll not thank you for the information. Probably she doesn't want to know anything about it."

"Likely enough," Nyctasia agreed. "But there's another reason I want to find her. Garast said that the Circle meant to use the treasure for vengeance somehow. If they went to Jocelys too, she may know something about their plans."

"Garast made it all up, I daresay. That one was almost as much of a liar as you are. We didn't find anything in the library that would serve as a weapon for vengeance."

"That's just what worries me. Yesterday I had the last of the books removed .... There's a volume missing, and it was taken recently, to judge by the dust."

"It wasn't me!" Newt said hastily, looking guilty nevertheless.

Corson gave him a sidelong glance. "No one's accused you. Yet. Do you know what book it was, Nyc? Was it valuable?"

"It's rare, yes, and for good reason. For generations it's been forbidden to make copies of it, all through the Empire, and it's proscribed in most municipalities as well. Naturally there are those who'd pay anything for it."

At this, Newt took an interest. "What's in the thing?"

"It's a treatise called *On the Nature of Demonic Spirits*. No one knows who wrote it, or exactly when it was written, but it's old. The work's divided into two parts—the first is harmless enough, and not very hard to come by. I've read it many times. But the *Second Book*, you see, contains spells—spells only a mad fool would tamper with—for summoning and commanding certain elemental powers ....

"Perhaps the Cymvelans never had the entire work," she continued, after a long silence, "but there are other books just as rare in that collection. And the missing volume, whatever it was, was on the shelf next to the *First Book on the Nature of Demonic Spirits*. I think they had the *Second Book*, and knew very well the potency of its spells. That riddle about the peach tree is ambiguous—it doesn't spell out the answer. It could refer to the library, to the sweet fruit of study that nourishes the spirit, but holds a deadly secret. One spell from the *Second Book* could free the demonic Presence of the Cymvelan land, and give the power and riches that the riddles promise, but the danger is unthinkable. Corson, tomorrow is Yu Yaleicu."

Newt gave a low whistle. He felt that he'd chosen a good time to get out of Vale. He was bound for Amron Therain simply because it was the nearest town of any size where there would be a Harvest celebration, no doubt teeming with drunken folk with pockets to be picked. As he'd explained at dinner the night before, he'd had his fill of treasure and adventure, and meant to return to the safer occupations of thievery and swindling. After a few glasses of Edonaris wine, he had entertained some muddled but interesting ideas of selling worthless pieces of parchment covered with clues to the Cymvelan fortune. With his detailed knowledge of the site, he should be able to make them very convincing indeed .... But foremost in his mind was the desire to put some distance between himself and Corson and Nyctasia, whose company he considered unlucky.

As they reached the outskirts of Amron Therain, he reined in his horse and waited for them to pass. "I'll not enter the city with you, if you don't mind," he said, with a curt bow. "I'll wait here till you're out of sight."

"Good," said Corson. "If you're caught for a cutpurse, I don't care to have been seen with you."

Nyctasia gave him a present of money. "Farewell, Newt, and be careful. If you take up brigandry again, I'd advise you to go masked in future. You might rob another soldier with a memory as long as Corson's."

Newt grinned. "Many thanks, Your Ladyship. The generosity of the Edonaris is renowned. Your kinfolk won't object, I'm sure, if I keep this handsome horse, in place of the one you cheated me of, back in Rhostshyl Wood." Then he turned to Corson, shaking his head reprovingly. "And you, you're too careless by half. When you drink with a thief, guard your valuables well." To Corson's astonishment, he tossed her a large diamond she'd received from Nyctasia some time ago, in fee for her services as bodyguard. "I hate to give it back, but I fear our paths might cross again one day."

"Asye forbid!" said Corson. "Nyc, let's go before I forget my promise and break his neck." Newt

drew aside and waved them on their way with a jaunty salute. Corson dug her heels into her horse's sides. "A strange little scoundrel, and no mistake," she laughed. "Good riddance to him, for all that he saved our lives."

Her object in Amron Therain was to arrange passage on the first riverboat sailing south to Stocharnos. From there it would be only a few days' ride overland to Chiastelm and Steifann. He had been on his own quite long enough, she felt; if there was no boat leaving soon, she'd return to Vale with Nyctasia for the three days of Harvest Festival, but if she could set sail on the morrow, so much the better.

She'd already taken her leave of the Edonaris. As was usual with her, her farewells had been brief—except with Raphe. Their leavetaking had occupied the greater part of the night. She'd tried to return the fine gold silk, since the material could easily be used again, but he had insisted that she keep it, declaring that it could not possibly look so charming on anyone else. Uncertain, she'd consulted Nyctasia, who'd assured her that it would be impolite to refuse. "Always accept a gift from one who can afford to give it," Nyctasia had counseled, and Corson accepted her advice readily. She was not likely to have occasion to wear the gown again, but she looked forward to showing it to Steifann, and she could have a shirt made from it afterward. A silk shirt would be an extravagance, but more practical than a fancy gown. There'd be enough left over to make a kerchief for Annin and some ribbons for that little peacock Trask to wear on his sleeves. It would be her finest homecoming yet—the stories she'd have to tell them, this time! And as for Steifann, she'd make him wish he'd never met that mangy cur Destiver. And after that, she'd make him forget that there were other women in the world ....

As she planned her reunion with Steifann, in vivid detail, they rode into Amron Therain, and Nyctasia halted her horse. "I can't go to the waterfront with you—I must find Jocelys. There's no time to be lost. I'll ask at the marketplace first. Shall I meet you somewhere later, in case you decide to go back to Vale with me tonight?"

Corson started guiltily. Nyctasia looked tormented with worry, and her voice was strained and anxious. "No, I'll help you look for her first. I can do that much. But I can't help you fight spells, Nyc. My sword's no use against ghosts and demons. I won't hide from you that I think I'm well out of all this. But if the danger's as great as you say, why not post guards and keep the Cymvelans out of the temple, like I told you before?"

"I'll see to that, of course. But I'm not sure that will prevent them from invoking the spell. I'm afraid that the time when it's clone may be more important than the place where it's done. The Valeice is at its height now, at the turning point from summer to autumn. The celebration marks the weakening of the boundaries, not just between the seasons, but between all things. Nothing is certain at such a time, and the Balance is weighted toward death—not toward life, as it is in the spring. Something must be done, but I don't know what to do."

Corson sighed. "I surely don't know if you don't, Nyc. But I think we'd better stop talking and get on with searching for this Jocelys."

"Would it be Jocelys the tax-collector you want, milady, or Jocelys who keeps the dramshop?"

"The dramshop-keeper," said Corson hopefully.

"I don't know," said Nyctasia, "Was either of them a foundling from Vale?"

The man shrugged. "I don't know their histories. The one's a man, rather loud, rather fat, and the other a woman, rather quiet, rather thin."

"Ah, we're in luck," said Corson. "Where will we find her?"

"You've not far to go. If you turn down this lane and take the second alleyway to the thoroughfare, then cross the square, on the right side, you'll be nearly there, but it's a small place and easy to miss—"

"Show us the way," ordered Nyctasia, holding out some silver.

The dramshop was indeed a small one, and empty at this hour of the morning except for a woman who was mulling ale over an open hearth. The rich, savory scent filled the room.

"Two cups of that brew," said Corson, "and plenty of ground emberseed in mine, if you've got it."

The woman nodded to them. "Surely, mistress, but bide a breath, if you will. I've not quite finished with it." She tasted the simmering liquor with a long wooden spoon, then tossed in a handful of nutmeg

from a row of jars on the mantel and stirred it in.

They sat down on a bench near the hearth. "If it's as good as it smells, it will be worth the waiting," said Nyctasia. "Would you be Jocelys brenn Vale, I wonder?"

The woman's eyes widened. "I am, and no reason to hide it. All in this town know me."

"We bring you news from Vale ... about Garast," Nyctasia said gently. "He's dead. I'm afraid. We were all three exploring the caverns beneath the Cymvelan ruins, and he fell from a ledge. I'm sorry to bring such tidings across your threshold."

Jocelys bent over the kettle of ale, her face hidden. "What is that to me? I've nothing to do with that fool Garast and his schemes. I told him he'd find no treasure there, and I tell you the same. Let me be!"

"But we did find the treasure. It was knowledge the Cymvelans hoarded. We found their library, underneath the temple. Garast wanted you to know that, you and Rowan. You've a claim to it, after all."

"So, now I know, and you can take yourselves off. I trouble no one, and I want no trouble from others. I've my family to think of. Get out of this house, both of you!"

"In good time," said Corson evenly. "We'll have that drink first, if it's ready."

"Jocelys, please hear me out," Nyctasia pleaded. "We've not come to make trouble for you. We need your help—it's a desperate matter. Garast warned us that the Cymvelans mean to visit some dire vengeance on the folk of the valley, and the time is near. Surely they sought you out as well. If you know aught of their plans, I beg you to tell us before it's too late to stop them."

Scowling, Jocelys turned back to her brewing. "So you believed that mad tale of Garast's?" she said scornfully. "There are no Cymvelans. How could they have escaped the fire, tell me that? Oh, Garast may have seen them, but who else ever did? Not I. Not Rowan, that I ever heard of." She paused to taste the ale again, and stirred in more spices. "If you're worrying over some nonsense that one told you, you can rest easy, by my word. And you're welcome to the library, and the root-cellar too, for all of me." She ladled out two mugs full of the fragrant drink and set it before them, clearly impatient to be rid of them. Though she spoke firmly enough, Nyctasia saw that her hand trembled as she poured their ale.

It *was* as good as it smelled. Corson decided. "Nyc, what she says makes sense. Maybe Garast did imagine that little visit from the Cymvelans. He was crazy enough for that."

Nyctasia sipped her drink thoughtfully. "I'd be glad to believe that. But there's still the book to be accounted for, and the uncanny power we sensed at the ruins ...." She turned to Jocelys. "You see, there are tunnels underneath the temple that they might have used to flee the fire. The *vahn* knows I hope you're right about Garast's story, but if you're not, many lives may be in danger—the innocent and the guilty alike. It might be of help if you told us what he said to you about their plans. He might have revealed more to you than to us. Please try, that's all I ask."

"If I do, will you go away and leave me in peace? I don't like to speak of it."

Nyctasia gave her promise.

"Very well," sighed Jocelys, "but I warn you, you'll be here for a good while, if you want the whole story." She refilled then-mugs, then went to the door, pulled it shut and bolted it. "I'll have to turn away customers," she complained. "I won't have others hear me speak of this."

"Your neighbors won't hear of it from us," said Corson.

"And you'll not lose by it," Nyctasia assured her. "I can pay for your—" She stopped, puzzled. Her own words sounded strangely slow to her, and seemed to echo in her ears. I've taken too much ale, she thought, and at such a time! I should have known better. It had not tasted very strong, but she was not used to drink at all. Angry at herself, she shook her head hard, trying to clear her thoughts, but only felt dizzier for it. Jocelys was speaking now, but Nyctasia couldn't understand her. She turned to look at Corson, and even this simple act was almost too difficult for her. "Corson," she managed to gasp as she slid from the bench, "the ale—don't—drugged—"

Corson leaped to her feet with a shout and started toward Jocelys, but the floor suddenly shifted beneath her feet, and she staggered against the wall. Jocelys seemed to float away from her, white, terrified, whispering, "I'm sorry. I didn't want to do it, I had to. Garast told you about them, and he's dead. They threatened me .... My husband," she sobbed, "my child."

CORSON STIRRED AND groaned. She felt as if her head were in an ever-tightening vise, and her mouth tasted of swamp water. She sat up slowly. She could hear Nyctasia beside her, breathing harshly in her sleep, as if in pain. Corson shook her roughly.

“Wake up, curse you. Do you know where we are?”

“Leave me alone,” Nyctasia moaned. “I want to sleep.”

Corson seized her by the shoulders, “Come to what little sense you’ve got, fool. Hlann help us, but we’re going to need every bit of sense we can muster, and between the two of us I don’t think we make a half-wit. How could I be taken in by a colt’s trick like that?” She pressed her fists against her aching head. “That bloody bitch,” she added, with feeling.

“Well, where are we?” Nyctasia asked sullenly. “I don’t like it, wherever it is. I knew it was a mistake to wake up.”

“We’re somewhere in the ruins, that’s my guess—and it’s night. The stink of magic’s so thick I can hardly breathe.”

Nyctasia sobered suddenly. “Carelessness,” she said. “Always and ever carelessness. It’s not only night, it’s the night of Yu Valeicu. Sweet *vahn*, we’ve got to find them before—”

“Find *them!* We don’t know where *we* are.”

They rose unsteadily and groped around them in a darkness so dense that they could not even see one another, and all directions were alike. The floor beneath them was smooth stone, but Corson discovered that she could not reach the ceiling or walls from where she stood. “We’re not in a tunnel, anyway,” she said thankfully.

But her relief was short-lived. As they shuffled forward together, her outstretched hand soon met with an intricate web of metal that she took for part of the fountain until she remembered that the courtyard was not paved. “Oh no,” she said softly, “they would do that, the rotten bastards. They wouldn’t just kill us, not them. They wouldn’t soil their pure spirits and clean hands with our blood—perish the thought!”

Nyctasia touched the bars, and understood. It was the gate to the maze, and this time they were on the wrong side of it.

Corson pulled furiously at the gate, but the ironwork held fast, for all that it had looked delicate from the other side. “I never thought to say it, but I wish we had Newt here now. He could pick this lock in the dark as easy as picking his teeth. But we’ll just have to get through the maze. For Hlann’s sake, if children can do it, I can.”

Nyctasia’s voice was flat and hopeless. “They didn’t do it in the dark. There are torches on the walls which our hosts have neglected to light. And even if we should find the way through in time, what do you suppose they have waiting for us at the other end? Not, I think, a welcome to the ranks of the initiated.”

“It’s no use asking that now. We might as well take our chances as wait here for them to come fetch us. You know, we’ve been round the maze—it’s not much bigger than a barn—it won’t take long to cross it.”

“Don’t you see, it may be too late already. And the size of the space doesn’t matter when all you do is go around in circles and wander in and out of the same blind alley over and over—”

Corson heard the edge of panic in her voice, and became immediately the stern commander. “No—hold your noise and listen,” she said firmly, dragging Nyctasia into the maze. “We won’t get lost if we’re careful. I’ll keep my left hand on this wall; you keep your right hand on the other side, and take a good hold of me with your left. We don’t want to get separated.”

They moved forward slowly until they reached the first junction of the path. “We’ll go left,” Corson decided. “As long as we keep going in one direction, it makes no difference which. We know there’s an opening somewhere. If I always have my hand on the wall, it has to lead us there sooner or later, doesn’t it? If we strike a dead end, we’ll just retrace our steps and go the other way. Come on.”

“One, left,” said Nyctasia.



“Left, straight, right, not counting the blind ends. Remember that, it may repeat. There’s sure to be a pattern of some sort. The Cymvelans did everything by design.”

“Left, straight, right,” Corson repeated. “No—it’s straight, left, straight, right! The first bit was straight, remember?”

“Yes, I didn’t see that it mattered before. Corson, I apologize for calling you a simple-minded barbarian.”

“Spoken like a lady. There’s a straight part coming now. How much will you wager that the next turn should be left?”

“I’ll wager my life on it.”

But they had followed the left turning for only a few paces when Nyctasia stopped. “Corson, I can’t feel a wall on this side. I think we’re out!”

Corson kept her hand on the other wall. “Are you sure? This side’s still curving in. It should go the other way on the outside.”

Nyctasia stretched to reach as far as she could without losing touch with Corson. “It’s open over here,” she insisted.

“Maybe it’s just another opening in that wall, like the ones we’ve come through. We’d better keep to this wall for a while, and you go on feeling for the other.”

“All right ... but there’s nothing yet ... it’s still open ...”

“This side’s still curving around. Wait, here’s another turning. We’re still in the maze, then. There was only one opening on the outside.”

“Yes ..., unless we’ve come full circle, and that’s the same opening we came through just now.”

Corson cursed. “It can’t be! We’ve not come far enough. Have we?”

“I don’t think so. But I can’t judge in this darkness. I’m going to try to cross this space—if we’re outside the maze, we should be almost opposite the door to the stairway.”

“And the door to that other room,” Corson reminded her. “Don’t go far. The door’s only a few feet away, if it’s there. Make some noise so I know where you are.” She released Nyctasia’s hand with misgiving.

Nyctasia stepped away hesitantly, her arms outstretched, reaching into emptiness. “Stars are wheeling in the night,” she sang, without thinking, “birds are circling in their flight, winter turning into spring, children dancing in a—” There was a long pause.

“Nyc? Are you still there?” Corson called anxiously.

“Oh, yes, we’re still here, both of us. I’ve come across farther than the width of that corridor outside the maze, and I haven’t found the wall. This must be an inner chamber, probably the heart of the maze. I can hear them from here, Corson. They’ve begun.”

“The chanting? I wondered when you’d notice. Come back here—follow my voice. We have to keep following this wall, it’s the only way. We must be halfway through, that’s something.”

“There’s no time for that. Suppose the maze doubles back on itself? I’m going to try to create a spell-flame to light the way, There’s power enough here to draw upon.”

“If you can conjure up a light, why didn’t you do it before, in the Hlann’s name?”

“Because it’s dangerous to tamper with an unknown Influence! But we’ve nothing to lose now. If we don’t get out in time to stop them, it won’t matter if we get out at all. Now be still.”

Corson heard her scratching at the floor, and thought she heard her spit. Beyond the maze, the chanting had risen to a wailing song. Corson could not understand the words, but she knew well enough what they meant.

“Air is the element nearest to fire,” said Nyctasia, after a long pause, and she breathed warmly into her cupped hands.

Slowly, the glow crept to the edges of the high, round room, and Corson could see that there were several entrance-ways to the place, evenly spaced around the circle. She pulled the ornament from her hair and left it to mark the place where she stood, then took a torch from the wall and hurried to Nyctasia.

She was kneeling in the center of the room, gazing into her burning hands, Corson soon found that

those pale, flickering flames gave off no heat, but when she touched the torch to them, the pitch flared up at once in a reassuring blue and gold blaze. By its light, Corson saw that Nyctasia knelt on a wide circle of mosaic-work, surrounding the image of a huge, hideous spider made up of thousands of tiny chips of black tile. Nyctasia seemed almost to be riding on the back of the loathsome creature. Her face, lit from below by that eerie bowl of flames, looked unfamiliar and inhuman. Corson remembered how Nyctasia had seemed a different person when they'd traveled through the haunted Yth Forest—a dangerously different person, and perhaps not a person at all .... Corson wanted to seize her and shake her from her spell, but she dared not touch that still, rapt figure, illumined by witch-fire.

"Nyc, get up from there! We've no time to waste, hurry!"

Nyctasia looked down at the decorated floor, then slowly raised her head. "The poisonous stone at the core of the sweet peach," she said. "The murderous spider at the center of the gossamer web. The forbidden spell hidden among the volumes of precious wisdom. And the bloodlust buried in the hearts of the peaceful. We are meant to remember it, but not to surrender to it. The Cymvelans have forgotten their own lessons."

"If you've quite finished your recitation, we could go stop the Cymvelans and their rutting spell. Do you want to get out of here or don't you? Make up your mind fast, because I'm leaving."

Nyctasia shook herself, and stood. "And douse that cursed spell-fire," Corson snapped, lighting another torch and thrusting it at her.

Reluctantly, Nyctasia pressed her hands together, quenching the livid flames. She took the torch and looked around in confusion. "But you've left the wall! Which door did we come through?"

Corson located her hair clasp. "This one. No, wait, we came through that one and walked to this one. Let's go on. Now that we've light, we can find which of these lead to blind ends in half the time."

Nyctasia ran to the door opposite the one Corson had pointed out. "This way. The maze must be symmetrical—the rest should be a mirror image of the first half, the same pattern in reverse."

"That sounds like the Cymvelans' tidy way," Corson agreed, "And this is as good a starting place as any. It will save us a lot of trouble if you're right."

"Nothing will save us if I'm wrong," said Nyctasia. "Don't you hear? They've stopped. They've completed the invocation." She disappeared into the waiting tunnel, with Corson close behind her.

The door to the underground temple stood open, and the ceremony within was well-lit by flaming brands and candles. Corson and Nyctasia abandoned their torches and grasped their weapons instead.

No one seemed aware of their presence. The celebrants, draped in skins and masked in the heads of animals, stood facing the altar, where one old man, who wore no mask, was speaking. He alone might have heeded their approach, but his eyes were fixed on some point in the air beyond them, where nothing was to be seen. His manner was commanding, and he intoned his words in a language like none Corson had ever heard in all her travels.

But Nyctasia, hearing him, gasped and suddenly screamed out, "Now, *now!*" and Corson let fly her knife.

"Run for help—I'll hold them off," she ordered.

"You can't—"

"Go!" Corson pushed her toward the other door and turned to meet the first of the horned, furred creatures that rushed from the temple, howling in fury and brandishing clubs of oak.

Nyctasia raced up the stairs to the bell-tower, leaving Corson to certain death below. The Cymvelans were not many, but they were surely more than one fighter could hope to overcome. Yet she knew that Corson had been right to sacrifice her life to give her this chance to flee. If neither of them escaped to give warning, many more lives would be lost. Even now, Nyctasia was not sure she could summon help in time to prevent the Cymvelans from finishing what they'd started.

Then at the top of the stairs, she saw at once what had to be done. Instead of running away from the tower, she dashed through the inner door and threw herself upon the bell-rope, pulling it down with the full weight of her body.

The rope held, but the great bell barely moved at first. Somewhere, she sensed, something was taking shape, drawing power into itself, becoming more potent with each instant that passed.

Desperately, she dragged down the rope, again and again, with a strength she had not dreamed she possessed.

When the bell spoke at last, it seemed to take on a life of its own, and its powerful voice sounded out over the countryside, so loudly that Nyctasia thought she would be deafened. Its motion grew wild and violent, like the thrashing of a caged bird, frantic to break free, and Nyctasia was pitched to and fro in its wake as she clung to the rope, fighting to control the bell's great weight. She could not steady her feet against the floor, which seemed to shudder beneath her while the walls tilted drunkenly overhead. Not till Corson had seized her around the waist and dragged her from the toppling building did she see that the ground was really buckling underfoot, and the walls shaking. The whole earth seemed caught up in some terrible convulsion.

They flung themselves down the hillside in the darkness, falling, rolling, scrambling to their feet and plunging on, till they landed in a heap among the vines of the lower slope. "Idiot!" shouted Corson. "Didn't you see the rutting place coming down around you?"

Nyctasia struggled for breath. "But—but—what about you—how—?"

Corson pulled her to her feet. "They were ... old, Nyc. Weak. They looked fierce in those masks, but some of them could barely stand. It was easy to scatter them. I felt sick, to tell the truth, cutting down such people. Are you hurt?"

"I don't know. Probably. I wonder if Jocelys was among them." She looked back at the fallen tower, where nothing stirred except the settling stones.

But there was much noise and commotion at the foot of the hill, as people came running to answer the call of the bell. As Corson and Nyctasia walked down to meet them, they saw that great bonfires burned in the fields, and that the crowd was dressed in gay finery and vine-leaf wreaths. Singing and shouting, they swarmed up the slopes, waving ribboned torches and leafy branches, carrying flutes and drums and tambourines. It was the first night of the Harvest Festival.

"And I left my new hair-clasp down there, too," Corson said glumly.

## 29

IT WAS ON the last night of the Harvest Festival that Nyctasia slipped away from the festivities alone, and toiled up the slope of Honeycomb Hill by moonlight. Overhead, the Reaper's Eye burned steadily, like a beacon warning ships of treacherous waters. Danger, turn back. Turn back, fool, she thought, but she continued to climb, passing the cave and the rows of sweet, overripe golden grapes left drying on the vines. She did not stop to rest until she saw the ragged pile of stones where the bell-tower had stood. The great iron bell had crashed through the flooring easily, to disappear into the caverns below. The temple seemed to have sunk beneath the earth, and now its painted dancers, the fair and the wild, lay together in the tomb with nothing to choose between them. Half the hilltop had caved in on itself, crushing the last of the life from the Cymvelan Circle for good and all. There was only a great pit now, like an open wound, to mark the place.

The Edonaris had argued hotly over the possibility of digging into the hillside to search for survivors of the cave-in, some arguing that it was their duty to try, others that the ground was still too unsettled to be safely disturbed.

But Nyctasia had assured them that no survivors were buried under the rubble. She knew that all were dead, as surely as she knew that she had killed them—that the sound of the bell had finally shivered the weakened supports that upheld the whole hollow structure.

"But how can you be sure?" Corin had asked uneasily.

And Nyctasia, more composed and withdrawn than ever, had answered, "I know ... that the One they summoned has been satisfied. The sacrifice has been accepted. I know because it was I who carried out the sacrifice. Let no one set foot on the hill for any reason. Even if the earth has settled, the land is more dangerous now than before, more dangerous than you imagine." But she had refused to explain further.

The superstitions of the countryside were well founded, Nyctasia thought, as they so often are. The

land was unlucky indeed, the place was well and truly cursed, now, and it was for her to cast out the demonic presence that haunted it. The dragon had been awakened, and only she could bridle it.

But that would be a simple matter compared to the task that must be undertaken first. Before she could rid this place of its curse, she would have to cast out the demons of ambition and desire that haunted her own spirit. It was for that struggle that she doubted her own strength.

She had held vigil for days, fasting, solitary, silent, as she searched within herself for the guidance of the Indwelling Spirit. She had examined with uncompromising clarity the choice that lay before her, and sought the strength to choose aright, though each way she turned seemed to lead to a grave mistake.

But she could not delay any longer. The power that had been bound by the ancient spell, and guarded by the Cymvelan Circle, had now been invoked, and it had been waiting a very long time to be free. Corson is right, Nyctasia reflected with a rueful smile, I think too much. There's no time for that. Sometimes it's action that's wanted.

She could sense the newly roused, restless power of the place all about her, like an unseen radiance, in the earth, in the air, in the very stones at her feet—and within herself. It was easy, all too easy for safety's sake, to draw upon that power and use it to work her will. She felt as if she were again in the enchanted Yth Forest, whose untamed, predatory power had all but ensnared her once. The feeling was not in the least frightening. It was inviting, enticing, elating. It offered everything and demanded nothing, and though Nyctasia knew that it lied, she listened.

Without further thought, she reached out in spirit to summon the enemy, using its own power to compel it to come forth.

There was only a subtle shifting of shadows to show that it had obeyed, and a heightened sense that something was demanded of her. But Nyctasia had expected nothing more. This was a being that could not be imaged by the eyes of the spirit, and far less could it be seen by the eyes of the body. But its claim upon her was strong and undeniable. A bargain had been struck. A price had been paid, and paid in blood. But not until the service thus won had been received would that bargain be fulfilled, and the spell broken that had held this Power captive for so long.

It is an exile, as I am, thought Nyctasia, and probably less to blame for its plight than I for mine. It is fitting that I set it free. For she knew that this was not truly an entity of evil. It wanted, as she did, to return to where it belonged, and only the service it owed to her stood between it and its desire.

Had the Cymvelans succeeded in using its power to avenge themselves upon the Valleylanders, it would have carried out their commands as surely as it would carry out hers now. It had no ties to humanity, and made no distinctions among mortal beings. Certainly it did not care whether they lived or died.

Nyctasia could not blame it. She blamed only herself, for her reluctance to release the One that awaited her command, the temptation to turn its power to her own purposes. For the demon, believing that it could win its freedom in no other way, ceaselessly demanded that she yield to that temptation.

Among the rescued volumes of the Cymvelan library, Nyctasia had found certain works that she knew would be there, and she studied them carefully—not for the first time—before she set out to confront that which awaited her at the temple. But most especially she devoted herself to the *First Book on the Nature of Demonic Spirits*.

“There are other worlds than our own,” she'd read. “And that which we call a demonic spirit is no more nor less than a denizen of another world who has become ensnared in this world of ours, through magic or mischance. And if beings such as ourselves were to be drawn into the world whence such Ones come, we should ourselves be as demons to those who dwell there, and it may be that this has come about, betimes, and none returned thence to tell of it. Or mayhap some have returned but been accounted mad by their fellows when they spoke of the strange regions they had visited. And some of those whom we deem mad were perhaps made so by sights incomprehensible to humankind, witnessed in worlds beyond our own.

“Then it is little wonder if those beings known to us as Demons should be desperate and dangerous in nature, and unpredictable to deal with, as mad folk are. And this is seen in those who are possessed by them, such that the most skilled physicians are oft hard pressed to decide whether some certain

unfortunates are in truth possessed by demonic spirits or have indeed simply lost their wits.

“Now such a One, being out of Its own rightful place, does in consequence forfeit its proper form and nature, and appear to mortal eyes insubstantial, as an Absence rather than a Presence. But by virtue of Its displacement and discorporate essence does such a Being acquire sundry Powers which in no wise answer to the Laws governing substance and matter, even as the Indwelling Spirit submits not to be thus constrained. And thereby It may assume what guise soever should serve Its ends, albeit in illusory wise.

“Only by the Laws governing Immaterial Influences may such a One be compelled, and Its powers made to serve the Will of another. But this ought in no wise nor manner to be attempted, for the Power thus won may well be beyond price, but will prove well beyond the price that any one alone can pay. For even as the Invited Power is drawn from Without, so must the recompense be made from without, if Balance is to be restored, and such a Sacrifice the Spirit of Harmony forbids ....”

Excellent advice, thought Nyctasia, if it did not come too late. For the recompense had been paid already, and now it remained for her to assign a service, as It demanded. But if she consented to take advantage of that sacrifice, then the blood of the Cymvelans would truly be on her hands.

“Balance must be restored.” It spoke to her, silently, wordlessly, but its meaning was unmistakably clear to Nyctasia. “Take what is yours! Ask! Command!”

What’s done is done, Nyctasia told herself. It will not be undone if I refuse, they will still be dead. If I accept, they cannot be more dead than they are. And though this seemed like reason, yet even as she voiced her command to the demon of the hill, she knew that the *vahn* within her replied, “Not they, but you can be more dead than you are ....”

But Nyctasia gave the one command she had known she must give, whatever the cost to her own spirit, “Tell me of my city. Will there be war?”

And before she had finished speaking, she saw the answer, inwardly, as one sees memories, not before her eyes but behind them. She could envision, as if she had been a witness, the burning buildings, the barricaded streets, already littered with the dead and wounded. Fire raged unchecked from house to house, and the gates of the palaces were broken and undefended. Rhostshyl, the proud city, the city of marble and silver ...

“No more!” Nyctasia ordered, but she could not forget what she had seen.

She was offered other visions, then, which said as clearly as words, “By my power you could prevent this. Use it. Use it. You could have the power to impose peace on the city. Take it. Take it. Your enemies will do your will. You will be hailed as peacemaker and savior of the city. Rhostshyl need not perish. Do it. Do it. You must. It is your duty.”

Was it not, in truth, her duty? If she could prevent the death and destruction she had seen, had she the *right* to refuse?

But these thoughts were not her own. They were the work of One who sought to serve her for Its own sake. “You lie,” she said. Power won at such a price could not bring peace, could not give life, could not—whatever her intentions—be used innocently. This Nameless Being knew her every weakness, she realized, knew her deepest desires and her very thoughts. Such a servant is too dangerous, she decided, and ordered. “Show yourself! Take a form that I can see. Speak in words that I can hear.”

Again it obeyed. In man’s shape it walked out of the shadows and approached her, stepping into the moonlight to reveal the form and features of Erystalben ar’n Shiasfred.

“I can bring him back to you,” it said, in his voice.

### 30

“WHAT MAKES YOU think she’s gone up there?” Corson asked, as she and Deisha climbed the cart-track up Honeycomb Hill, stopping occasionally to shout for Nyctasia.

“I don’t know .... Nobody’d seen her at dinner, and she wasn’t in her room, or at the dancing or the bonfire. I just suddenly felt quite certain that she’d gone back to the temple, I can’t think why. Perhaps I’m wrong, I hope I am.”

“Oh, you’re probably right—it’s just the sort of mad thing she’d do, the rutting half-wit. Every time I plan to set off for the coast, that one gets herself in some kind of trouble! I swear, if she’s vanished into the earth now, I’ll leave her there to talk philosophy to the moles. I mean to be back in Amron Therain in two days, without fail, even if the ground opens up and swallows all of Vale.” She called again for Nyctasia, but there was still no answer. “Curse her, if she’s hurt herself, I’ll throttle her!”

’Deisha reached for Carson’s hand and squeezed it. “No wonder Nyc’s so fond of you. And Raphe will break his heart when you go.”

“Did she tell you she’s fond of me?”

“Oh, anyone could see that, but in fact she did tell me so.”

“Ah ... well, you can’t believe everything that little liar says. The Imperial Head Questioner couldn’t get the truth from her on the rack if his life depended on it. Sometimes I’ve come within a hair of—”

’Deisha laughed. “Corson, how do you deal with people you *don’t* like?”

“Ask Newt,” said Nyctasia out of the darkness ahead of them. “He can tell you all about that, but it’s not a pretty tale, I warn you.”

“He deserved it,” said Corson promptly. “Nyc, you fool, what were you doing up there?”

“Have you been looking for me? I’m sorry you had the trouble of coming out here—I was on my way back.”

Corson turned to ’Deisha in exasperation. “There, that’s what I mean. She can’t answer a plain question. It’s not in her nature. Oh, no, we weren’t looking for you, of course not. We climbed all this way in the dark because we wanted to fall in a pit and break our necks. Come along, scatterwit, let’s get back to the feast.”

“I really shall miss you, Corson. It will be rather a bore being among civilized people again, but I daresay I’ll get used to it in time.” She took Corson’s hand, then ’Deisha’s, and they started back down the path together.

’Deisha leaned across Nyctasia to say to Corson, “You’re right, she never did answer. And just now she tried to provoke you, to turn the subject. It’s remarkable.”

“Now you’re catching on to her tricks. She can talk you into swearing your hat’s a hen, and believing it too, if you don’t take care. But maybe you’ll prove a match for her—you’re of the same blood.”

“Yes,” said ’Deisha, “we’re of the same blood. Nyc, why were you at the temple? It’s dangerous there, you said so yourself.”

“It’s not as dangerous now.”

“Hmmm, I thought as much,” said Corson. “It’s changed, I can feel that. What did you do?”

Nyctasia was silent for a time, but then said quietly, “I didn’t do it, but it’s done. That’s all that matters.”

For it was not she who had spoken, in truth, but the Indwelling Spirit which had spoken through her. Faced with a temptation which she could neither refuse nor receive, she had desperately thrust from her the very will and power to choose. Guided only by the thought, “Don’t hesitate, act!” she had cried inwardly, “Let it be as it will, whatever may befall. Let it be as it will.” When she drew breath to speak she did not know what she was about to say, and then she heard her own voice commanding, “Begone. Return in peace to thine own place, and there remain. This and this alone I require of thee. Obey!”

She had no sooner ceased speaking than she was alone on the dark hillside, and only a fleeting sense of wild, inexpressible thanksgiving remained to mark the passage of the Cymvelans’ curse.

Nyctasia was past doubt or disappointment. If she had lost her only chance to save her city, to be reunited with her lover, yet she knew a great relief that the choice had been taken from her. She might so easily have made a mistake, but now she had only to trust in the *vahn* and believe that the right decision had been made. She had—thank the stars!—no choice.

She did not know how long she’d been away from the harvest celebration till she heard Corson and ’Deisha calling for her. Then she hurried downhill to join them, suddenly eager to be with the others, and to forget about what might have been.

“It’s done,” she said. “Done is the chase, and you’ll not have to come hunting for me there a third time, I promise you. I don’t mean to climb this hill again till next crush. And perhaps I won’t be needed

then—I don't think the workers will shun the place anymore, by then. But *I* will. Now I only want to have some of Raphe's new wine. In fact, I want to have a great deal of it." The first barrels of the golden wine had been opened on the first day of the Harvest Festival. The new vintage had been a great success, a striking blend of sharp and sweet that even Nyctasia had appreciated. Raphe had named it, in Corson's honor, "Corisonde."

"*And* some food," Nyctasia added. "I've not eaten all day, I'm famishing."

"What, not eaten a thing at the harvest feast?" cried 'Deisha. "That's bad luck for the whole year to come! You must come eat plenty at once, or Aunt Mesthelde will never forgive you."

"That's right," said Corson gleefully, "and she'll surely be offended if you don't have some of her own special traditional zhetaris, Nyc."

### 31

THE RIVERBOAT *HARBOR LASS* tugged against the moorings as it rode at anchor between the wharves. It seemed to Corson that the boat was as eager as she to be free and on its way to the next port. She watched the crew loading the last casks of wine, under the direction of Leclairin ar'n Edonaris. It would not be long now before they cast off.

"If you ask me, the Cymvelans brought it on themselves," she said suddenly to Nyctasia. "Maybe they did cause the drought, in a way, because they defied Nature. Everything they did was so controlled—making herbs grow in fancy patterns, making water flow in fancy patterns. Maybe the drought and ... the rest ... was Nature's way of rebelling and showing them her power."

Nyctasia smiled. Corson's nature had chafed at military discipline all during her years in the army, and left her with an incurable distrust for any form of restraint or confinement. "I doubt it," she answered, "but really you have a remarkable grasp of Elemental Balance." Still, it might be as well not to restore the knot-gardens after all, Nyctasia reflected. "Well," she continued, "since you disapprove of interfering with Nature, perhaps you won't want this little keepsake I made for you." She knelt and looked through her satchel for her parting gift to Corson, a small parcel wrapped in a scrap of leather. She moved stiffly and painfully—the result of a final lesson in swordplay from Corson.

At first Corson was puzzled when she unfolded the covering and found only a simple wooden comb. But then she remembered that Nyctasia had once told her about a certain perfume of ancient Kehs-Edre—a perfume for the hair. She sniffed at the comb eagerly. "I don't smell anything."

"I told you, only men can smell it, and only when it's combed through a woman's hair. Don't try it now, for *vahn*'s sake! Put it away—you must only use it when you're alone with the man of your choice, and then only in a place where you can wash your hair afterward. I'm serious, Corson, I warn you. In *your* hair, the scent might even be dangerous."

Corson believed her. When Nyctasia was lying she never seemed at all anxious to be believed. "I'll be careful," she promised, putting the precious comb safely at the bottom of her pack. "Thanks! I'll write and let you know how I fare with it."

"Yes, do. You've almost learned to write legibly. You should keep in practice."

"And you, remember to use your shield arm. Always think of your shield as a weapon, not just a protection, even if it's only a cloak wrapped around your arm. Never let your shield arm hang idle—if there's nothing else to hand, grab some dirt and throw it."

"I'll remember," said Nyctasia with a grimace, touching her left forearm, which was bandaged. But then she started to laugh. "You're lucky 'Deisha didn't take up arms against you for the way you misused me. She'd have minced you to bits and fed you to her dogs, she was that furious. Now she thinks you're a brute."

"Well, I think she's a darling," Corson said generously.

"And that puts me in mind of something else—when Raphe wished you a good journey, why did you say, 'The same to you, and many of them'? What did you mean by that? He's not going anywhere."

Now it was Corson who laughed. "Why don't you ask him to explain it? You Edonaris are great ones for explaining."

“Never mind. I think I can guess .... It looks as if they mean to weigh anchor soon. Perhaps you should get on board. Do you have the letters I gave you? Remember, don’t take them to Chiasm with you, Give them to a courier in Meholmne or Lhestreq, except the one for—”

Corson picked her up and hugged her roughly. “I won’t forget, don’t worry.”

“Put me down, fool!” said Nyctasia, and kissed her on the nose.

Corson obeyed, and took up her pack instead, slinging it over her shoulder. They started down the wharf to the gangplank of the *Harbor Lass*.

“Take care of yourself, Corson. And send me word if there’s ... news ... of Rhostshyl.”

“I will. Maybe I’ll bring you word someday. I’m bound to be in these parts again, sooner or later. I’ll come for a visit.”

“You’ll be most welcome—especially to our Raphe. But if you had any sense, you’d stop your vagabonding and settle down in Chiasm, you know.”

“Sense! If I had any sense, I’d not have taken up with you in the first place.”

“True. But I didn’t hire you for your sense.”

“No, you hired me because you were so *fond* of me,” said Corson triumphantly. Before her startled companion could reply, she raced up the gangplank to the deck of the *Harbor Lass*, well satisfied that she’d finally managed to have the last word in a conversation with Nyctasia.

When she looked back. Nyctasia had gone to join the other Edonaris. Leclairin was concluding their dealings with the trader who’d purchased their wine for shipment to distant markets, while her brother Aldrichas paid the hired wagoners. Nyctasia looked on patiently, without comment.

Soon the call was given to weigh anchor, and the lines were cast off, the plank drawn in. Corson watched the sails unfurl and swell as the *Harbor Lass* moved slowly away from the wharves. The sight reminded her of something, and she chuckled at the idea. The sails, the rigging—what were they but a web to catch the wind? “I’ll have to remember to write that to Nyc,” she thought. “She likes that sort of nonsense.”

Nyctasia waved to her from the dock. For a while she watched the graceful vessel sail out of the harbor and head downriver, then she turned back to her waiting kinfolk, ready to start for home.

## Witch Of Rhostshyl

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### A SPELL IS CAST

*We ourselves are the true link between the world of the spirit and the world of matter, Nyctasia mused, and thus the gateway where the two realms meet is rightly to be sought within ourselves and not elsewhere ....*

Nyctasia drew her dagger, and slowly closed her hand around the blade. The edge bit deep into her palm and fingers, but she barely felt the pain.

“Approach, I am near you,

Speak, for I hear you ...”

Nyctasia chanted as the throbbing swelled in her wounded hand. Behind her closed eyes she thought she saw the reflections of fallen stars, or of stars which had never been. Finally she pressed her hand against the stained floorboards and waited, silent, while the living blood mingled with the dead ....



## Prologue

A STRANGER LOOKED in the back door of The Jugged Hare and tried, with scant success, to catch the attention of someone in the kitchen. “Eh, is there anyone here called Steifann?” he shouted finally.

“I’m Steifann,” declared a thin, grimy youth named Trask, who was slicing a pile of potatoes. He drew himself up to his full, rather unimposing height, thrust out his narrow chest, and swaggered across the room to address the traveler. His mimicry was undeniably accurate. Somehow, by the tilt of his smooth chin, he even managed to suggest Steifann’s thick black beard. “What’s your business with me?” he demanded, in his deepest voice.

The cooks exchanged amused glances, and a serving-girl giggled. The messenger looked doubtfully at them. “I’ve a letter here ....”

Trask gestured peremptorily at Walden, the head cook. “Pay the fellow,” he ordered, snatching up the sealed paper and perching on the table among the potato peelings. Walden obeyed, and the man withdrew, shaking his head in confusion.

“Trask, Steifann’ll tear you to shreds if you open that,” scolded the girl, looking over his shoulder eagerly. “It must be from Corson.”

Walden shoved her toward the taproom. “Go fetch him, Giniver, you goose—neither of you brats can read anyway.”

“Oh, I can make *this* out well enough,” said Trask. “Listen!” He broke the seal at once and held the letter at arm’s length, peering at it shrewdly, though it was upside down. “My darling, sweet lambkin,” he recited, loudly. “I think of you every moment, for I have an ache that gives me no rest, and no one else can ease it. Every night I toss and tumble about, dreaming of your broad shoulders and thick, mighty arms, your wide, warm chest, your manly hips and long, powerful thighs, your—”

“Give me that, you stinking little turd, before I tear your tongue out!” roared Steifann, charging in from the taproom and grabbing Trask by the collar. He seized the letter, and Trask wriggled from his grasp, ducked a blow, and scampered out the back door, snickering.

Steifann glared around at the others, but they made no attempt to hide their laughter. “Well, read it, lambkin,” said Walden. “What’s that worthless layabout Corson got to say?”

“That’s my affair—and I don’t pay you lot good wages to stand about gaping like half-wits! There’s work to do.” Steifann hastily scanned the letter, and everyone gathered around to hear the news, ignoring his bluster. “Nothing but a lot of lies and boasting, as usual .... Her handwriting’s a bit better, though,” he said, surprised. As he read further he reddened, cleared his throat, pushed the hair back from his forehead, and finally grinned. “She’ll be home by first frost!” he announced.

## 1

BY THE TIME her ship docked at Chiastelm, Corson was already in a rage of impatience. She was bored by the confinement and monotony of shipboard life, which left her all too much leisure to imagine how Steifann was spending his time—and with whom.

“Rutting stud-bull,” she muttered. “Probably been to bed with everyone on the coast since I’ve been gone, especially that dirty hag Destiver.” And when she saw that Destiver’s cargo ship, the *Windhover*, was in port, her suspicions seemed all but confirmed.

There was not much work for a skilled mercenary in the peaceful port town of Chiastelm, and Corson was more often away than at home. During her travels she was no more faithful to Steifann than he was to her, but this did not allay her jealousy in the slightest. However she might carry on, in the distant lands where her sword took her, she felt that Steifann ought to be passing the time thinking of her and longing for her return. She knew this was foolishness, and in her more reasonable moments she laughed at herself for it, but Corson’s reasonable moments were few, where Steifann was concerned. And Steifann, a most sensible man as a rule, was just as unreasonable about Corson. Both furiously

resented anyone whom they suspected of sharing the other's bed.

But Corson despised Destiver, the cargo-runner and petty smuggler, more than all the rest. Destiver had known Steifann longer than Corson had, which was an unforgivable offense in Corson's eyes. Furthermore, she'd recently charged Corson an outrageous fee to smuggle her out of Chiastelm when there was a fat price on her head. That bloodsucking bitch was probably at the Hare with Steifann right now, Corson thought grimly, the both of them drunk and randy as rabbits ....

But once she left the wharves behind, her ill humor soon gave way to eager anticipation of her welcome. Whenever she returned to the Hare, her friends made much of her and even pampered her a bit, plying her with food and ale and questions about her adventures. Well, she had tales aplenty for them this time, and the loot to bear them out. When she showed them the gold and the large, uncut diamond she'd earned by her sword, they'd see that she was no common fighter-for-hire. She, Corson brenn Torisk, was a fit companion for gentlefolk.

The jewel, and her fine red-gold earrings, were the gifts of a grateful noblewoman, a lady of the lofty rank of Rhaicime. And there was a gown of gold silk as well, a token of hospitality from a family of wealthy vintners in the Midlands—folk of noble descent they were, too. She would let Steifann know that she'd been wooed by the handsome heir of a distinguished line, while *he'd* been bedding down with that scrofulous smuggler. And if Destiver was there to hear it, so much the better!

It had been too long since Corson had enjoyed a proper homecoming. The last time she'd come back, she'd hardly been home a day before she had to sneak out of the city in the hold of the *Windhover*. It had all been monstrously unfair, Corson thought. True, she had cut the throat of a powerful nobleman from Rhostshyl, but that was his own fault, she considered, for abducting the Lady Nyctasia while Corson was her bodyguard.

But now that Rhostshyl was involved in civil war, the rulers of the city had no time to concern themselves with a mere hireling killer. Corson could safely pass the winter with Steifann and his people, who were more of a family to her than any she'd known before.

When she caught sight of Steifann's tavern her pace quickened, and she thought she could smell the savory stew, roasting meats and baking loaves. As always, she went straight to the kitchen door.

"I'm back!" she announced. "And I'm hungry as a hunter. I've been living on ship's swill for weeks."

But instead of crowding around to exclaim over her and hear her news, the others went on with their work, barely sparing her a greeting. They seemed busier and more rushed than usual. Steifann was nowhere to be seen—and neither was Destiver.

"Oh, good, Corson's here," said Trask. "She can keep an eye on the drunks out front." He blew her a kiss and went on scrubbing a pot with unwonted industry.

"Corson, my pet, just in time. Here, carry this." Annin, the head serving-woman, held out a heavy tray laden with mugs of ale.

"Never mind that," Walden ordered. "Someone has to chop more firewood. We haven't much left."

"Where's Steifann, then?" wailed Corson. "Why hasn't he cut the wood?"

"He's sick, we put him to bed. The man's no use at all."

"Sick? Steifann's never sick. He's healthy as an ox," Corson said uneasily. "What ails him?"

"Grippe. Fever. Go see for yourself—but don't tarry. I need that firewood now."

"Firewood ...?" Steifann said hoarsely, as he lumbered into the kitchen. His face was flushed with fever, his eyes red and swollen. "I'm going out to chop the wood—" He broke into a rasping cough and collapsed heavily onto a bench, "Soon," he added, and sneezed.

"I'll do it," Corson said reluctantly, "and it's more than Destiver would do, mark my word."

"First help me drag this diseased dog back to bed, before he gives us all the grippe," sighed Walden.

Steifann sneezed again. "Destiver? Is that lazy leech here again? She wouldn't lift a finger if the lot of us were dying. She only comes by to drink my ale and tell lies about her past as a ferocious pirate."

Annin bustled in carrying the empty tray. "What's he doing in here? We've enough to do without looking after him."

"I'm fine," Steifann protested. "No need to fuss ...." He leaned back against the wall and looked up at Corson, bleary-eyed. "So you're back, are you? It's about time. Where have you been?"

“Come along, love.” Corson said resignedly, pulling him up by the arm. “I’ll tell you all about it.”

He staggered against her and mumbled, “I don’t need any help. It’s just a chill—” and started to cough again.

Corson removed an accounts-ledger and a stray boot from the bed, then gathered up the tangled quilts and shook out each one. She laid them out smoothly, as Nyctasia had done for her only a few months before, when she’d been desperately ill herself. Corson remembered how curiously comforting it had been to have the bedclothes properly arranged for her, though Nyctasia had received little thanks for her attentions.

Steifann was no more cooperative than Corson had been. “I don’t want blankets,” he said, kicking at them. “It’s hot in here.”

“It’s not. The fire’s gone out. And when you have a fever, you ought to stay warm. I know all about such things.”

Steifann snorted. “And when did you become so learned a physician?”

“I know what Nyc did for me when I was sick—in Lhestreq it was. And I didn’t have just a touch of grippe, I tell you, I was *poisoned*. I nearly died, I was too weak to move, for days and days—”

“Who’s this Nick,” Steifann interrupted, “and what else did he do for you?”

Corson looked smug. “She’s an old friend. A lady of quality, from the aristocracy. You needn’t think that I spend all my time in the company of louts like you.” She picked up some of his clothes from the floor and threw them over a chest. “This place looks like a kennel.”

“You’ve known plenty worse! When I met you, you were glad of any roof over your head—” He broke into another fit of coughing before he could give full expression to his indignation.

“There! You should be quiet, you see? You’re supposed to rest, and ...” Corson thought for a moment. “And drink something hot. I’ll mull some ale,” she decided.

“Corson!” Trask shouted through the door. “Walden says if you don’t cut that firewood now, he’ll come in after you with the axe.”

Corson sighed. “I might as well. I have to make up the fire in here too.”

“You might fetch in more water while you’re about it, Your Highness,” Steifann suggested.

Corson slammed the door on her way out.

“Corson!” Steifann called after her.

“What now? Do you want me to clean the stable too?”

“I’m glad to have you back,” said Steifann.

## 2

ANNIN CAME DOWNSTAIRS briskly and looked around the kitchen. “Where’s Corson? Isn’t she up yet? It’s time she was off to market.”

“She left at first light and came back an hour ago with our supplies,” Walden said without looking up from his bread-dough. “Then she went off on some business of her own. She brought in wood and water enough, though. First time we’ve had everything we need since Lambkin’s been abed.”

Trask wandered in, tousled and yawning, “Poor Corson! She came all this way to get Steifann into bed, and instead she can’t get him out of it. I’m surprised she stayed this long.”

“Wash your hands and get to work on this kneading. Corson’s just gone on an errand, a letter to deliver, or some such thing. She said she’d be back before anyone in the taproom had time to get too drunk.”

Annin shook her head in wonder. “That one’s earning her keep, and no mistake. I’ve never known her so hard-working. She’s been doing all Steifann’s work, and everything else she can lay her hand to.”

“And waiting on him hand and foot like a nursemaid,” Trask put in. “He’d be a fool to get better. I wouldn’t, in his place.”

“She brought him his breakfast this morning too,” Giniver reported, with a smirk.

“I’ll tell you what’s even stranger than all that,” said Walden. “She’s hardly been complaining lately.”

Trask gave an exaggerated gasp. “By the Hlann, you’re right—and she hasn’t been drunk even once,

or started a fight.” He pounded both fists into the mass of dough on the table. “It must be love!”

There was plenty of sickness in the town, as there always was at the turning of the seasons, and Maegor the herbalist was busy. She was not pleased when a tall, armed stranger entered the apothecary and asked for her by name.

She thought at once of Nyctasia. ’Tasia’s allies from Rhostshyl had come already, asking for news of her, but were her enemies still seeking her as well? Had they learned that Maegor still heard from her, from time to time? If so, this visit could mean danger. The others had accepted her word that she did not know where Nyctasia could be found, but the minions of the ruthless Lady Mhairesstri would not be so easily satisfied ....

Maegor was fairly tall herself, but she had to look up to meet the eyes of the unknown swordswoman. “I am Maegor,” she said calmly. “How may I serve you? You don’t look to be in need of healing herbs.”

But the woman smiled disarmingly. “Not for myself, to be sure, but my man’s down with a hard cough, and a fever. I was told you might have some remedy.” Corson had little use for potions and medicaments, for she was rarely ill, and wouldn’t admit to it when she was. But since the commission from Nyctasia brought her here, she might as well see about some cure for Steifann.

“I can prepare an effective cordial for that,” said Maegor, somewhat reassured, “but there are others before you, as you see.”

“Oh, I can come back later,” Corson said pleasantly. With her back to Maegor’s other customers, she drew Nyctasia’s letter partway from her shirt, far enough for Maegor to see.

“Yes, that will be best. I’ve no doubt I can help you. I’ll be ready for you, then—just after sunset,” Maegor suggested.

Corson had recognized Maegor at once from Nyctasia’s description. “A woman of polished walnut wood,” Nyctasia had called her, and so she was. Her hair and eyes and skin were all of a deep, burnished brown, and she had something of the vital, unyielding nature of living wood as well. There were few people Nyctasia trusted so unreservedly.

As Corson expected, Maegor was alone in the shop when she returned. She handed her the letter without explanation, and Maegor quickly broke the seal, assuring herself that the writing was in Nyctasia’s hand. She glanced through it hastily while Corson walked about the apothecary peering into the clay jars that lined the shelves.

“She doesn’t know ... ?” Maegor said, frowning.

“About Rhostshyl? Not when I left her. She may have heard something by now.”

Maegor sighed. “I hope not. She’ll think, she should come back, if she learns how things stand in the city. And there are those who ... well, no matter.” She seemed sorry to have said even so much as that. “I once tried to persuade her to stay, but now I’m glad she’s clear of the place.”

“I promised to let her have news of the city.”

So you know where she is, Maegor thought, but she said only, “If she returns, she may very well be assassinated.”

“She knows that,” Corson said evenly. “I’ve no right to make such a decision for her.” She did not add, “and neither have you,” but Maegor understood her well enough, and she turned back to Nyctasia’s letter, silent.

“Is it true that ground hartshorn excites the passions?” Corson asked, examining a small pot of grayish powder.

Maegor looked up, startled, then laughed, “’Tasia told you to ask me that, as a sign, didn’t she? Those were the first words she ever spoke to me. Are you satisfied?”

Corson shrugged. “I was sure of you. But I thought perhaps you weren’t so sure of me.”

“I wasn’t, at first—but it’s not likely that anyone else would match ’Tasia’s description of her courier. Listen: ‘She who delivers this to you should be a veritable giantess, a magnificent creature a furlong high and as beautiful as a dream, with great blue eyes, skin like dark honey, and a long bronze braid crowning her proud head.’” Maegor paused to look Corson up and down, nodded, and continued, “‘If some

lesser being stands before you, then this message has been intercepted, but I have no fear of that. My messenger is as deadly as she is comely, and her equal with a sword has not been born.' You seem to have made quite an impression on the Lady Nyctasia, friend."

Corson blushed and said stiffly, "That one wallows in words like a sow in muck. I don't pay any heed to her nonsense. And I can't wait about here all night, for that matter—I've work to do. If you want to send her an answer, you can find me at The Jugged Hare. But what of that remedy you promised me, eh? That wasn't a ruse, I do need it. Do you know Steifann brenn Azhes at the Hare?"

"I know him by reputation," said Maegor, discreetly, without mentioning what Steifann's reputation was like. "Is he the one taken sick?"

Corson nodded, "First time since I've known him. He's coughed himself hoarse. His throat's swollen up and he wheezes like a bellows. Can you really heal that?"

"Well, I can ease it a good bit. Keep water on the boil in his room day and night. The steam will soothe his breathing. Is he sneezing too?"

"Constantly."

"Mmmm, with a fever, you said?"

"I think so. He has the chills."

Maegor disappeared into the back of the shop and returned with her hands full of fragrant dried fruit rinds, which she tied up in a square of cloth. "Boil these in water or wine till the mixture's thick, then have him drink all of it at once, as hot as he can bear it. That's for the cough. But these"—she measured out a selection of herbs—"are for fever and catarrh. Steep them in a tea and give him a cupful at night and in the morning, with plenty of honey, Honey's good for the throat."

Maegor gave Corson further instructions on caring for a chill and cough, and sent her away laden with admonitions and medicinal preparations. Only when Corson was gone did she give her full attention to Nyctasia's letter.

As usual, Nyctasia did not say where she was. Raised among the schemes and intrigues of the court at Rhostshyl, she considered such information a weapon that might fall into the wrong hands and be used against her. The feuds and rivalries of the nobility of the city had often taken a deadly turn, and Nyctasia ar'n Edonaris had made more enemies than most. Her attempts to settle the ancient enmity between the Houses of Edonaris and Teiryn had not been welcomed by either party. Powerful factions of each family were determined that the feud should end only with the destruction of the other. Nyctasia had been forced to flee the city, and with Corson as bodyguard she had escaped the coast with her life. But even safe in exile she found it hard to abandon the caution bred by a lifetime of secrecy. The letter said that she was among friends, but gave no clue to her whereabouts.

When Maegor had last seen her, Nyctasia had revealed that she meant to join her lover, Erystalben ar'n Shiestred, but where he had settled after leaving Rhostshyl, Maegor had no idea. The Edonaris had driven him from the city years before, to end his influence over Nyctasia. He had not only threatened their plans to marry her to her kinsman Thierran, but had also abetted her in the study of magic—a study which had won her an undesirable (and largely undeserved) reputation as a dangerous sorceress.

Maegor had met Lord Erystalben, and found him overly proud and ambitious. Not a man, she thought, who ought to study magic. But his love for Nyctasia she could not doubt, and it had been comforting to know that her friend would not be alone in exile.

Yet Maegor was not truly sorry to learn that Nyctasia was not with him after all. Perhaps now she would turn from her pursuit of the magic arts. "He is lost to me," Nyctasia had written, "through a spell of Perilous Threshold, which he used in desperation to defend his stronghold against a more powerful mage. Such a spell exacts its own price, and I know not where it has taken 'Ben, nor what it has taken from him. I have 'sought in spirit, that the flesh might find,'"—a quote Maegor recognized from the *Isporian Precepts*—"but I have learned little. That he lives is certain, but he might be anywhere in this world, or in another. He may be so changed that my spirit can no longer reach out to his. I have dreamed dreams that do not lead me to hope."

Though Maegor was no magician, she knew how dangerous and unpredictable a spell of Perilous Threshold was said to be. Surely even Shiestred, with all his hunger for power, would not take such a

mad risk. There was much, she realized, that Nyctasia had not chosen to tell her.

“But I have found a family who treat me as one of their own,” the letter continued, “and I shall try to be content with that for the present. I have work to console me as well, for a great collection of books has recently been discovered in these parts—an entire library of rare and precious works, which are all that remain of a sect of scholars known as the Cymvelan Circle. All seven volumes of *The Manifold Ills of the Flesh* are here in full, and Rosander’s treatise *On the Curative Properties of Wildroots*. I shall send you the latter as soon as I have taken a fair copy.”

Maegor smiled. Nyctasia had not changed. However grave her plight, she never lost her passion for learning of all kinds—nor her readiness to display her erudition. If anything could reconcile her to exile from Rhostshyl and separation from Lord Erystalben, it would be the lost lore of an obscure lot of scholars somewhere in the hinterlands.

“No one hereabouts takes an interest in the books, and I have them altogether at my will,” Nyctasia exulted. “I ought to summon scholars from the university in Liruvath to share in this discovery, but I mean to take its measure myself, first. There are certain works here on the secrets of the spirit, which may be of some use to me.”

Nyctasia was unchanged indeed. Sighing, Maegor read on, but what followed was even less to her liking.

“I rely on you to let me know how matters fare in the city”—to Nyctasia there was no city but Rhostshyl—“for travelers from the coast are rarely met with here. You may safely entrust any message to my fair courier, Corson brenn Torisk by name, who can be found betimes at the ale-house called The Jugged Hare.”

Nyctasia concluded her missive formally, with a traditional Vahnite blessing. “May the Indwelling Spirit guide you in all things, my dear Maeg,” she had written in closing, with a characteristic flourish, “and for the *vahn*’s sake, don’t forget to burn this!”

### 3

CORSON LAY AWAKE listening to Steifann snore, and trying to decide how to begin a letter to Nyctasia. She rarely wrote to anyone but Steifann, and her letters to him were not altogether different from Trask’s idea of them—but something more formal seemed to be called for now. What form of address would be proper between persons of such widely disparate rank as herself and the Rhaicime Nyctasia? Corson hated to reveal her ignorance of such matters by using the wrong terms, but she could hardly consult a public scrivener about this letter. It was commonly believed that Nyctasia ar’n Edonaris was dead, and it would be safest to let it stay that way. For secrecy’s sake, the letter would have to be sent on the *Windhover* as far as Lhestreq, but there was no help for that. Destiver at least knew how to keep her own counsel, though she had no other good qualities, in Corson’s opinion.

But Destiver would soon be on her way north—this letter must be taken in hand. Knowing that nothing short of an earthquake would wake Steifann, Corson got up, wrapped herself in a blanket, and lit a candle from the hearthfire. She pushed Steifann’s account-books to one side of the table and sat with her head on her hand, nibbling thoughtfully at the tip of a quill. “Corson brenn Torisk, to the Lady Nyctasia ar’n Edonaris, Rhaicime of Rhostshyl, Greetings,” she murmured. That sounded impressive, but was it correct? Should Nyctasia’s name come first? It would take forever to write it, either way ....

Corson was proud of her ability to read and write, rare skills in one of her station, but her hands were trained to the sword, not to the quill. Under Nyctasia’s direction, she had practiced her penmanship, but she still found it slow, uncomfortable work.

Perhaps she ought not to reveal Nyctasia’s full name in the letter at all. It would pass through many hands before it reached her, after all, and it might be wiser to be cautious. The letter could be directed to the estate in the Midlands where Nyctasia was staying with a distant, disowned branch of her family. They’d see that she received it. That would be best.

With a sigh of relief, Corson flexed her fingers and carefully wrote,  
“Dear Nyc,

“It’s happened in Rhostshyl as you said it would. It’s over now, and your kin hold the city, whatever’s left of the place. You’re well out of it, from all that I hear. Plenty of folk fled to Chiastelm for refuge, and they say half the city’s in ashes, and many killed on both sides. Maegor can tell you more of it than I, she says she’s spoken with your friends from Rhostshyl. I didn’t think you had any friends in Rhostshyl, but I suppose she knows what she’s about. She’s a fine healer, that’s certain. Steifann was half dead with the grippe when I got here, and she told me how to look after him. Now he’s as well as ever.”

Corson paused to shake her cramped hand. She’d have liked to boast to Nyctasia about all she’d done to care for Steifann, and how much she’d learned about nursing a fever, but writing all that would be more of a chore than doing it had been. She decided to let it keep, and pass on to something more important, “I could even say that he’s better than ever,” she wrote, grinning to herself. “I used that comb you gave me, the wooden one, not the silver one, and it was all you claimed, I confess. I had my doubts, but I guess even you have to tell the truth now and then.” Corson chuckled, remembering the evening she’d tried out the charmed comb that Nyctasia had made for her as a parting gift.

Steifann had recovered his health quickly under her ministrations, and had taken up the heavy work about the place again, bringing in supplies, throwing out troublemakers and seeing to everything else that needed doing. Corson had decided to take a well-earned rest that night, and left the others to close up the tavern while she soaked lazily in a hot bath. She had taken to washing more often of late, to prove to the fastidious Nyctasia that she was not the unkempt sloven Nyctasia had called her at their first meeting—though she would have died in agony before admitting that she cared for Nyc’s opinion.

And tonight she particularly wanted to be clean, since she meant to wear her gold silk gown for Steifann, for the first time. She washed her waist-length, chestnut hair till it shone in the firelight, and went to a chest to fetch her fine silver brush and comb. Let Steifann see those too, she thought with satisfaction.

But then she noticed the wooden comb among the heaped mess of her belongings in the chest, and picked it out instead, examining it thoughtfully. It looked ordinary enough, just such a poor piece of frippery as any peasant girl might buy at market for a copper. But Nyctasia claimed to have bewitched it with a certain mysterious perfume that drove men wild with desire. Only men could smell it, according to Nyctasia, and then only when the comb was drawn through a woman’s hair. It sounded suspiciously like one of her strangely convincing lies, but what reason could she have to make up such a thing?

Even if the comb did what Nyctasia promised, though, Corson wondered whether she’d be able to tell the difference. It was hard to imagine Steifann any lustier than he already was. But he might be more tired than usual tonight, working so hard after just recovering his strength ... and it could do no harm to try the thing, after all—

Steifann *was* rather tired by the time he finished securing the tavern for the night, but he forgot his fatigue when he pushed open the door to his room and saw Corson waiting for him. She half lay on the sheepskin hearthrug, sheathed in heavy cream-gold silk that caught the firelight and cast its sunset radiance over her honey-gold skin and glowing, burnished-bronze hair. Steifann caught his breath at the sight. He had always thought Corson a fine-looking woman, though he never saw fit to tell her so, but she was usually bedraggled and dirty (as he never failed to tell her) and rarely looked respectable—much less glorious.

Corson looked up and smiled a welcome as she pulled the comb slowly through her damp, shining hair. “What do you think of my gown? A rich vintner in the Midlands gave it to me.”

“Very pretty,” Steifann said gruffly. “What did you do to earn it, eh?” He took the comb and rapped her on the head with it, then began to comb her long hair for her.

Corson sighed contentedly. “I was a guest of the house, I’ll have you know. They even named a new wine for me.”

“Did they call it Shameless Slut?” Steifann suggested. “And when did you start perfuming yourself like a strumpet?” He suddenly buried his face in her scented hair, intoxicated by its sweet, heady fragrance. “You smell like a whore,” he lied, his voice thick, his breath quickening. His hands had begun to shake slightly, and the comb fell from his fingers. Dizzy with desire, he pulled Corson against him,

kissing her hair and her throat, sliding his hands hungrily over her breasts and belly.

A rush of passion cascaded through Corson till it seemed to pool in her hips, but she elbowed him away and said tartly, "You should know how a whore smells. You bed down with enough of them while I'm away." Let him smolder a bit—he'd burn all the brighter for it soon.

Steifann meant to retort, "And I suppose you weren't whoring all over the Midlands with that vintner of yours?" but he didn't seem to have breath enough to speak. That didn't matter, though. Nothing mattered but obeying the command of that compelling, overmastering fragrance, which no longer seemed to him a mere scent, but an irresistible power in his very blood. Without thought, he seized Corson and pulled her down onto the hearthrug, searching fiercely with hands and mouth for the elusive, maddening secret she had somehow hidden everywhere at once.

Corson gasped in delight. At that moment she forgave Nyctasia for every deception and insult. "Have a care, love," she laughed, "this is Liruvathe silk!"

Now Corson stretched and yawned, smiling sleepily to herself. Well, she couldn't write all *that* to Nyc either, more's the pity. She'd have to wait to thank her properly someday, face to face. For the present, she contented herself with writing, "Many thanks. I wouldn't trade that comb for the whole Imperial treasury!"

Corson shamefacedly confessed the trick to Steifann some days afterward, but he merely roared with laughter and called her a number of very colorful names, some of which she'd never heard before, even in the army.

"And me worrying that I'd gotten as drunk as that on so little ale," he added. "I was afraid I'd lost my stomach for drink! I can't remember half of what we did that night—but I wouldn't mind doing it again, I know that." He picked up the comb and sniffed it cautiously. "I don't smell anything now."

"Nyc says the perfume can only be smelt in a woman's hair."

"Nick, eh? The more I hear of that one, the less I like her. So she combed your hair for you too, did she?"

Corson grinned, relishing his jealousy. "It only works on men. Nyc just made the comb for me to remember her by. And she gave me these gold earrings too, when my old ones were stolen. She gave me a lot of fine things," Corson said provokingly, "because she enjoys my company. She's *very* fond of me."

"I'll give you a fine lot of broken bones to remember *me* by, one of these days, you slattern," Steifann said, swatting her affectionately.

Though he'd done nothing but complain while he was ill, Steifann had secretly been delighted to have Corson caring for him and fretting over him. He'd never seen her behave so responsibly before, and he liked what he saw. Had he heard her tell Maegor that "her man" was sick, he would have been even better pleased. And the incident of the comb had done nothing to detract from her charms.

Finding that he took such an indulgent view of the charmed comb, Corson decided to unburden her conscience of another matter as well. "Nyc did another piece of magic for me once," she said offhandedly, "a queer spell that showed what people far off were doing. I was thinking of you just then, as it happened, and I saw you pictured in a mirror."

"Charlatan's fakery," Steifann scoffed. "A false mirror, or some such. You were hoodwinked."

Corson shrugged. "Maybe. Nyc's tricky as a weasel. But it surely seemed to be you. You were sitting right there, in this very room, late at night, writing in your everlasting account-books. You blotted the page and had to scrape the ink off. Do you remember a night like that, late last summer?"

"Dozens. And you've lain there and watched me at it scores of times ...." Steifann hesitated. "All the same, Corson, there was one time, in the summer, when I'd let the accounts fall behind and I was up half the night trying to right them. I remember it specially because I had the strangest feeling that you were here, even though I knew it was impossible. I couldn't help looking over at the bed, time and again, to see if you were there. I was only half awake, I suppose. Then I did fall asleep over the ledger, and I thought you shook me and said, 'Get to bed, leave that for tomorrow,' and I suddenly woke up. It was just a dream, of course, but I was so sure you were there, it was uncanny."

"That was Nyc's witchery," Corson said decidedly. "I know spellcraft when I meet it. I have an unusual affinity for magic, Nyc says. Or something like that."



“Witches, winemakers ... was there anyone in the Midlands you *didn't* sleep with?”

“I don't think so,” Corson teased. “I might have overlooked a few shepherds or laborers, though. I was only with the gentry, you see. Even Raphe, my vintner, comes of' good family—his own sister's heir to the title of Jhaice. And Nyc's not some mountebank trickster, she's a scholar and a noblewoman, A Rhaicime, if you want to know.”

“I don't. What are you doing under my humble roof, if Rhaicimes are so fond of your company?”

“Well ... I came back for your sake. You looked so wretched without me, in the mirror-spell, I felt sorry for you.”

Even Steifann's good nature balked at this outrageous bluff. “Then you can go right back to your fine friends!” he shouted, “Not that I believe a word of it—”

“Peace, peace,” cried Corson, throwing her arms around him. “Very well, then, I was missing you—didn't I write and tell you so? I was so lonely for you, I asked Nyc to do that spell for me, just so I could see you. Are you satisfied?”

As Corson intended, Steifann was flattered to hear her admit to missing him, and he forgot to accuse her of spying on him. Despite herself, Corson had learned some of Nyctasia's subtle wiles.

“Well, I trust you've seen the last of this witch,” Steifann said, mollified. He pulled her closer.

“I daresay. But she has a way of turning up again, just when I think I'm rid of her.” And Corson couldn't resist adding, “I rather miss her too. She's a charming little thing, in her way.”

“Bitch. I know you're just trying to nettle me.”

Corson chuckled. “Nyc says my insolence is insupportable,” she said proudly. “I learn the most outlandish words from that one.”

“You've learned too much from her to suit me. I'll just take charge of this comb myself. You're not going to play that trick on anyone but me.”

“It's mine! Give it here!”

“Not if I know it.”

They tussled over the comb until they had both forgotten about it. It was some time later before Steifann rolled over and felt it jabbing him in the back. He seized it and flourished it triumphantly at Corson.

“Oh, all right, I make you a present of it,” she said. “I can drive men mad with desire without any help. But you'll have to give it to Annin if she asks. I said I'd lend it to her.”

Steifann glared. “Did you tell everyone about it, you—”

“No, no, only Annin. I'd no choice! You see, I had to wash the perfume out of my hair, that morning, while you were still sleeping, and I called Annin to bring me hot water. I didn't dare to fetch it myself—I'd have had to fight off half a dozen fellows, and maybe kill a few of them, through no fault of their own.”

Corson laughed, remembering her whispered conversation with Annin through the door. “Annin said, ‘What did you *do* to him?’ They must have heard him howling all the way to Ochram!” And I said, ‘Never mind that! Believe me, I need to wash my hair *now*, and don't send Trask with the water, bring it yourself!’”

By now, Steifann too was laughing. “What did she say to that?”

“Plenty. She was furious. Both of us sleeping half the morning away, leaving her with all the work, and then asking her to fetch hot water, if you please! When she finished cursing me, she said, ‘You just washed your hair last night! Do you think I'm your rutting lady's maid?’ So I had to explain. But she wouldn't help me unless I promised to let her use the comb some time.”

Steifann shook his head. “Asye! No man on the coast will be safe!”

## 4

CORSON'S LETTER WAS duly dispatched on the *Windhover*, along with another from Maegor containing urgent messages from Nyctasia's allies in Rhostshyl. Some weeks later, Destiver turned over the lot to a trustworthy courier in Lhestreq who was bound for the Midlands, but nearly two months

passed before he had completed the journey inland, around the Yth Forest, and arrived in Osela. By that time the winter had struck in force, and early blizzards had already buried the Southern Trade Road under impenetrable banks and barricades of snow and ice. Communication with the Valleylands to the south would be cut off until the way was clear again. Nyctasia's letters remained in Osela to await the spring thaw.

Winter was a time of some leisure for the farmers of the Midlands. With the crops harvested, the fields cleared, and the winter wheat planted, there was time for a measure of rest, for mending and making, and instructing the children.

On the estate of the Edonaris of Vale, the work of the vintnery went on at a slower pace, now that the pressing was completed and the new vintage sealed in casks. The barrels in their caves had to be inspected daily against damage or spoilage, the vine-stakes and trellises had to be kept in repair, and the plants themselves needed constant pruning, even during their barren season. But still winter was the least toilsome time of the year, and the family took full advantage of the respite. There were gatherings of the local gentry, feasting and flirting, and long evenings of gossip and storytelling about the hearth.

The labors of the estate did not much concern Nyctasia. Though she was willing enough to learn the art of vintnery, she did not share her kinsfolks' passion for the profession, and she saw all too clearly that they needed no help from her to make and market their celebrated wines.

She did contribute a useful skill to the household, however, by taking upon herself the education of the youngsters. Even the practical Mesthelde ar'n Edonaris, who ran the manor-house with a firm hand and had little use for scholars, was grateful for Nyctasia's learning, now that she herself was relieved of the unwelcome task of teaching the children their letters. "And you can give some lessons to the older ones as well," she ordered Nyctasia. "That will cure them of their notions of running off to the Imperial University!"

Nyctasia rather sympathized with her young cousins' desire to attend the university in Liruvath, but she could see the sense in Mesthelde's suggestion. Once they'd had a taste of the hard work that true scholarship demanded, most of her pupils did find the prospect of the university less inviting.

She had better success with the children, who were fascinated by her foreign accent and her exciting past. It was far more interesting to take their lessons from an exiled Rhaicime and sorceress than from Mesthelde, who'd been caring for them and scolding them all their lives.

But most of Nyctasia's time was devoted to her own studies, researching the volumes of the Cymvelan library, copying and translating rare and ancient texts, discovering works unknown to her. She took part, from time to time, in the family's winter pastimes, but she could usually be found in the tower room where the books had been housed when they were removed from the abandoned temple of the Cymvelan Circle. She pored over their pages day and night, often forgetting meals and sleep, driven by the desire to possess their secrets, as if the knowledge gained could fill the emptiness left by her losses.

Her newfound kin still hardly knew what to make of her. She had arrived in their midst suddenly, unexpected, a stranger from far-off Rhostshyl, the home of their remote ancestors, and a place known to them through tradition and rumor as a city of splendor and of danger. They had been wary of her at first, suspecting that she had come to enlist their aid in the warfare between the Houses of Edonaris and Teiryn in Rhostshyl. But much to the disappointment of the younger, more adventurous members of the family, Nyctasia had implored them to have nothing to do with the feud. She had sought only to live in peace among them, a request it would be churlish to refuse; the laws of hospitality forbade them to turn her away.

She looked like one of themselves, after all. She was nearly identical to Frondescine ar'n Edonaris, resembling her more closely than did her own twin brother, Raphistain. And though the Edonaris of Vale were hard-working folk who dealt in trade, they were mindful of their noble descent nonetheless, and Nyctasia's lofty rank made her all the more welcome to the family. They were flattered that a Rhaicime should acknowledge them as kin, and they could not but be impressed by her elegance and her aristocratic ways. Not a few of her distant cousins were half enamored of her already, and when Lady Nocharis suggested one evening, "Let someone fetch Nyc to give us a song," several voices promptly answered, "I'll go!" and the others laughed.

Frondescine winked at her younger brother Jenisorn. “You go, Jheine. You can talk the birds out of their nests when you’ve a mind to. I daresay you can lure our little lone owl down from her tower,” Frondescine, who was always called ‘Deisha, had been Nyctasia’s most ardent admirer from the first, but her feelings had since cooled to a somewhat more sisterly affection. Dear as Nyctasia was to her, ‘Deisha could not help finding her brooding visions and dark spells a little frightening. She had seen more than the others of Nyctasia’s strange humors and forebodings.

Jenisorn got up from the bench, grinning. “At least Nyc has the wit to appreciate my charm and talents, unlike my nearer relations and my loutish siblings,” he declared. With his thick brown curls and laughing blue eyes. Jenisorn gave promise of becoming the handsomest of a handsome family, in time. He was used to being a favorite, but was too clever to be truly conceited.

“Get along with you, you strutting cockerel,” said Mesthelde. “Tell Nyc she’s not to blind herself, reading all night by candlelight.”

“At once, Aunt. She’ll not dare to disobey *you*.”

Mesthelde glanced up from her sewing and gave him one look that sent him hastening from the hall.

“We ourselves are the true link between the world of the spirit and the world of matter,” Nyctasia read. “For humankind is equally composed of flesh and spirit, of earth and air, of fire and water, and thus the gateway where the two realms meet is rightly to be sought within ourselves and not elsewhere.”

She looked up from the page when the great hound sleeping by the fire stirred and sat up, thumping its heavy tail on the hearthstones. Before long, Nyctasia too heard footsteps on the tower stairs. She quickly closed her book and returned it to the chest beside the table, locking it and pocketing the key. Some of her young kinfolk had already been pestering her to teach them about spells and spirits, and she dared not leave such a thing to chance. By the time Jenisorn knocked and looked around the door, a different treatise lay open on the table before her.

“Ah, Jheine, have a look at this,” she invited. Jenisorn was the only one of her older pupils who showed a true gift and inclination for scholarship. He was already making good progress at learning Ancient Eswraine. “It’s a collection of the Isporian Maxims. How would you translate this one? The words are all simple ones.”

Jenisorn joined her and bent over the manuscript. “*Veshayin heocht ...*” he pondered. “To speak to a dog? Oh, I see—‘Speak to the dog at your hand.’ That makes some sense, but why ‘Speak to the bird at the bread’?”

“That’s not quite right, though it’s not quite wrong either. That form of the word can mean ‘at’ or ‘by’ or ‘with,’ you know. And ‘hound’ will match the pattern of consonance better than ‘dog’: ‘Speak to a hound with your hands. Speak to a bird with bread.’”

“Deisha will like that.” The livestock of the estate were his sister’s particular concern.

Nyctasia smiled. “Well, it doesn’t really have to do only with animals. It means that one should deal with everyone according to each one’s ability to understand. Here, now try this next one—it’s rather more difficult.”

Jenisorn puzzled over the unfamiliar passage for a time. “How can stars have echoes?” he said doubtfully.

“They used the same word for ‘echo’ and ‘reflection,’” Nyctasia explained. “That’s why you often see mirrors called ‘echo-glass’ in old translations. It’s usually easy to tell which meaning is intended, though there’s sometimes a deliberate ambiguity. I think. Here it’s clear enough.”

“Hmm ...” He tried again. ‘Long after those ... *perhelid*?’

“Ancient.”

“‘Long after those ancient stars had fallen, their reflections could still be seen on the still, dark water below.’ Is that right?”

“Yes, well done!”

“But what does it mean?” he demanded.

Nyctasia laughed. “No one knows, but scores of disquisitions have been written to interpret it. None of them satisfies me, but I don’t claim that I can explain it any better myself.”

“Is it about ghosts, do you think?” Jenisorn asked, lowering his voice instinctively. It might be unwise to ask such a question in this isolated, ill-lit tower room, with the snowstorm howling at the windows.

“That has been suggested. Or it might simply mean that we ought always to consider the consequences of our actions. It seems to mean something different to everyone who reads it.”

“No wonder she was called Ispen the Mad,” sighed Jenisorn.

Nyctasia ruffled his hair. “All poets are a bit mad, no?” She knew that Jenisorn had tried his hand at writing verses himself.

Suddenly the dog gave a short bark and trotted out to the stairway to greet another hound as huge as itself. It was followed by the twins, who’d come in search of Nyctasia and Jenisorn both.

“There, Raphe, just as I told you—Nyc’s netted him,” ’Deisha exclaimed. “We’d have waited all night while the two of them discussed philosophy.”

Nyctasia looked bewildered, and Jenisorn guilty. Raphistain laughed and swept a low bow to Nyctasia. “My dear Nyc, this scatterwit was supposed to fetch you to sing for us, at Mother ’Charis’s desire—and Aunt Mesthelde’s command.”

Raphe too was fond of Nyctasia, and he knew that the family still had hopes of a marriage between them. He had indeed considered the advantages of the match, for it would enhance the family’s prestige a good deal if the title of Rhaicime should descend to a child of their line. Still, though it was most agreeable to have a mysterious, solitary scholar for a cousin, Nyctasia was hardly what Raphe needed in a wife. Someone with more stamina, less reserve, and, especially, a far greater interest in grape-farming and winemaking would be the only practical mate for him, he had concluded.

But what had in truth decided him, in the end, was that he found he simply could not court a woman who was the very image of his own sister. Nyctasia’s slender frame and fine features, her long, slim throat, high cheekbones and wide brow were all mirrored exactly in ’Deisha. Both had the grey Edonaris eyes and smooth black hair, as did Raphe himself. But the Edonaris of Rhostshyl were fair-skinned, the Edonaris of Vale dark from years of working in the sun. And Nyctasia had a scholar’s sloping shoulders, while ’Deisha stood straight as a young tree.

During the harvest season, Nyctasia had grown so brown in the sun that it was sometimes difficult to tell her from ’Deisha, and even now that the winter had restored her pale complexion, the resemblance was still uncanny. Raphe and Nyctasia had become excellent friends, but both knew that they would never be more.

“If you would consent to honor us with your company,” he said, offering his arm to Nyctasia, “allow me to serve as escort, since Jheine has shown himself unworthy.”

“I’d have brought her!” Jenisorn protested. “I was just—”

“Oh, come along, both of you,” laughed ’Deisha. “Send a goose to fetch a goose, and neither you’ll see again,” she chanted.

## 5

As THE WINTER WORE on, Corson grew increasingly bored with her lot in Chiastelm. She never tired of Steifann’s company, but the endless routine of chores that ordered life at The Jugged Hare always began to wear on her restless spirit after a time. The work itself was not so burdensome as the tedium of doing the same tasks day after day, like an ox at a treadmill, always plodding over the same circle of ground. There was the occasional fight with a truculent customer to relieve the monotony, but that did nothing to satisfy Corson’s wanderlust.

When the captain of the city guard heard that she was in town, he offered her a position on the night watch—a post she’d held before, from time to time. Patrolling the streets and wharves looking for trouble was work more congenial to Corson’s nature than marketing, or chopping wood, but serving in a garrison of guards reminded her of her years in the army—years she would rather forget. And she far preferred Steifann’s bed to the municipal warders’ barracks.

Corson decided to forego the job, but she let it be known that she was for hire as a courier or armed escort in the vicinity of Chiastelm. Most coastal trading was carried on by ship, but there were merchants

enough on the roads—and bandits enough—to ensure regular employment for such as Corson. The pay was not of the best, but the brief journeys eased Corson’s sense of confinement, and the harsh weather through which she had to ride made her appreciate the comforts of the Hare all the more, each time she returned. At every homecoming she swore she wanted no more of riding all day in the winter wind and standing watch in the snow at night, with her feet freezing in her boots; she’d be happy to sit by the fire peeling potatoes till spring.

But as the weeks passed, and spring seemed as far away as ever, Corson would feel again that the walls of the tavern were closing in around her. She wanted to be in the open, where there was room for her long limbs to move freely, where the very air she breathed wasn’t shared with a dozen other people. Everyone and everything seemed to be in her way, and she found it hard to control her quick temper. She knew, at such times, that there would be trouble if she didn’t get away soon.

At the close of the day, when the last customers were gone, and the tavern scrubbed and secured, Steifann and the others often sat in the warm kitchen for a while, drinking ale, quarreling amiably, and eating any food that was left in the place. Corson usually enjoyed these times, but it had been several weeks since she’d last been away, and tonight the room seemed unbearably close and stifling to her. Everything her friends said she’d heard them say many times before, on nights exactly like this one, and she suddenly felt that she couldn’t bear to hear them said again. Only by maintaining a sullen silence did she keep herself from snapping angrily at the others for no reason.

If only, for this one night, she could be traveling with Nyc again, through some wild, lonely place where anything might happen .... I never knew what that one would say next, she thought wistfully, the addelepat chit! Nyc was unpredictable, always changing—like quicksilver, the mirrorlike living metal Corson had once seen an alchemist use at a fair. And she could be as dangerous as that pretty poison as well, Corson reminded herself, Nyctasia was by turns sorceress and scholar, noblewoman and vagabond, benefactor and deceiver, stranger and friend. Corson had known her as an arrogant aristocrat and as a humble healer. She had thought nothing of letting Corson risk life and liberty in her service, yet she’d nursed Corson through a desperate illness with patience and selfless devotion. She might be flattering and affectionate one moment, then sharp-tongued and mocking the next. She was capable of quite convincingly impersonating a pickpocket, a penniless student, a common tavern-singer, a pert messenger-boy, or any other guise that would suit her purpose. Nyctasia was the will-of-the-wisp that could never be clearly seen, that disappeared when you thought you’d caught it. She was sly and perplexing and altogether exasperating. She was an insufferable vexation, and Corson missed her.

There was no mystery about Steifann, but Corson did not want to discover any. His frank, forthright nature and steady reliability were the very qualities that made Corson trust him as she trusted no one else, and made her return to the Hare as often as she could. If she ever found Steifann changed, she’d feel that the earth had given way beneath her, that she was falling helplessly, with nothing to catch hold of. There would be no stability or certainty in all the world.

Corson knew that if she chose to settle down in Chiastelm she’d have a secure home, and a steadfast friend in Steifann, yet she could not bring herself to make that choice, for all of Steifann’s urging. That same unchanging dependability that she valued in him was also what drove her away from him to seek the unknown and untried. “And when I was with Lady Quicksilver, I was missing Steifann all the while,” she thought glumly. “What ails me? I must be under a curse, that I can never be content.”

It did not improve her mood when Destiver came by to pass the time and cadge a late meal. Corson had seen a good deal more of Destiver than she liked, over the winter, and she made no secret of her displeasure, but she could see for herself that Destiver was no rival for Steifann’s affections. Indeed, Destiver seemed far more interested in carrying on a long-standing flirtation with Annin.

“We’re closed to custom for the night,” said Corson. “Go away.”

Destiver ignored her and poured herself some ale. Pushing Trask out of the way, she sat down next to Annin and kissed her hand.

“Don’t mind Corson,” said Annin, grinning. “She’s just jealous of all my swains, aren’t you, pet?”

Corson was in no humor for games, but she did her best. “Of course I am,” she said heavily. “Who wouldn’t be?” She drank deeply of her ale and tried to look less wretched than she felt.

“So am I,” Destiver declared. “Wildly, desperately jealous. It drives me mad.” She pulled Annin closer and nuzzled her bare shoulder.

“So am I!” Trask mimicked. He threw himself at Annin’s feet, exclaiming, “Annin, my beloved, let me carry you away from—”

Annin kicked him. “Spurned!” he cried, crawling hastily out of reach. “I die.” He collapsed with his head in Giniver’s lap. “Console me, fair maid,” he suggested.

Corson suddenly strode to the door and threw it open. She stood in the doorway with her back to the others, drawing deep breaths of the cold night air and staring out over the roofs of the town at the limitless black sky. Trask’s antics usually amused her, but now she was heartily sick of them, and of all the rest. She felt trapped by everything familiar.

“Corson, you rutting idiot, close that door! You’ll freeze us all.” Steifann came over and kicked the door shut himself. “You’ll catch a chill,” he said, wrapping his arms around her. “And then you’ll have to drink that foul, scalding brew you gave me. Here, I’ll keep you warm.”

“There’s not air enough for a sparrow in here,” Corson complained, pushing him away and immediately regretting it.

“Ah, you’re just looking for a fight,” said Steifann. “What you need is a job. She’s bored,” he explained to the others. “She hasn’t killed anyone for weeks.”

Destiver looked up. “I could take you on for a few days. I’m shorthanded just now.”

“What did you do, keelhaul someone?” Corson sneered.

“Not yet—but I will, as soon as I get my hands on that drunken bastard Hrawn. It’s not the first time he’s played us this trick. I warned him I’d have the skin from his back if he let us down again.”

No one asked why Destiver did not simply rid herself of such an unreliable crewman. They all knew that her evasion of the trade laws left her little choice as to the sailors she hired. The wonder was that she managed to control her crew of outlaws and outcasts at all. “What do you say?” she asked Corson. “It’s only a short run up the coast to Eske, to pick up some cargo.” Destiver considered Corson a demented and dangerous animal, but she thought the same of most of her crew, so this did not deter her.

Corson so desperately wanted a change that she was almost tempted by the offer, but the prospect of being under Destiver’s command for even a few days was intolerable to her. “Try at the Crow’s Nest, why don’t you? Isn’t that where you get most of the scum you sail with?” The Crow’s Nest was a cheap dockside inn which was not choosy about its guests. Criminals and fugitives of every sort could usually be found there.

“High and mighty, aren’t you? You were glad enough to get onto my ship, not so long ago.”

“And gladder still to get off of it! I don’t need—”

“Oh, our Corson’s a favorite with the gentry nowadays, didn’t you know?” Annin interrupted. “She hasn’t much time for common rabble like us. Rhaicimes and wealthy Midlanders seek her out, to hear her tell it.”

Corson flushed angrily. “It’s true! I could better myself if I chose.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” said Trask. “I was meant for better things myself than serving in an ale-house. Why don’t you get me a position in a noble household, Corson, since you consort with gentlefolk? I could be a page, a squire, a herald!” He pictured himself in silk doublet and hose, a jeweled dagger swinging at his hip as he hurried—in a dignified way—through halls of pale marble, bearing an important message from His Lordship to the chamberlain.

“You!” snorted Steifann. “You’d still be selling your skin on the docks if I hadn’t taken you in. You don’t even know your parents, you misbegotten foundling.”

“Well then, I might be an earl’s son for all you know,” Trask pointed out. “You should treat me with more respect.”

“Asye, first it’s Corson getting above herself, and now this ungrateful little guttersnipe,” Steifann said indignantly. He turned to Annin. “I suppose you think you should be lady-in-waiting to the Empress now.”

“Not I. I should be Empress myself.”

“You’re *my* Empress,” said Destiver. “And I your slave.”

“Fool,” said Annin complacently.

Steifann drained his tankard and poured himself another. “I know how people better themselves, and it’s hard work that tells, not currying favor with a lot of Rhaicimes. Who,” he added, glaring at Corson, “probably don’t exist anyway.”

Corson only shrugged disdainfully, somehow resisting the temptation to hit Steifann with a chair. It was almost as if she could hear Nyctasia admonishing her, “Now, Corson, don’t be so hasty.”

Warning to his subject, Steifann took a long swig of ale, sat back, and began to tell everyone for the thousandth time how he, a lowly sailor, had become the owner of a prosperous tavern, all thanks to his own wits and sweat. But before he was very far into the tale, he was interrupted by a loud, insistent knocking at the back door.

Trask, who was already half asleep, roused himself and sat up. “Shall I—?”

Steifann shook his head. “It’s some drunk, that’s all.”

“The house is closed,” called Annin. “Try at the Flagon and Embers.”

The knocking grew to a pounding, and they heard someone shouting against the wind, something about a message. Steifann cursed and got up to unbar the door. “Come in, then, and be quick about it. What’s your business at this Hlann-forsaken hour?” His manner grew more courteous, however, when he saw that their visitor was sober and well dressed, and that he wore the livery of the Ondra, the most influential of the powerful merchant families of Chiastelm. “Er ... will you have a drink?” Steifann offered. “Did you say you’ve a message for me?”

“No,” said the man curtly, glancing around the kitchen. When he saw Corson he advanced and made her a bow. “Do I address Corson brenn Torisk?”

Corson hesitated. She was either in a great deal of trouble, she thought, or she was about to make a great deal of money. But since there was only one messenger the prospects were favorable, so she stood and returned his bow. “At your service, sir.”

“I have the honor, madame, to serve Ioseth, son of Ondra. He desires an interview with you, Mistress Corson, on a matter of some importance, which will not admit of delay. I’m to bring you at once, if you would be so obliging. You will find him most appreciative, I assure you.”

Definitely money, Corson decided. “I shall be with you directly, sir,” she said grandly. “Fetch my cloak, Trask.”

“At once, milady,” Trask muttered, but he did as he was bid. With a triumphant look back at the others, Corson swept out of The Jugged Hare, at the invitation of the head of the house of Ondra.

## 6

“WELCOME BACK, WE’D almost despaired of you,” said Diastor, teasing Jenisorn, his younger son. An Edonaris by marriage, Diastor had become one of the heads of the family, and between them he and Raphe bore much of the responsibility of managing the estate and vintnery.

“The both of them were buried in their books, Father—Nyc’s gone for her harp,” ’Deisha explained, settling herself on the hearth between her two dogs. They belonged in the kennels by rights—as Mesthelde frequently reminded her—but these were ’Deisha’s favorites and rather spoiled. They were fine watchdogs, nevertheless, and Nyctasia encouraged the one which seemed to have taken her under its special protection. Accustomed to the company of an armed escort, Nyctasia felt safer with the massive wolfhound following her about the house by day and guarding her chamber by night. Mesthelde disapproved, but tacitly allowed it after ’Deisha confided to her something of Nyctasia’s nightmares.

Mesthelde judged that Nyctasia was growing easier with her new life and her new family’s ways. She no longer went about armed, after all. No doubt she would leave behind her fears at last. She ought to be discouraged, of course, from shutting herself up with those bothersome books—it was such a bad example to set the youngsters. Mesthelde smiled with satisfaction when Nyctasia came in with her harp.

Nyctasia returned her smile, taking it for a welcome. Mesthelde must be warming to her at last, she thought, and she was not far wrong.

She next greeted the matriarch, Lady Nocharis, a frail, white-haired woman seated in a warm corner

of the enclosed hearth, well provided with cushions and shawls. Nyctasia kissed her cheek. "Mother 'Charis, how good to see you here."

The matriarch did not often leave her own rooms, yet she was in many ways the guiding spirit of the family. Her experience and her wise, gentle nature made her counsel much respected. It was she who had persuaded Nyctasia to remain with them in Vale.

"With so many of us gathered together, I couldn't stay away. Even 'Clairin home at last, and Alder, my wandering children." Diastor's wife Leclairin—the mother of five—and her brother Aldrichas were away much of the time, traveling to markets in all parts of the Midlands to deliver the wines and deal with merchants and patrons. They exchanged an amused glance, upon hearing their mother's epithet for them.

"After all, a family gathering cannot be complete without the two of us, my dear Nyctasia," Lady Nocharis continued. "Are we not the oldest and newest members of the family?"

Nesanye looked up from the half-finished toy cart he was carving. "A family gathering's not complete without song, that's certain. Nye, give us 'The Queen of Barre'."

Nyctasia sang every ballad and catch the others asked for, and a few of her own as well, when they called for more. Trained at court, she was at her ease playing or singing or composing verses—all necessary accomplishments for a person of her breeding. Her voice was high, clear and confident, and she accompanied herself deftly enough on her small lap-harp.

But to the others music was a rare luxury, especially in the winter, when traveling players and songsters could not visit the ice-bound valleylands. They could not have enough of Nyctasia's minstrelsy.

"Sing something from the coast," begged Tepicacia, "something we've never heard before."

"You must always have novelty, 'Cacia," Nyctasia chided her young cousin. "Very well, here's a wayfarer's song for you, a song of those who are far from home, of those who have no home to return to. I learned it in Chiestelm, a town full of travelers:

*"Paved roads lead us to the city,  
Earthen roads lead us away.  
To the north are roads of diamond,  
So they say.*

*Village roads are dirt and ditches,  
Mud by night and dust by day.  
Kings once rode on roads of silver,  
So they say.*

*Roads of water are the rivers,  
Flowing between roads of clay.  
Pearl roads run beneath the ocean,  
So they say.*

*Forest roads are plagued with dangers,  
Beasts and bandits haunt the way.  
Roads of sorrow are the stranger's.  
So they say.*

*Freedom is for those who journey,  
Safety is for those who stay,  
Border roads are most uncertain,  
So they say.*

*Pathways in the wilderness  
Have I traveled, lost and lone,*



*And unyielding, twisting, treacherous  
City streets of cobblestone.*

*Roads of clover, roads of favor  
Follow ever, you who may.  
Homeward roads are never-ending.  
So they say.”*

When she finished, there was a solemn silence, except for the whispering of the children, and the snowstorm raging against the high, narrow windows. Nyctasia busied herself at retuning her harpstrings with the silver key. Finally she raised her head and said lightly, “Hark to the wind. I have a good song for such a night, and it should please you, ’Cacia—no one’s ever heard it before.” Smiling, she sang,

*“Harvest is over,  
The fields are shorn.  
No longer the wind  
May court the corn  
Where lovers shelter  
Among the grain,  
Where you and I  
Have often lain.*

*Not in the season  
Of wintry weather  
May the wind and I  
Go a-wooing together,  
But he shakes the shutters  
To let me know  
Of his new romancing  
With the dancing snow.*

*Though the wind be fickle,  
You’ll find me true  
In every season,  
My love, to you.  
And in the springtime  
Let him carouse  
With the beckoning, blossoming  
Apple-boughs,  
For the spring shall see us  
Renew our vows.*

*Harvest is over.  
The year complete.  
No longer the wind  
May woo the wheat  
Where lovers sheltered  
Among the grain,  
Where you and I  
Shall lie again.”*

This merry love-song met with a murmur of approval from the company. "Why has no one heard that before?" asked 'Cacia. "Did you just make it up now?"

Nyctasia grinned. "Do you like it?"

"Surely," said 'Cacia politely.

"Quite charming," Raphe assured her, and the others agreed.

"I'm most gratified by your favorable opinion," said Nyctasia, "but I didn't write this one. It's one of Jheine's."

Her announcement caused a sensation, especially among the youngsters, who lost no time in taunting Jenisorn about his secret love.

"Tell, Jheine, who's it for?"

"No one," he protested, blushing. "It's just a song."

"Who is it, boy or girl?"

"Desskara? Nolinde?"

"Eivar brenn Glaos?"

"No!"

Nyctasia intervened on his behalf. "It's an exercise in composition, on a seasonal theme," she explained. "But it's incomplete, Jheine. You've left out the summertime."

"Well, I had another verse, but I'm not sure it will do. Can 'faithless' be rhymed with 'nameless'?"

"Not on a dare," said 'Cacia, who felt that she'd been tricked into admiring her cousin's handiwork.

"I didn't ask you. You couldn't *spell* 'nameless'."

"What about 'scatheless'?" someone suggested, setting off another round of debate.

'Deisha got up from the hearth and stretched. "The song's well enough, little brother, but I don't care for the way your friend the wind is carrying on tonight. I'm going out to see that the horses are well bedded."

The dogs jumped up too, eager for any activity, and one of them looked back at Nyctasia expectantly. "Wait for me," she laughed. "Grey thinks I should stretch my legs, and he's right. I've been sitting all the day."

"Be careful!" Mesthelde called after them. "That storm could swallow the two of you like pebbles down a well."

"Don't worry, I won't let the mooncalf wander off," said 'Deisha. At the door, she took two long fur cloaks from their pegs and draped one over Nyctasia's shoulders. "We'll take lanterns, but they won't be of much use. Just remember, don't take your hand from the guide-rope for a moment. Aunt Mesthelde's right about these storms—folk have frozen to death just a few paces from shelter because they couldn't see what was before them. We don't have many blizzards as bad as this in the valley, but we do have to be prepared for them."

Nyctasia had never known such weather. The climate of the coast was a good deal more temperate. Her cloak was whipped about her legs, and the blowing snow was so dense that she could hardly see 'Deisha walking just ahead of her. When she looked back toward the house, it had already vanished in the blinding white darkness that surrounded her. Without the rope that had been stretched tight across the yard, she'd have had no idea which way the stables lay. The dogs stayed close beside them all the way.

Not until they could feel the door beneath their hands did they release their grip on the rope. 'Deisha laughed, fighting the wind to push the door fast behind them. "That's better! We might have been at the bottom of the sea, out there!"

"Neither earth nor air," said Nyctasia absently. "Neither shore nor star." She stood motionless and intent, as if trying to listen to some distant sound.

"What did you say?" asked 'Deisha, pushing back her hood and brushing snow from her cloak. "Nyc, what is it? Don't stand there dripping like a candle."

"Nothing, only ... an echo," Nyctasia murmured. "A memory of something that perhaps never happened."

'Deisha stared.

Abruptly, Nyctasia shook herself from her abstraction. "Holding to the rope for guidance," she

explained. "It was a Manifestation of the Principle of Recognition. In just such a way must one follow, blindly, to seek what is within."

"Oh, I see," said 'Deisha, who didn't. Like most professed believers in the Indwelling Spirit, 'Deisha did not spend a great deal of time pondering the mysteries of the Vahnite faith. Leaving Nyctasia to her revelations, she went to confer with the ostler.

It was the barking of the dogs that finally drew Nyctasia's attention back to the mortal world. They had been sniffing suspiciously at a stall filled with fodder, growling deep in their throats, and now they set up a clamor that brought 'Deisha and the stablehands running. Nyctasia reached instinctively for her sword, and found only the small pearl-handled knife that she used to sharpen her quills.

"It must be rats, mistress," said one of the grooms, but 'Deisha waved him aside.

"They'd not raise such a noise over a few barn rats." Addressing the heap of hay she ordered. "Come out of there, or we'll have you out with pitchforks."

Nothing stirred except the two hounds, pawing at the ground and snarling. At a sign from 'Deisha they leaped forward and dug furiously into the hay, fangs bared.

There was a shriek of pain from their quarry.

The boy looked no older than Jenisorn. He was thin and ragged, with one hand wrapped in a crude bandage, and his shoulder bleeding where one of the dogs had seized him. He crouched shivering in the straw and gazed about him desperately. 'Deisha had called the dogs off at once, but they now stood guard between him and the door. "Let me go, lady, please," he appealed to 'Deisha. "I've not stolen anything—"

"Go? Certainly not," 'Deisha said sternly, and Nyctasia smiled to hear her sound so much like Mesthelde. "Where are you to go, in this weather? Come along to the house now, and we'll give you a meal. You'll have to stay until this storm passes over, at the least."

Her words were not an invitation, but a command, and the boy saw that he had no choice. He rose to his feet stiffly and limped to the door, hugging his thin cloak around him. Nyctasia took up a horse-blanket and wrapped him in it. Looking into his grey face and bright, frightened eyes, she thought, *Fever. Perhaps frostbite*, and said, "He must have some mulled wine, 'Deisha. He's half frozen."

"I could do with some myself," 'Deisha agreed. When she pulled open the barn door, a fierce, piercing wind rushed in, making the horses stamp and whinny in protest. "We've not had a storm like this in Vale for years. Not since—"

"Vale?" gasped the boy, turning to one of the grooms. "I was nearly to Amron Therain! This can't be Vale?"

"You must have circled back in the snow, lad. This is Edonaris land."

"No—no, it can't be," he cried. For a moment he stared wildly out at the storm, then suddenly he pushed past 'Deisha and disappeared into the swirling snow.

## 7

CORSON WAS IN a much better temper when she returned from her meeting with Ioseth ash Ondra. Soon she'd be on the road again, and this time for a fee that would make it worthwhile to brave the winter weather. Her new employer had revealed very little about the job he offered, but he had been particularly clear about the price the Merchants' Guild was willing to pay her for her services. Corson, who knew better than to ask too many questions, was quite satisfied with what she'd been told.

One of the young scullions, who slept in the kitchen, recognized the familiar sound of her cursing and kicking at the door, and rose reluctantly to let her in. When Corson not only thanked him, but actually gave him a silver penny for his trouble, he thought he must still be asleep and dreaming.

Corson stood in the doorway of Steifann's room for a few moments, watching him sleep. He lay to one side of the large bed, as if to leave room for her, and one arm was stretched out over the space where she usually lay. The sight of him was so inviting and reassuring that she felt a pang at the thought of leaving him again so soon. "Asye, I've not gone yet, and already I miss him," she sighed.

Making no attempt to be quiet, she shut the door behind her and sat down on the bed to pull off her

boots. Steifann stopped in the middle of a snore, mumbled something, started to snore again, then changed his mind and woke up instead. He rolled onto his side and lay watching with drowsy approval as Corson undressed by candlelight. “So her ladyship honors me with her company, eh?” he rumbled. “What do the Ondra want with you?”

“I don’t know,” Corson admitted, “and I don’t much care—it means fifty crescents in gold, and they paid half in advance.” She leaned over and jingled her money-pouch in his face.

At this, Steifann woke more fully. “Fifty—! Corson, they’ll want murder done.”

“Nothing so simple as that, I fancy. My mission’s sanctioned by the Guild.” Though Chiestelm was ostensibly governed by a council of its nobility, it was no secret that the powerful Merchants’ Guild really made the town’s laws and saw to their enforcement. Members of the Guild represented Chiestelm in the Maritime Alliance, while maintaining a purely formal fiction that they were acting in the name of the aristocracy.

“They’re paying for my silence as much as for my sword,” Corson continued. “The matter’s so secret that I don’t yet know where I’m bound, much less what I’m to do when I get there. A few days’ ride to the south was all he said—and that was probably a lie. I expect I’ll be guarding something precious, or accompanying someone important—an imperial emissary to the Alliance, I shouldn’t wonder. They’re worth a fortune in ransom, so I’ve heard.”

“Well, if you don’t know where you’re going or why, do you at least know when?”

Corson hung her sword-belt over the bedpost. “Tomorrow morning,” she said ruefully, “but I’ll be back within the week.”

“Tomorrow? Then why in the Hlann’s name didn’t they give you your instructions tonight?”

“They don’t mean to let me have time to sell the secret. They’ll not give the game away till we’ve started out. Every bandit between here and Ochram would be watching the roads, if word of this business got out, and the Guild’s taking no chances that I’m in league with them—that’s my guess. They even made sure that I wouldn’t be seen going to this meeting by summoning me in the dead of night.” Corson unpinned her long braid and shook out her hair, taking up her fine silver brush. “I thought I’d come back tonight and find you in bed with Destiver—with my comb.”

Steifann chuckled sleepily. “Not likely, when Annin’s in the mood. Those two are old flames. But how she could prefer anyone else to me I’ll never understand.”

Corson couldn’t understand it either, though she wasn’t sure which woman he meant. She quickly finished brushing her hair and admired her reflection in a basin of water. “Well, anyone who’d want that scarecrow harridan Destiver deserves her. I’m worth three of her.”

Steifann yawned. “You’re three times as big, to be sure.”

“Nyc says I’m beautiful as a dream,” Corson said smugly, and blew out the candles.

Steifann pulled the blankets up around his ears and turned away. “Speaking of dreams, I need some sleep.”

Corson grinned vengefully as she climbed into the warm bed. Turn his back on her, would he! She was still quite cold from the out of doors, and when she slid in beside him she suddenly clamped one icy hand to the back of his neck, and clutched at his stomach with the other.

“Arrh! Get away, you’re freezing! Rutting bitch!”

Steifann rolled over and tried to push her out of the bed, but Corson clung to him, laughing. “I thought you didn’t want me to catch a chill.”

“Let go—”

“You said you’d keep me warm,” Corson reminded him, dragging him over on top of her.

Once she had his attention, she soon changed his mind about sleeping. “Well, since you’re going away so soon ...” he said.

## 8

“NOTHING TO CONCERN you, Father,” ’Deisha said briskly. “Just a stray, hiding in the stables—a thief, I daresay. The little fool bolted off into the storm as soon as we discovered him. But he can’t have

gone far, his legs would hardly carry him. 'Cacia and the boys will find him. He'll still be in the yard somewhere."

Jenisorn, Tepicacia and Nicorin had already taken the dogs out on field-chains, long chains used for measuring plots of land. With one end fastened securely to a pillar of the porch, they could search the length and breadth of a field in safety. By this time, they were thoroughly tangled up with the chains and the dogs, and enjoying themselves immensely.

'Deisha led Nyctasia off to the kitchen. "Come, Nyc, we'll see to that mulled wine. They'll all be wanting some."

As she predicted, it was not long before the three returned, snow-covered and sneezing, carrying with them the still form of the dazed boy. They came down the low passage leading from a back door to the scullery, then up a short flight of stairs to the kitchen, preceded by the dogs, who bounded in and enthusiastically shook snow and ice on everyone. Greymantle, much relieved to find that Nyctasia had survived an hour without his protection, leaped up to greet her, knocking her against the table. On his hind legs, he was a good deal taller than she.

'Deisha swatted him. "*Down*, you brute. It's your own fault, Nyc, you encourage him. He'll be unmanageable soon. Ah, here they are," she said, as the others came in with their burden. "Lay him down by the fire, and get those frozen clothes off him."

"He was by the paddock, half buried in snow," said Nicorin. "'Deisha, I think his feet are frostbitten."

"Rub them hard, 'Corin. And Jheine, rub him all over with tallow. 'Cacia, hot poultices. Nyc, is the wine ready?"

"Yes, just." She had poured out bowls of the steaming, spiced drink for the others, but brewed the boy's portion a little longer, adding herbs to ease pain and give a healing sleep. Now she knelt beside him and raised his head gently. Greymantle crowded in beside her and licked his face to show that he was forgiven for being a prowler, nearly spilling the wine Nyctasia was trying to hold to his lips. Jenisorn pulled the hound away.

Revived by the heat of the hearth, the boy managed to drink some wine, despite his trembling, and stammered a few words of thanks.

'Deisha stood over him, frowning. "That was a fool's trick, running out into the open like that. You'd have soon frozen out there."

The youth closed his eyes again. "Yes," he whispered, "I knew that, lady. The snow is kind, but I don't know if you are ..." As feeling began to return to his numb limbs, he gasped in pain, twisting his head helplessly from side to side.

'Deisha turned away. "We'll do what we can," she said. "Try to rest now."

"He's getting some color back," said 'Cacia.

Nicorin paused. "Is it enough, 'Deisha?"

"Soon. When the mash is hot for the poultices you can stop rubbing. Never mind if it hurts him—if he can feel it, he's lucky."

"He'll not feel it for long," Nyctasia murmured, "He'll sleep soon." She had heard and read of frostbite, but never seen it, and certainly did not know how best to treat it. It was strange to her to stand by uselessly and watch others tend to the afflicted. But she was well able to care for injuries, and she soon set herself to cleaning and dressing the boy's dogbite wounds. He hardly seemed aware of her, but when she took his hand and began to unwrap the dirty cloth bound around it, he suddenly cried out and pulled away from her, shielding the bandaged hand against his chest.

"If it's as painful as that, it must be seen to," Nyctasia said. "I'm a healer, I shan't hurt you."

He tried to ward her off with his good hand, clutching the other to him. "No, don't," he said weakly.

"Don't be afraid, child, let me see your hand. If a wound's not properly cleaned it will never heal."

She reached for him again, but 'Cacia barred her way, leaning over him protectively. "Don't, Nyc. There's no need."

"But—"

"Nyc, *let be*," 'Deisha said firmly. Taking Nyctasia by the arm, she pulled her to her feet and drew

her away from the others. "Let them tend to him. They know what they're about." She picked up a bowl of wine and took a deep drink, then handed it to Nyctasia. "Here, even a devoted Vahnite like you can drink this. Hot wine's as weak as water."

Nyctasia sipped at the wine and watched as her young cousins applied the poultices to the boy's feet and calves, then wrapped him in furs and blankets. He seemed limp and lifeless in their hands, and Nyctasia realized that the sleeping-draught had taken hold of him.

"You can take it in turns to watch him tonight." 'Deisha was saying, keeping her voice low. "If you lay a hot stone beneath his feet you won't have to change the poultices as often. Use sacking to wrap it in, and see it doesn't burn him."

"We know how, 'Deisha."

"Very well. And try to give him some broth later."

"Hush, you'll wake him," whispered Jenisorn. He sat with the boy's head in his lap, lightly stroking his fair hair.

Nyctasia joined 'Deisha and made a last attempt to be of help. "He'll not wake," she assured them. "And perhaps now that he's asleep, I—we—could see how bad that hand is ...?"

The others exchanged a look, and 'Cacia shrugged. "Why not? He won't know."

"Yes, show her," said 'Deisha. "Then we'll go."

'Cacia folded back the furs, uncovering the boy's arm. "It's not a wound, Nyc," she explained, carefully unwinding the bandage. "This is what he didn't want you to see." She held up his hand to show Nyctasia the dark scar of the slave-brand burned into his palm.

## 9

ALL DURING THE ride back from Eske, Corson rehearsed to herself various ways of explaining what had taken place. Most of these accounts were true, but she doubted that Steifann would accept them, all the same. *It's not fair*, she thought. *Something like this always happens to me!*

When she'd set out with the Guild's agent, she still hadn't known her destination, though she had not been surprised to find her guide leading her north instead of south. But when they were joined by several other swordfighters along the way, she knew she'd been mistaken about the nature of her commission. If a small troupe of warriors was needed for the job, it was most likely a matter of clearing a nest of bandits out of the woods, to make the roads safer for parties of merchants. It would be bloody work, Corson knew, but she still hadn't suspected how much trouble lay ahead.

Talking with the others when they camped for the night, she found that they knew no more about the business than she did. Like her, they were not usually particular about their work, provided that the wages were satisfactory. Too much curiosity did not accord well with their profession. No doubt the Guild had taken such pains to be secret lest warning of the attack should reach their intended quarry. Corson took note that most of her fellow travelers were outlanders—southerners like herself or mercenaries from Liruvath—who were unlikely to have ties among the local brigandry.

Her guesswork was not far from the mark, but she only realized exactly what they were hunting when their leader called a halt on the bluffs overlooking a small, rocky inlet near the fishing village of Eske. By that time, it was too late to do anything but see the job through to the end. Hidden among the boulders on the dark shore, she had waited with the rest, silent, watching for the signal to attack, and already trying to think of an explanation that would satisfy Steifann. When the time came, she did her part and earned her wages. She had no choice. To retreat or raise an alarm would be more than her life was worth.

"Take them alive if you can," were the orders, and that had not proven difficult. The whole affair had been easy. Corson thought with distaste, like spearing penned and hobbled game, The three who'd arrived at moonrise had been hopelessly outnumbered. As soon as they'd signaled their confederates, they'd been seized with hardly a struggle, and their places taken by Corson and two of the others. It was just as simple to overcome the two who answered the signal, while they were busy hauling their boat onto shore.

When the boat returned to the waiting ship it rode low in the water, with two rowing, two lying flat on

the bottom, one crouched in the prow, and two towed along, holding to the sides. Corson, who couldn't swim, stayed on shore to guard the prisoners and watch for anyone who tried to leap overboard and swim ashore. She knew that the ship would be taken quickly enough without her help. They were sailing shorthanded, after all. There could be no more than three of the crew left aboard, including Destiver.

## 10

"TO AID A fugitive slave is theft, under the law," 'Deisha explained. "That's why it's best left to children and those in their nonage, like Jheine here, who aren't answerable to the law for their actions, if they're discovered, the rest of us can claim that we knew nothing about it, and no one can prove otherwise. You and I, Nyc, only saw this runaway in the stables, for an instant, and we took him for a thief—remember that. He escaped from us, and that's the last we saw of him. The youngsters went out to search, but they told us they couldn't find him. If we're asked, that's all we know of the matter."

The three had come to Nyctasia's tower-room to confer, where they were least likely to be overheard or interrupted. It was the most isolated corner of the great, sprawling stone mansion. Several days had passed since the boy had been found, but Nyctasia had not seen or heard anything of him since that night. Only the younger members of the Edonaris clan knew where he was hidden, and no one questioned them about it.

Jenisorn was leafing through one of Nyctasia's books without reading a word. He put it down, took up another, and set it down by the first, unopened. His usually merry, winsome face was grave and troubled, his eyes shadowed. "Perhaps you're not bound by Midland law, as you're a Maritimer," he said to Nyctasia, "I'm not sure. But it would be simplest if you and 'Deisha told the same tale, if you don't mind lying. I'm sorry to ask it of you."

"I'm quite an accomplished liar," Nyctasia assured them. "But I don't understand ... surely even in the Midlands it's not lawful for someone so young to be branded! Children can't be enslaved for life, can they?"

"No, a child born to a slave is bound in service only till its twentieth year. The owner must feed and shelter bondschildren during their infancy—ten years, according to law—and they in turn must work for the owner for ten years as recompense for that upbringing. They can't be sold, except for the rest of their term of service, and of course they can't be branded. Once their debt to the owner is paid, they're supposed to be freed."

"But a good many disappear before that happens," Jenisorn said darkly.

"Disappear ... ?" echoed Nyctasia.

"Sent on journeys from which they don't return, or sold for their remaining time of bondage, to someone who pays rather more than you'd expect for a few years' service."

"Someone who takes them far away," 'Deisha added, "usually over the Spine Mountains, where no one can question their history."

"And so into Liruvath," Nyctasia guessed, "where the laws governing slavery are even more barbarous."

"Yes. Anyone who's marked as a slave can be sold there, with few questions asked. You see, bondschildren can't be branded *unless they try to run away before they've fulfilled their term of labor*. It's an old game—their owners ill-use them till they're forced to flee, to save themselves. Then they're caught and branded as runaways, which makes it much easier to sell them to foreign slavers ...."

"And that's what happened to this one?" Nyctasia asked.

'Deisha shrugged. "Jheine?"

Jenisorn nodded. He sat staring at his own clenched fists for a time and finally said, "His name's Lorr. Lorr Saetarrinid."

'Deisha groaned. "I was afraid of that. Small wonder the poor lad was terror-stricken when he realized where he was."

The Saetarrin lands bordered on Edonaris property, but there were few dealings between the two houses. Wealthy, landed nobles who lived on the proceeds of their estates, the Saetarrin disdained the

Edonaris as mere upstart merchants, despite their aristocratic ancestry. The Edonaris, for their part, knew much of Saetarrin history that was less than honorable, though they kept their suspicions to themselves. They were in no position to risk the enmity of their powerful neighbors.

A marriage-alliance of the two families had once been spoken of, but nothing had come of it. Only an Edonaris in direct line to the Jhaicery, and bringing a sizable dowry, would be considered worthy to marry into the House of Saetarrin, and thus far no heir to the title had been tempted by the prospect. Mesthelde, Lady Nocharis's eldest daughter, had never married, and had no intention of marrying. And her niece and heir, 'Deisha, had made it clear to her kin that she would rather marry a swineherd than a Saetarrin lord.

Now she cursed the Saetarrin and everything they touched. "We'll have their people here searching for him tomorrow, now that the storm's cleared," she worried.

"They'll not find him," Jenisorn said confidently. "But we'll have to get him away from here, as soon as may be, and it won't be an easy matter with the Saetarrin hunting him."

"Would they sell him to us?" Nyctasia suggested. "If it's merely a question of avarice, I can satisfy them."

'Deisha shook her head. "Not likely, Nyc. They wouldn't want him in Vale, free to bear witness to what he knows of them. And if they refused, we'd have to surrender him. There's only so much we can do for him, he'll understand that. He knew he'd be taking his chances."

"No," Jenisorn said abruptly. "He fled for his life, not for his freedom. He says he's killed Marrekind ar'n Saetarrin."

"Well," said 'Deisha, after a silence, "in that case, he does indeed deserve our help. I've often wanted to do the same. He'll have to stay in hiding a good while, then, till they've given up the search in these parts." She stood frowning at the fire, lost in thought, weighing plans and possibilities. One of the dogs nosed her hand, and she stroked his head absently. "In the spring, some of you must go with him to Amron Therein. He won't be as noticeable as one of a group of young folk. There'll be so many people flocking in and out of the city, once the Trade Road is clear, that you may avoid suspicion then."

Nyctasia was pacing about the small tower-room, "That seems so chancy. How would it be if his pursuers believed him dead? I can prepare a potion that counterfeits death for a time. If they saw his lifeless body, at least they'd call off the search, and it would be safer for him to come out of hiding."

"It's plain to see that you come from the coast, cousin," Jenisorn said. "Don't you know that they'd take him back, living or dead?"

"But why—?"

"To discourage their other slaves from trying to escape, of course. If there were no proof of his death, they might believe that he'd really gotten away, and be tempted to try it themselves." Jenisorn's voice rose. "Oh, they might just cut off his branded hand and bring that back—"

"That will do, Jheine," said 'Deisha.

"I see," Nyctasia said faintly. "Yes, we are a long way from Rhostshyl, And if he reaches Amron Therain, what then?"

'Deisha answered. "There are those in Amron who'll help him make his way to the coast, for a price. We know how to find them."

The coast was the goal of all fugitive slaves, as Nyctasia well knew, for slavery was forbidden by law in the Maritime cities. A condemned criminal might be sentenced to a term as slave-laborer in the service of the municipality, but a person could not become the property of a private citizen. An escaped slave who could reach the coast was safe from the laws of the east.

"It seems this isn't the first time you've been concerned in such an undertaking," Nyctasia observed. "Does it happen often?"

"No, not often. But Raphe and I had a hand in it, before we came of age. Most of us do, once or twice, when we're young enough."

Nyctasia understood their actions perfectly. They were Edonaris, after all. Her own ancestors had been instrumental in abolishing slavery from the cities of the Maritime Alliance, and she had been raised in a land free of its evils. She was proud of that family heritage, and it had seemed only natural to her that



the Edonaris of Vale were not slave-holders.

But now she realized that their ways were not at all natural here in the Midlands. She had thought of the Valley as a haven of peace and harmony, far removed from the treachery and bloodthirsty ambition that threatened to destroy her homeland. But now it seemed to her that she was lost in a primitive, lawless land, unfit for civilized folk. Never in her exile had she longed so painfully for Rhostshyl.

"I've seen little of the valley beyond this estate," she sighed. "I knew there were slave-markets in Osela and Amron Therain, but until this hapless creature came among us, I'd forgotten that the lands between ..."

"Hush," Jenisorn warned her, and they all fell silent as they heard someone climbing the stairs to Nyctasia's tower.

The rest of the family knew, without being told, what had happened on the first night of the storm. Deisha's careful words to Diastor, "Nothing to concern you. Father. 'Cacia and the boys will find him," had told everyone that she was speaking of a runaway slave, and there they had let the matter lie. Now, the sudden silence at his approach, and the air of secrecy that met him, only confirmed Raphe's suspicions that the affair was far from finished.

Closing the door behind him, he asked, "Well, Jheine, how fares our guest?"

"I feel a fool denying what you already know, brother, but you ought not to ask, nor I to answer."

"Jheine's right, you know. Nyc and I are already compromised, but you've had no part in this," Deisha said, though without much conviction. She felt, as Raphe did, that anything that touched her touched her twin as well.

He did not argue the point. "Never mind. I only asked how he was, not where, or who. Or whose."

Jenisorn shrugged. If Raphe was willing to be told, it was his own choice to bear the responsibility for what he learned. "The frostbite's better, but he's still in a fever. It's his back that worries me most. He's been beaten savagely—flogged—and those weals don't look to be healing. I don't know if he'll be able to travel by spring thaw. It's only a few weeks away at the most. I don't know if he'll live until spring."

"In the *vahn*'s name!" cried Nyctasia. "What sort of mad fools abuse their own property? It's beyond reason and nature!"

"It's hard to understand," Deisha agreed. "People who take great care of their goods and livestock will nevertheless mistreat and neglect the people they own. Mother 'Charis says that's because it deforms the spirit, even of decent folk, to keep others in bondage. It's been family tradition with us, not to own slaves, ever since our ancestors learned that the Edonaris of Rhostshyl had banned slavery from the city. It was more a matter of pride than principle at first, I fear—aping the ways of our noble kinsfolk. In those days, they still hoped for a reconciliation, but *your* ancestors would have none of it," she teased Nyctasia.

"And slave-labor wouldn't really serve our purposes," said the ever-practical Raphe. "We need to employ a great many people at harvest time, but we couldn't afford to maintain them all the year long. We haven't the farmland for it. For most of the year we need too few laborers to make it worth our while to keep guards over them, or pursue them. It's foolishness. Much of what needs to be done, we do ourselves. We're a large family, and we're not ashamed to work."

"The Edonaris have always worked hard, wherever their duty lay," Nyctasia said, a touch of reproach in her voice. "You may believe that governing a city such as Rhostshyl is no heavy burden, but I assure you that there's little rest for those who undertake it."

"We know *you're* not too proud to work, Nyc," Raphe said hastily. "You proved as much at the harvest. You labored far beyond your strength."

"So I did, and all I accomplished by my efforts was a fit of sunstroke. I was worse than useless. Still, though I wasn't raised to bodily labor, neither was I raised to idleness."

"I only meant ..." Raphe began, but stopped, realizing that he had meant very much what Nyctasia thought he meant. He spread his hands helplessly. "I meant no offense to you, cousin."

"Only to my rank and station, perhaps?" Nyctasia said, without rancor. "It's true that we're proud of our position, yet you wrong us if you think our pride has not been earned—as yours has. In all of you I see the pride of the Edonaris. Indeed, I believe that you are prouder of your way of life than we of ours."

The better I know you, the more certain I am that we are in truth one family, though now it is you who choose not to acknowledge us as kin.”

“If the rest were like you, we’d gladly welcome them,” ’Deisha said diplomatically. She lifted up one of the massive tomes that Nyctasia had been studying, and remarked, “I think you work harder than all of us together. I’d rather toil out of doors all day than try to read these thick, difficult books of yours. To each her own task, say I, and I’m off to mine now. Come along, Raphe, we’re keeping Jheine from his lessons.”

“We’ll have one gentleman in the family, eh?” Raphe grinned. “Nyc, I came to tell you that we’ve cleared a way up Honeycomb Hill to the Esthairon vines and the temple cellars. Most of the debris was removed before the storm, and a good bit of the crypts and caves have been uncovered. They’ll make perfect wine-cellars. You said you wanted to see them again before they were filled with barrels.”

“Is it safe to go under there now?” Nyctasia asked doubtfully. She had not been near the hill since the collapse of the temple had crushed the last members of the Cymvelan Circle in the caverns beneath. She felt keenly that they should have been left in peace, that it was unseemly to disturb the ruins to accommodate the vintner’s merchandise, but she kept such scruples to herself. She understood that more room was needed to house and age the new vintages. Now that the hollow hill had been cleansed of the Cymvelans’ curse, the Edonaris could not afford to let such valuable storage space go to waste. It was not for her, an outsider, to interfere in such a matter.

“It was the supports beneath the temple and the bell-tower that were unsound,” Raphe assured her. “Now that those structures have fallen, there’s no danger. What’s left underneath is carved from solid rock. You can visit there whenever you like, now, but take care not to lose your way in the tunnels. All right, ’Deisha, I’m coming—”

“Nyc, take Grey with you, if you must go ferreting about down there,” ’Deisha called from the stairway. “He could find his way out by smell.”

When the twins had gone, Nyctasia turned to Jenisorn. “I don’t imagine you’ve made much progress with the text of Raine of Tierelon’s *Travels*!”

“I’ve had no time for it,” he admitted, “and I still haven’t, I’m afraid.”

“I can well believe that. We’ll leave it for now. I’ll give you passages from Book One of *The Manifold Ills of The Flesh* to study, dealing with the treatment of open wounds and febrile maladies. After I’ve seen the boy myself, of course.”

“But Nyc, I—”

“Don’t try to tell me that you can’t take me to him, Jheine. You must. I don’t doubt that you’ve done all you can for him, but that may not be enough. Fever may be brought on by a poison in the blood, from a morbid wound. Salves and tea of fever’s-ease bark won’t drive it out. If you don’t want to see him die a lingering, painful death, you’ll let me tend to him.”

Though she was hardly the powerful sorceress her accusers claimed, Nyctasia was magician enough to call upon the healing power of the Indwelling Spirit, and Jenisorn knew it.

He sighed. “Would you, Nyc? I didn’t like to ask it of you, but we’d all be grateful for your help. ’Cacia thinks that the weals should be cauterized, and none of us knows how to do it. I don’t think you need fear the law—it’s not only that you’re a foreigner, but that you’re a noblewoman. The law bows before a title, they say, and it probably grovels before the rank of Rhaicime.”

“Rhaicime or no, I’m a healer—and an Edonaris. I’ve a duty to the afflicted, not to the law which allows such an outrage.”

She did not claim that it was also her duty as a Vahnite to aid the helpless. She knew she was guilty of pride, but that would be pride of another sort, and less forgivable.

From the top of the house they descended to the very bottom, stopping to gather a few supplies and—at Jenisorn’s suggestion—warm cloaks. The wine-cellars were as cold as the out of doors.

The dark, dank corridors were lined with immense barrels lying on their sides, and stacked jars of glazed clay sealed with wax. “Some of this wine’s centuries old,” Jenisorn told her proudly, “and very little of it spoiled. Someday I’ll show you through the cellars properly. The whole history of the family is down here, if one knows how to read it.”

Nyctasia followed in silence. She felt that she had already seen more than enough of the damp, chill cellars with their webbed walls, thick dust and foul air. The prospect of a more extensive tour held little appeal for her. She could see the shine of the snail-tracks in the lamplight, and she was certain that rats lurked in every shadow. Family history, she thought, was often best left buried. Pulling her cloak tighter about her, she said, "I'm sure that would be most interesting."

"That lot was laid down in the year of the drought, you see," Jenisorn explained, as they passed a row of casks smaller than the rest. But even these, Nyctasia saw, would be nearly as tall as she, if stood on end. "Nearly empty now, most of them." He tapped the fronts of a few barrels with a small wooden mallet, as they walked, to show Nyctasia how the different sounds told the quantity of wine within—which she found quite interesting, despite herself. "And these are from the year Kestrel Hill was first harvested," he continued, brushing away a layer of dust to uncover the falcon-brand.

Nyctasia sneezed. "Jheine, *where are we going!* If you've hidden our friend down here, he'll never heal, not in this damp and filth."

"I know. We hope to move him soon. But the room he's in isn't as bad as this. There's a fireplace, with a flue that opens into the back of the kitchen hearth above, so it's warmer there, and the air's fresher. You'll see—it's at the end of this corridor."

Nyctasia followed, but when they reached the far wall of the passage they came up against a blind end with a pyramid of barrels stacked against the stone, and no opening to either side. Nyctasia searched the floor, and soon found the outline of a round trapdoor, but there seemed to be no way of raising it.

Jenisorn tapped on one of the barrels.

"Empty," said Nyctasia promptly, recognizing the hollow sound. "Jheine, how are we to lift this?"

The empty barrel tapped back.

"That's just an old cistern, Nyc. The room is through here," Jenisorn replied, as the lid of the cask was pushed out from the inside. A wan, flickering light spilled out, and 'Cacia crawled from the barrel's mouth.

"Time enough you got back," she said, then seeing Nyctasia she remarked, "So you've come. I thought you would." She lowered her voice. "He's no better. He's shaking so hard his teeth rattle, and he's mad with fear and fever. He keeps asking me to kill him. I'm going to get some sleep. Good luck, Nyc."

Kneeling before the opening, Nyctasia saw that the wall was thick and solid except for the round hole piercing it behind this one barrel. The hidden chamber beyond was dimly lit by a small fire and a lamp hanging from a hook in the low ceiling. Once inside, she found that she could just stand upright, and she noted with approval that the little room had been swept and scrubbed clean. Fresh straw and mats of rushes covered the floor, to withstand the chill, and Lorr lay on a deep pile of pelts and coverlets by the hearth, wrapped in woolen blankets and fleecy sheepskin. His hands were hidden by warm, furred gloves.

But he looked to Nyctasia as if he were still huddled in the hay like a cornered animal. He struggled to sit upright when she approached, cringing away, until Jenisorn crawled into view behind her.

"Don't worry, this is my cousin Nyc that I told you about—the Lady Nyctasia, I ought to say—from Rhostshyl, on the coast." Jenisorn reached back through the hole and fitted both the front and back pieces of the cask into place again. Even if someone opened the lid, there'd be nothing to see but an empty barrel.

He came and knelt beside Lorr, who clutched at his hand desperately. "She's a healer, don't you remember? She'll soon have you fit again."

"Why?" Lorr whispered, trembling. "It's too late. I-I'm not afraid of death ... only of d-death at the hands of the Saetarrin .... Please ...."

Nyctasia could imagine what sort of death would be dealt to a slave who'd killed his master. Jenisorn looked to her for help, and she too knelt by the pallet-bed and gently touched Lorr's fever-flushed face. There was only one way to comfort him. "You are safe in this house," she said firmly, "and when you're strong enough to go, I'll brew a deadly poison for you to take with you. Just a prick of it with a needle, or a drop on the tongue will kill in mere moments. If you're taken, you'll have a swift death at your

command. Your enemies shan't have you."

For the first time, relief showed in the youth's face. "You are merciful, lady," he said weakly, bowing his head to her. In Nyctasia he recognized someone who had also known despair.

"But take heart," urged Jenisorn. "They'll not hunt for you forever. You may yet escape with your life. They're sure to think you were lost in the storm and froze to death somewhere."

"Yes, perhaps," he said, as if to reassure Jenisorn.

He was clearly too exhausted for further talk, and Nyctasia bade him lie down again, while she looked over his wounded back. He gasped in pain as she uncovered the angry, swollen welts, but he made no complaint. Jenisorn turned away, and Nyctasia too was sickened at what she saw. Flogging was a common punishment in her homeland, for petty crimes of theft or brawling, but she had never seen at close hand how a really vicious beating tore the flesh. "Have you washed these wounds with vinegar?" she asked at last.

Jenisorn nodded. "Thrice in the day. And leeching-wort. We've tried ice for the swelling—"

"Don't use ice. It may ease the pain, but it can hinder healing," said Nyctasia. She gathered up the stained bandages and threw them on the fire, then cut a wide piece from one of the blankets and laid it lightly over Lorr's back. "Wool's best for this," she explained. "It may help draw out the poisons."

"Nyc, I've been bathing his face with snow, against the fever," Jenisorn said worriedly. "Was that wrong?"

"No, that can do no harm. But never keep ice on a wound for long, remember." She helped Lorr roll onto his side and wrapped the woolen bandage around him, then draped the covers over him carefully, trying not to let them press on his back. "Lie like that if you can."

Lorr looked up at her and gripped Jenisorn's hand more tightly. "If not ice, fire then?" he asked faintly, his voice shaking.

"It may come to that. But if I cauterize your wounds, I'll give you a drug first that will keep you in a deep sleep till I've finished. You needn't distress yourself over that."

He closed his eyes and drew a long, shuddering breath. "Elixir of Painshade, no? He was supposed to give me that when I was branded. I heard the smith say so ...."

Neither Nyctasia nor Jenisorn had to ask who it was he meant.

"Rest now," said Nyctasia quietly, "and we'll see what a bit of Vahnite wizardry can do." With her knife she scraped a few coals from the hearth into the small brass bowl she'd brought with her. "This is only for burning a few leaves and herbs," she explained, seeing that both boys were watching her apprehensively. "You're to breathe the smoke, Lorr, and that will help us to achieve a healing-trance together. Jheine, leave us now—*someone* has to stay awake. Light an hour-candle, and when it's half-burned come back and waken me."

Lorr reluctantly released his hand, and Jenisorn bent over to kiss him. "You're safe with Nyc," he promised. "I'll soon be back. I'll sleep here tonight. Nyc, pull the cask-lids fast after me."

Nyctasia took his place beside Lorr and laid her hand on his brow, feeling the blood throbbing in his temple. His heartbeat was still strong—that was favorable. "Lean this way a little," she instructed. "Breathe deeply."

Dropping a small handful of crushed, powdery leaves over the coals, she held the bowl so that the wisps of bitter smoke drifted into his face. He choked and tried to turn away, but the fumes seemed to follow him, and he was suddenly too weak and dizzy to move. The floor was shifting dangerously beneath him, and unless he stayed perfectly still he would fall ....

*Nyctasia could feel the rope steady beneath her hand, leading her forward on an unswerving course through the dense, surging snowstorm. It was Lorr who struggled on ahead of her now, buffeted by the fierce wind, barely able to cling to the guide-rope. Fearing that without help he'd lose his hold and be lost, she called to him to wait for her, but the wind swallowed her words at once. A curtain of snow blew between them, and she lost sight of him completely.*

*When she reached the shelter of the porch, the door stood open, casting a bright beacon of light out into the starless, treacherous night. Had Lorr made his way to the house, or had he been swept away into the icy darkness? Nyctasia searched all through the building for him, hastening*

from room to room but finding them empty, and calling his name in vain.

## 11

"IT'S NOT MY fault!" Corson shouted. "How was I to know it was smugglers they were after? If they'd told us, I'd have warned her—that's why they made ruttin' sure we didn't know. There was nothing I could do! Do you want me to give the money back? That won't help Destiver."

She had tried to tell Destiver the same thing, on the way back to Chiastelm, but Destiver, wounded and in shackles, had only spat at her.

Annin looked as if she'd like to do the same. "Then what will help? You put her into prison—"

"I didn't! She can blame herself. If she wasn't a stinking smuggler—"

"If you weren't a mercenary—!"

"They didn't teach me any other trade in the army!"

"You didn't have to take this job."

"If I hadn't, someone else would be fifty crescents the richer, and Destiver would still be in prison. I tell you, I didn't sell her to the Guild. I'd have saved her if I could."

"I don't believe you. Everyone knows you hate her."

Corson couldn't deny that. "I can't abide her. But you and Steifann like her, though only the Hlann knows why. I'd have done it for your sake, not hers, but I swear I'd have done it."

"What's to be done now, that's the question," Steifann reminded them. He had always disapproved of Corson's profession, but, upon reflection, he couldn't hold her responsible for Destiver's arrest. "Destiver would be no better off if someone else had taken her," he admitted, "but you might be better off, Corson, if someone else did the Guild's dirty work for them."

"You'd be better pleased, I daresay, if I'd taken the job Destiver offered me. Then I'd be in prison with her now."

"You needn't have taken any sort of job—there's plenty of work for you right here." It was their old argument, never resolved between them. "But never mind that now. There must be something we can do about Destiver."

"What about all those Rhaicimes and Jhaices you know, Corson? They should be able to obtain a pardon for her."

"I know *one* Rhaicime, and I met *one* heir to a Jhaicery, and I left them both in the valleys of the Midlands. I wish to the Hlann that I'd stayed there myself."

"Then they're no use to us," Steifann said reasonably. "But you do have friends on the city guard, Corson. Couldn't you arrange for them to leave her cell unlocked one night and look the other way? We'd make it worth their while."

Corson shook her head. "If she were just a thief or a common killer, it might be possible. But they wouldn't dare let a smuggler get away from them. The Guild would have their heads for it." The Maritime cities depended on trade for much of their revenues, and nothing could be permitted to interfere with their profits. The penalties for smuggling were as harsh as those for murder, and rather more likely to be enforced.

"But they might let you in to see her, on the sly," Corson offered Annin.

"Well, you could bring her some food, I suppose," said Walden.

"Or some ale," Steifann suggested, "That's what she'll really be wanting."

"Or a knife ..." said Annin thoughtfully.

"That's too dangerous. You'd be caught."

"She'll be hung if we don't do *something!*"

"I have an idea," said Trask.

The others looked at him with as much annoyance as surprise. "Corson, drop this brat down the well, would you?" Annin said sharply.

"With pleasure."

"Don't spoil the water, just throttle him and I'll use him for stew-meat." Walden threatened to cook

everyone, almost every day, but he always managed to sound as if he meant it.

“If you haven’t swept out the taproom, Trask, you’d better do it now,” Steifann ordered. “And if you have, go do it again.”

Trask sighed and picked up a broom, but only stood leaning against it lazily. “If you’d listen to me for a change, I know of someone who might be of help,” he insisted. “Eslace av Ondra. She has influence on the Guild.”

“You don’t know Eslace av Ondra! An Ondra wouldn’t even use you for a footstool.”

“I didn’t say I knew her—there’s talk about her, that’s all. I’ve heard that she can be very generous, if one appeals to her in the right way.” He stroked the broom-handle suggestively.

“That’s the sort of thing you always hear,” Carson said scornfully. “Why haven’t you paid her a call yourself?”

“From all they say of Mistress Eslace, she has an eye for a man who’s big and brawny,” Trask explained, looking pointedly at Steifann. “There’s no accounting for taste.”

“Rot,” said Steifann.

Trask shrugged. “Please yourself. Destiver’s no friend of mine. But if half of what’s said is true, the daughter of Ondra would be well pleased to grant a hearing to a petition from the likes of you. Or you,” he added, turning to Walden. “If Mistress Omia could spare you for the night.”

The broad, barrel-chested cook was shorter than Steifann but no less muscular, and he could beat Steifann at arm-wrestling three tries out of five. But the only woman who interested Walden was Omia, his stout, good-humored wife and the mother of his numerous children. “I could do very well without Destiver myself. *I’m* not her countryman and shipmate,” he said, grinning at Steifann. “I must yield to you the honor of pleading her cause with Madame Ondra.”

“It might be worth a try, at that,” said Annin.

Steifann considered the matter for a while, scratching at his bushy beard. “It couldn’t do any harm, I suppose. There’s no reason I shouldn’t address an Ondra. I’m a respectable householder.”

Corson snorted. “You’re a common taverner!”

“The Ondra may give themselves airs, but they’re only traders, all in all. They’re no better than the rest of us.”

“Well, the worst she can do is have you thrown out,” Annin reflected.

“We’ll see about that,” said Steifann decidedly. “More likely she’ll beg me to stay. But I’d better take a bath, all the same. Heat up some water. Trask, clean my good boots.”

Corson followed him into his room and watched moodily as he searched in a chest for his best shirt. “You never groom yourself for me,” she complained.

“I will,” Steifann promised, “when you’re someone of influence and consequence, instead of a worthless vagabond.”

“I always said you were a whore at heart.”

Steifann laughed. “I don’t blame you for being cross. You might have to make do without me tonight, poor creature. That must be hard to bear.”

“I’ll survive somehow,” Corson said darkly. “Maybe I won’t be here when you get back.”

Steifann pushed the hair back from his face and frowned. “Destiver and I came over from Azhes together, you know.”

“I know,” said Corson, burning with jealousy. She had never even been to the island nation of Azhes. That Steifann’s past did not include her was bad enough—that it did include Destiver was infuriating. “You Azhid always stand together.”

“We do, but it’s not just that.” He closed the door, then went to stand at the hearth, beckoning Corson to join him. “What you don’t know is that we can neither of us go back there, on pain of death. We’ve both been condemned for high treason.”

Corson started. “High ... but isn’t that treason against the throne? How—?”

“Not so loud, Corson. Destiver and I were on the crew of the *Golden Feather*. You must have heard of it.”

“The royal ship—the one that mutinied?”

He nodded, his face grim. “Not all of Destiver’s stories are lies. We did live by piracy for a few years. There was no other way for us to live. Oh, it was nothing like the bold adventures she blathers about when she’s drunk. It’s a shabby trade. But we could hardly go back home after we’d set His Sovereign Highness Prince Breazhwen adrift, and made off with a royal galleon. And there were regal rewards for our capture in all the ports of the mainland.” His voice was bitter. “They should have given *us* a reward for rebelling against that pestilent whelp Breazhwen! They only gave him command of the vessel to keep him away from court—everyone knew that. All very well for them at the capital, but Their Excellencies didn’t concern themselves about the crew that would be trapped aboard ship with him for months, subject to his vicious whims.” He spat into the fire.

Corson had suffered under some brutal commanders in the army, but she hadn’t been penned up with them in the middle of the ocean, where she could not even hope to desert. “You should have killed him!”

“It wasn’t for his sake that we spared him, I promise you. We hadn’t much chance of mercy if we were caught, but no chance at all if we threw him overboard. Mutiny’s risky enough without murder.” He laughed suddenly. “And then someone did kill him, not a year after he returned to the palace. I suppose there was nothing else to be done. Asye knows we’d endured him as long as we could. We all tried to stay out of his way, but he noticed me, worse luck. I’m big even for an Azhid, though we’re not all such a puny lot as you Mainlanders.”

Corson smiled. It was an old joke between them. A southerner, she was fully as tall as Steifann, but she was one of the few people he’d ever met who was.

“He took a liking to me,” Steifann continued, with a grimace, “which was more dangerous than his dislike, in some ways. That mutiny probably saved my life ....”

After a long silence, Corson asked, “Why did you never tell me all this before?”

Steifann put his arm around her shoulders. “I’ve never told anyone. The others only know that Destiver and I were shipmates in the Azhid navy. I hadn’t the right to tell, you see—it was her secret as well as mine. She was one of the ringleaders. But it can’t make much difference to her now, I fear. I want you to know that I trust you, Corson—and that I owe it to Destiver to try what I can to save her.”

“Oh, of course you do, I know that. I wouldn’t mind cutting her throat myself, but I don’t much want to see her hang. She did sneak me out of the city last year, even if she charged me a fortune for it.”

“She could have earned much more by betraying you, you know.”

“All right, I don’t deny it. Go pay court to the whole Guild, for all of me. I wish you success of it, because I don’t think we can afford to bribe the magistrates.”

“Well, as long as you understand that it’s necessary,” Steifann said seriously. He dragged the wooden tub out of the corner and pushed it over to the hearth. Trask came in without knocking, poured a kettle of hot water into it and went back to the kitchen for more.

Steifann pulled off his boots and began to unlace his shirt. “Of course, I have heard that Eslace av Ondra’s still quite a handsome woman,” he remarked, grinning. “A pity that comb of yours only works on men.”

Corson threw the boots and a basin and ewer at him before she stormed out of the room, nearly knocking over Trask and his steaming kettle.

## 12

THE SAETARRIN LOST no time in inquiring after their fugitive bondservant. But the Edonaris household was astonished, and not a little disturbed, when Lady Avareth and her son paid them the honor of a visit themselves, instead of sending a messenger.

When informed of the noble pair’s approach, Mesthelde had hurried to the barn to find ’Deisha and send her to wash and change her clothes. As heirs to the Jhaicery, the two of them would be expected to be on hand to greet their lordly guests, but ’Deisha, who was attending to an ailing sow, was in no state even to welcome a roadworn peddler. She cursed and clambered out of the pen, complaining loudly that she’d prefer to spend the morning in the company of a sick pig than with the best of the Saetarrin.

“And fetch Nyctasia at once,” Mesthelde ordered. “It’s her they’ve come to see, not us, you may be sure. They’ve heard that we have a Rhaicime among us. Well, she’ll have to meet them sooner or later. Tell her she must be civil, for our sakes. She’ll be in the nursery still, at this hour. And take off those boots before you set foot in the house, Frondescine ar’n Edonaris.”

Nyctasia was reading a history lesson to Tsebrene, Melorin and Hespiara, who were rarely called anything but Bean, ’Lorin and Sparrow, respectively.

“... all the way to Azhes and the Westernmost Isles,” ’Deisha heard. “And that’s why folk from the west like me and folk from the east like you, all speak the Eswraine tongue, and you and I can understand each other—most of the time.”

“But not the Liruvathid,” said ’Deisha, from the doorway.

Nyctasia smiled at her. “That’s right. The Eswraine never settled the Inner Lands because they met with fierce warlike tribes there who drove them away. So they traveled through the north, around the mountains, and that’s when they came to the valley. They called the mountain range The Spine because it seemed to them like the backbone of the world. And from here, some of their great-grandchildren went farther west until they found the coast. And what else did they find?”

“Azhes and the Westernmost Isles!” ’Lorin recited. “*You* didn’t know that, ’Deisha.”

“I didn’t have such a good teacher,” said ’Deisha. “But lessons are over for today. Nyc, I must carry you off to meet some of our neighbors.”

“In a moment, love. And so the peoples of the Empire speak different languages from ours, and don’t even understand each other very well. They’re not children of the Eswraine, as we are. And *that*,” she concluded, “is why we always call people from Eswrin *avina*, which means ‘mother,’ or *vaysh*, which means ‘father.’ even if they’re quite small like you little minnows.”

Her pupils thought it extremely funny that grown people should call children father or mother, and Nyctasia left them giggling together, with a promise to tell them more stories on the morrow.

Explaining as they went, ’Deisha hurried to her own rooms, dragging Nyctasia along with her. Mesthelde had already ordered hot water sent up for her. ’Deisha tossed her filthy clothes on the floor and began to scrub herself vigorously with a bath brush. When she’d dismissed the maid, she told Nyctasia, “And the worst of it is, they say Lord Marrekind is with her—Lorr didn’t kill him after all. *Vahn*, what a shame!”

“But it’s good news for Lorr, surely.”

“Not at all. He must have fought with Marrekind and left him for dead. That’s as serious as killing him, under the law. The law for slaves is not much different from the law for animals, Nyc. A dog that turns on its owner shall be put to death.”

Before Nyctasia could reply, Mesthelde strode in to see that ’Deisha was making herself presentable. She wore a long russet gown with trimming of fox-fur at the sleeves and hem, and her hair was bound up neatly beneath a fine kerchief of gold lace. Around her neck was the heavy gold chain that signified her title. She had even left off the great ring of keys she always wore at her belt.

Nyctasia had never seen her in anything but plain, serviceable homespun, usually covered by a capacious apron. “How handsome you look. Lady Mesthelde,” she ventured.

But her finery did nothing to sweeten Mesthelde’s temper. “Lady Moonshine and Folly,” she snapped. “Nothing but a lot of bothersome rubbish. ’Deisha, wear your green silk. What have you that’s decent for Nyctasia to wear?”

“Any number of things. Aunt, don’t fret yourself. I’ve fine clothes enough for a dozen. They never wear out,” she explained to Nyctasia, “because I never wear them. Nyc, do take that gown with the silver stitching and the pearls on the sleeves—I’ve never dared put it on, but it might have been made for you.”

Mesthelde approved the choice, but Nyctasia demurred. “It’s lovely. I’d gladly wear it for a family celebration, but for this occasion I’ll do as I am.” She was dressed in plain woolen leggings and a simple tunic, both of dull brown. They were of good quality, but hardly elegant.

“You can’t be presented to the Saetarrin looking like that!” Mesthelde protested.

“You’ll find that I can,” said Nyctasia calmly. “Are they in their best?”



“No, but, my dear Nyctasia, little as we may esteem these people, we must stay in their good graces. We can’t afford to give them offense—”

Nyctasia had never before contradicted Mesthelde, but the usages of etiquette were something she understood far better than any of her kinsfolk here in Vale. “They’ll not take it amiss, I promise you. On the contrary, they’d think the less of me if I showed them more honor than they show you. As a Rhaicime, I’m their superior in rank, and they won’t be satisfied unless I behave accordingly. It is, as you so justly observe, great rubbish, but they’ll expect it of me.”

“Well, perhaps you know best,” said Mesthelde doubtfully, “We’d not ask you to receive them, if it could be helped, but they’ll take it as a slight if you don’t. I’ve already had to apologize that my mother’s not well enough to welcome them herself—as if I’d let her be bothered with them. You will be amiable to them, though, won’t you?”

“Ah, no, not amiable—gracious,” Nyctasia said with a knowing smile. She went to the door, pausing to say, “I’ll be down directly. I believe I do have a few preparations to make. Don’t worry, I want to meet them very much indeed—especially Lord Marrekind.”

’Deisha curtsied stiffly. “Lady Avareth, Lord Marrekind,” she said, “you honor our house.” In her green silk kirtle, with lace at her wrists and breast, and slippers of gold kid on her feet, ’Deisha looked perfectly exquisite, and felt like a perfect fool. Dainty gloves of spiderweb tracery might hide her work-hardened hands, but she knew that fine raiment could not make her a lady in the eyes of the Saetarrin, and she hated to take part in such a masquerade. They were sneering at her, she was certain. The dogs, sensing her mistrust of the visitors, regarded them balefully, hackles raised.

Lady Avareth inclined her head slightly in greeting. She considered ’Deisha an insolent chit who had dared to decline an alliance with the House of Saetarrin, and who ought to be put in her place. But if it were true that a foreign Rhaicime had settled among the Edonaris, then perhaps it was as well that no marriage-accord had been made with a mere Jhaice ....

Much to ’Deisha’s disgust, Lord Marrekind was more attentive to her. When he bent to kiss her hand, she saw a large, dark swelling over one eye that looked like a recent injury. A blow that could raise a bruise like that, she thought, could easily knock a man senseless.

“Mistress Frondescine, what a pleasure to see you again,” he was saying. “We ought to meet more often, neighbors as we are. If, as rumor has it, your distinguished kinswoman from the coast resembles you closely, she must be beautiful indeed.”

“You flatter me, my lord,” said ’Deisha, politely withdrawing her hand. “My lady cousin is far more comely than I. But you shall judge that for yourself. She will be with us directly.”

“We shall be honored.”

“The Lady Nyctasia is eager to make your acquaintance,” Mesthelde assured them. “Pray sit by the fire. May I offer you wine?” If Nyctasia kept them waiting much longer, she thought grimly, she’d go fetch her herself and drag her downstairs by the ear, if need be.

A servant had set a tray of silver goblets on the table, and Diastor himself had brought a dusty jar of a very old vintage from the cellars. When he cut the seal, an inviting, heady fragrance filled the air for a moment.

“The wines of this household are surely a Manifestation of Temptation,” said Nyctasia, from the doorway. “Good day to all.”

’Deisha saw at once that Nyctasia had been right to refuse the gown of silver and pearl. Her plain attire was clearly the best complement for the rich gold chain of office she wore, crown-like, around her head—as was traditional only for those of the highest rank. She smiled, bowed to the company, and advanced into the room, all with an air of stateliness and queenly dignity that no fine raiment could possibly have improved. Even Mesthelde was spellbound.

To one who could command such presence, ’Deisha realized, splendid garments were not only unnecessary, but even excessive. Then, recalling herself to her duty, she recovered her wits sufficiently to say, “Lady Avareth, Lord Marrekind, allow me to present our newfound kinswoman, the Lady Nyctasia Selescq Rhaicime brenn Rhostshyl ar’n Edonaris.”

“Oh, well done, milady sister,” Raphe murmured in her ear. “You’ve been practicing.”

Deisha stifled a laugh. “A commoner like you doesn’t understand these things,” she whispered. Raphe pinched her.

They watched in awe while Nyctasia indulgently accepted the formal obeisances of the Saetarrin, as if this were a duty that she willingly performed for their benefit. Greymantle growled softly as Lord Marrekind approached her, and Nyctasia laughed, not in the least discomposed.

“Why, lie down and be still, you mannerless cur,” she said lightly. “These are friends of the house.” Her tone might have deceived a person, but certainly not a dog. Greymantle obeyed, but continued to watch the guests suspiciously.

When Lord Marrekind knelt before her, Nyctasia took his hand and seemed to study it for a moment, a faint frown creasing her brow. But then she bade him rise, with a smile of the utmost benevolence.

“Permit me,” she said to Mesthelde, and poured out the wine, handing the guests their goblets herself, to do them honor. “You must not think it an insult that I refuse to drink with you. I am a healer, and so a most strict Vahnite. Even these excellent wines which bear my family name are forbidden by the Discipline, I fear. It is the price one must pay to serve the Indwelling Spirit—and to master it.”

“Your servant, my lady,” said Lord Marrekind, raising his goblet to her before he drank.

Her eyes met his and again she frowned. “Forgive my impertinence, sir, but you suffer, do you not, from sleeplessness, and a throbbing pain of the temples, at times? Perhaps nosebleed?”

He stared. “And did the Indwelling Spirit tell you that?”

“The signs are plain to any healer—the beat of blood in your hand, your ruddy complexion, and the blood-web in your eyes—”

“Of what are these the signs?” he demanded, anxious.

“But surely your physicians have warned you?”

“I have little faith in physicians’ ways. Lady Nyctasia. Pray let me hear your judgment of my state.”

Nyctasia laughed. “Perhaps you are wise to distrust the skills of leeches. I believe they harm as often as they heal. Indeed, though you will think I boast, our court physicians often came to me for advice on such matters. It seems that scholarship may be as valuable as experience. You are surely afflicted with tempestuous blood—what is commonly called the Surge. It is often found in those of powerful will, but is more dangerous to some than to others. You should eat little meat, sir, and be bled often, especially in the winter months. If you allow me, I shall send to your physicians a copy of the pertinent texts from the writings of the great Iostyn Vahr.”

“I should be very grateful, my lady.” That the Saetarrin did not keep a retinue of personal physicians was something he had no intention of admitting in the present company.

Nyctasia was in fact quite aware of this already, but her words would serve to remind him of the difference in their stations. “I shall also take the liberty,” she continued, “of sending you a certain preparation, a specific against the seizure known as The Red Veil. You may never need it perhaps, but if you should be stricken suddenly with a pain that dims your sight, and casts a red mist over all you see, lose no time but drink it at once. Such a wound”—she gestured at his bruised brow—“could be dangerous for one who suffers from tempestuous blood. It might bring The Red Veil upon you at any time. The color of the flesh is unwholesome, and ... well, it is best to be prepared.”

By now Lord Marrekind was thoroughly alarmed. He finished his wine and gladly allowed Nyctasia to pour him another. “You are most kind, Lady Nyctasia. I shall certainly heed your counsel. If I may ever in any wise be of service to you ...”

Nyctasia dismissed his thanks with a smile and a graceful wave of her hand. “It is a sacred duty, sir, to put such knowledge to use. But it is my passion as well, I do confess. I cannot see an illness or an injury without desiring to know its history, and to direct its treatment.” She regarded his face again, and said slowly, “A blow, I believe, raised that bruise, and not a fall. Am I correct?”

At this, Lady Avareth came forward to claim Nyctasia’s attention. “Entirely correct, my lady. And it was that very matter which brought us here today—or rather, provided us with a pretext for coming here to make Your Ladyship’s acquaintance.”

Nyctasia admired the skillful way in which Lady Avareth disguised the truth as a flattering lie, it was a ruse she had often employed herself.

“My son was attacked by one of our own bondservants,” Lady Avareth continued, “who has so far escaped capture. We came to inquire whether he’d been seen by anyone of this household.”

“No one’s told me about it if he has,” said Mesthelde, with perfect truthfulness. She looked questioningly at the others.

Diastor shook his head. “We’ll ask among our people, of course, but I doubt that we’ll learn much. Still, if the man’s dangerous, folk should be warned to be on their guard.”

“Dangerous he may be, but hardly a man—and I daresay he never will be one,” said Lord Marrekind. “He’s little more than a boy, but he’s given trouble before. I should have had him hamstrung the last time he ran off.”

Nyctasia looked startled. “What, a fair-haired youth? ’Deisha, do you suppose it was that young thief we found in the stables, on the night the storm began?”

“I—I don’t know, he might have been,” ’Deisha said in consternation. She did not have Nyctasia’s experience at lying, and was not aware that a half-truth was usually more effective than an evasion or an outright lie. Or even an outright truth.

“That must have been the boy Lorr,” Lord Marrekind exclaimed. “He fled just a few days before the storm struck. You say you found him?”

“Oh yes, we found him, and lost him, almost at once,” Nyctasia said thoughtfully. “He ran out into the snow, deliberately, as soon as he was discovered. I thought the poor wretch must be mad. If only I’d known ...” She sighed. “We searched the yard, but he’d already vanished. I couldn’t understand it at the time, but of course I see now that he didn’t wish to be rescued. He preferred to perish in the storm than to return to servitude.”

“To death, rather,” said ’Deisha grimly. “For raising his hand to his master.” She did not suppose that Nyctasia had forgotten this, but she was beginning to guess at her cousin’s game.

“My dear, I’m sure you do not mean to insult our guests,” Nyctasia reproached her, “but you have sadly misunderstood their intentions, unless I much mistake. Gentlefolk do not avenge themselves on their inferiors.” She sounded shocked at the very suggestion that the Saetarrin might take such savage measures. “The laws of your cruel country may *allow* an atrocity of that sort, but surely they do not *demand* it?” she asked, turning to Lord Marrekind.

“By no means, Your Ladyship,” he said hastily. “But I beg to assure you that the youth is not deserving of Your Ladyship’s concern, nor of such mercy as the law allows. I myself am witness to that.”

Nyctasia smiled. “As the Principles of the philosophers tell us, ‘Mercy dealt to the deserving is not mercy, but merely justice,’” she said sweetly. She had often had occasion to reflect that the greatest gift of Vahnite philosophy was its power to answer almost any argument.

Having silenced her audience with these lofty sentiments, Nyctasia continued, “But I fear he is beyond our mercy or our vengeance now. He can hardly have survived the storm.” She opened her hand in a Vahnite gesture of resignation. “I feel in some wise responsible .... If he should somehow be found alive, perhaps, sir, as you hold yourself in my debt, you will be so kind as to let me know your decision?”

She had left Lord Marrekind no choice, and he knew it. He bowed and said, “Upon my honor, his fate shall rest entirely in Your Ladyship’s hands.” Behind his back, ’Deisha winked at her.

“You have greatly relieved my mind, Lord Marrekind,” Nyctasia said warmly. “Though it may well be that the lad who concerns me is not, after all, the one you seek. I had only a glimpse of him, but he hardly looked strong enough to overcome a grown man.”

“He’s strong enough to wield a large stone—and I confess that he took me by surprise. I knew he was wayward and disobedient, but I’d no idea what a vicious little beast he was.”

“Yet, as a Maritimer, I cannot condemn him. We say on the coast that if you make beasts of people, you must not expect them to behave better than beasts. We prefer to be served by free folk who know their own worth.”

In as cold a tone as she could bring herself to use to a Rhaicime, Lady Avareth asked, “And are the peasants on your estates any better off than slaves?”

“Those on my estates are,” Nyctasia said evenly. “But you are quite right, of course—on many manors the laborers are mistreated, and have little recourse to justice. Unfortunately, there are those everywhere who disregard the law with impunity.” Nothing in her face or voice was accusing, but the force of her remark was not lost on anyone present.

The Saetarrin soon took their leave, much to the relief of their hosts. Nyctasia accepted an invitation to hunt with them in the spring, and reassured Lord Marrekind that she would soon send the promised medicine. Until they were shown from the hall, she remained as flawlessly, formally polite as when she’d entered. Her manner was one of perfect courtesy mixed with condescension such as the Edonaris had never before seen her display. Her treatment of the Saetarrin had made entirely clear to ’Deisha and her aunt the vast difference between “amiable” and “gracious.”

Raphe applauded her, and ’Deisha cried, “Nyc, you were wonderful,” embracing her wildly, and tearing a seam in the green silk gown, Excited by the commotion, Greymantle jumped up on them, sending Nyctasia’s chain of office flying.

Raphe retrieved it, and returned it to her with a bow. “Tell me, Your Ladyship, how do you manage to bow, wearing this thing, without letting it fall off?”

“It’s not at all easy,” laughed Nyctasia. “Shall I give you lessons in deportment?”

“I should say not!” Mesthelde returned from escorting the guests out. “You did very well,” she conceded. “They took to it. But if you ever behaved to me like that, I’d slap your face for you, you conceited creature. ’Deisha, get out of that dress before you destroy it.” She paused and fixed Nyctasia with a shrewd look. “Is Marrekind really ill?” she demanded.

“I hope so,” said ’Deisha earnestly.

“Powerful will!” snorted Mesthelde, before Nyctasia could answer her question. “It’s folk with ungovernable tempers who suffer from the Surge.”

“That’s true, but it would be less than gracious to tell him so. I believe that he is ill, yes ... or that he soon will be.”

“Hmmm ... and what was all that nonsense about a red mist, or some such? I’ve never heard the like.”

“It’s rather an uncommon malady, but a very grave one. I’d best go see to the preparation of the specific. I suspect that he’ll be needing it quite soon.”

But though Nyctasia made ready the necessary remedy, she did not yet send it to Castle Saetarrin.

## 13

CORSON WAS NOWHERE in sight when Steifann came back, just past dawn, looking tired and a little tipsy. Walden had gone to market for the day’s supplies—usually Steifann’s chore—leaving Trask and his other underlings to finish the baking. Annin was already bustling around the kitchen.

“A most charming woman,” Steifann reported. “But not very encouraging, about Destiver.”

“What did she say?” Annin asked anxiously. “Can she do anything to help?”

“Oh, she sympathized, said she quite understood—old shipmates and all that—”

“But ...?”

“But there’s nothing to be done at least till the Maritime Alliance meets, and she doubts that much can be expected then. She very kindly explained that this matter does not concern Chiastelm alone, but the whole enterprise of coastal shipping. The Guild means to raise its standing in the Alliance by showing the rest what Chiastelm has done to fight smuggling, and Destiver’s their prize.”

“She’s safe till late in the spring, then, that’s something gained. They won’t hold such an important council until the thaw’s well past, and the roads dry.”

Steifann pushed the hair out of his eyes and stretched wearily. “Maybe before then we’ll find a way. Where’s Corson?”

“Still abed,” said Trask.

“Lazy wench. I’ll join her for a while. I could do with some sleep.” He winked. “Being persuasive is hard work.”

But he found Corson not only awake, but dressed and waiting for him. “Good,” he said, “since you’re up you can go help Annin. I’ll be out when I’ve had some rest. I didn’t get much sleep last night,” he teased, throwing himself across the bed beside her.

“Neither did I,” said Corson smugly.

Steifann sat up again, “Eh? Why not?”

“If you think I spent the night here alone, missing you, you’re sadly mistaken, my friend, I was out looking for another man. I found him too.”

“I don’t believe that. You’re just jealous.”

“Ask Annin, then. She knows, Annin!” she called, “come in here, will you?”

Annin looked in. “What is it, pet?” She no longer seemed at all angry with Corson.

“Was I here last night?” Corson demanded.

“Why, of course you were. You were with me all night, if anyone asks. You never went out at all.”

Steifann looked from one woman to the other in confusion. Corson laughed. “That’s right, so I was, *if anyone asks*. But I shan’t be here tonight, that’s certain. One of the Vathid soldiers told me that the Border Guard of Tieraion is hiring people to train new recruits, and they pay well in the Gemlands. I’ll bring back diamond buckles for you all.” She stood and shouldered her pack.

Steifann hastily got up. “But you don’t have to go now,” he protested. “Wait a few days, why don’t you?”

“No sense in delaying. It will take a good while to get that far north, with the roads shin-deep in mud. I want to get an early start. I was only waiting to tell you good-bye, love.”

A hard hug and a hearty kiss were all of Corson’s farewells. She had never been one for prolonged partings.

Steifann held her back for a moment. “Corson, you’re not going just because I—”

“No, no, it’s not that. If I were jealous of your tryst with Eslace av Ondra—that scheming crone—I’d stay right here and see that you didn’t make a habit of it. And you’d better not,” she added, on her way out.

Steifann looked after her, angry and uncertain. “Then why in the Hlann’s name—!”

“Let her go,” Annin advised him. “It’s almost spring, and you know Corson can’t stay still with the spring fever in her blood. She’ll be back before long, I’ll warrant,” She pointed imperiously to the bed. “Sleep while you can, before the house is full of folk.”

Steifann sat on the bed and pulled off his boots, grumbling to himself. “Thinks she’s the only woman in the world, does she? Goes off for months at a time, never a thought for me ... Well, one day ...”

Annin shut the door before remarking, “Oh, I almost forgot—you were so busy all night, you haven’t heard the news, have you? Someone cut Hrawn brenn Thespaon’s throat last night, in the alley behind The Crow’s Nest.”

Steifann looked up sharply. “Is that so?”

“Yes, it seems he’d come by a good bit of money somehow, and of course the fool got roaring drunk with it. The talk is that he started bragging how he’d sold a pack of smugglers to the Guild for a pretty penny.”

“And does the talk say who killed him?”

“Not that I’ve heard. But they don’t take kindly to informers in that quarter, you know. It could have been anyone. And I don’t think the authorities will try very hard to find out, either. Hrawn was nothing but a troublemaker. The city guard will think themselves well rid of him.”

Steifann sighed. “And now Corson’s suddenly heard of a job in the far north. Well, I hope you’re satisfied.”

“She’d have gone soon anyway. She left you this in the meantime.” Annin took a well-filled purse from her pocket and tossed it to him. “She says you’re to hire someone to help with the heavy work here till she comes back. She suggested that someone ugly and unpleasant would be best.” Annin grinned. “And preferably bald.”

TRUE TO NYCTASIA'S prediction, it was only a matter of days before messengers from the Saetarrin arrived to entreat her help for Lord Marrekind.

'Cacia interrupted her and Jenisorn at their studies. "They say the Red Veil's come upon him, whatever that may be, and that you have a cure for it, Nyc, which His Lordship begs you'll send at once."

"I shall do better than that. I'll go myself to tend to him, and bring the remedy with me. I have it right here."

"Don't you do it!" 'Cacia protested. "Let the bastard suffer. Let him die!"

"I know what I'm about, girl. Trust me. Run and tell them that I'll set out at once."

"What *are* you about, Nyc?" Jenisorn demanded, as soon as 'Cacia had left them. "Why should you help him?"

"Why, Jheine. I'm surprised at you. It's my manifest duty to heal Lord Marrekind." Nyctasia grinned, and held up a small silver flask. "And when I've given him this, he'll be so exceedingly grateful he may even keep his word to me about Lorr. One who's been cured of The Red Veil doesn't soon forget it."

"You're quite sure you can cure it, then? If you go there yourself, and fail—"

"Don't worry, my lad. I cannot fail. I have only to give him this antidote to the poison I put in his wine. You'll agree, surely, that it's my duty to do so."

Jenisorn dropped the vellum scroll he was holding. "Sweet *vahn*, Nyc!"

Grey mantle watched in surprise as the scroll rolled across the floor toward him. He stalked it suspiciously, sniffed it, then decided that it was unfit to eat, and sneezed disdainfully. Nyctasia took it away from him before he could change his mind.

"You're not to tell the others, mind you, Jheine. I don't know that Mother 'Charis would approve—and I think young 'Cacia would approve too much."

"As you will, of course. But I'd not rely on Marrekind's promises, even if he believes that he owes you his life. I think we'd best try to get Lorr away in secret, nonetheless."

"By all means. It's not only his promises I wanted, but his pain as well. Oh, not for spite's sake—much as the prospect pleases—no, rather to create a certain Symmetry. Understand, Jheine, that Balance is the Principle that must be satisfied in order to bring about healing. To invoke any Influence, a sacrifice must be made, never forget it. I tried to give of my own strength to heal Lorr, but I feel that I was unsuccessful."

Jenisorn nodded. "He's been a little better since you saw him, but he's still far from well."

"That's because he doesn't *want* to live, you see. But it may be that I can find the power to overcome that Resistance, through the suffering of Lord Marrekind. The *vahn* forbids, in the natural order of things, that one should win such power from the sacrifice of another—but, in this matter. Balance will be served because Lord Marrekind was the one responsible for Lorr's suffering. Do you follow?"

"I think so. Is that why you must go to him now?"

Nyctasia hesitated. "No. Not for this Influence, but for another spell I mean to try. An older spell, and far more powerful. Perhaps the oldest spell of all—the blood of the guilty to heal the wounds of the victim. I shall order Lord Marrekind to be bled—which will do him good, in truth, though that's by the way—and bring back with me a measure of his blood, to bathe Lorr's back. It's a primitive magic, and wild and wicked, according to some. It certainly has nothing to do with the Indwelling Spirit."

"Let me come with you, Nyc. I can help. You could say you're teaching me to be a healer."

"So I am, but there's something I want you to do here while I'm gone. Do you know of the hot spring that was found in the great crystal cavern of the Cymvelans? It should be possible to reach it now, through the tunnels, to fetch some of the water. Such springs often possess healing waters, or so it's said. We may as well try. Wash Lorr's wounds with it, and give him some to drink."

"I've done that already," said Jenisorn proudly.

“Indeed? Then I shall take you along with me, if your elders don’t object. Here, put these books where they belong.” She paused. “I have read, though, that it’s best to partake of such waters at their source. Perhaps we could bring him to the spring one night, and keep him hidden there. It’s as secret as the cellars, and—”

Jenisorn laughed. “You *are* a witch, Nyc, and no mistake. That’s just where we moved him, once the way to the ruins was cleared. The air is pure there, and it’s warm near the spring. I didn’t mean to tell you unless it became necessary, but I see it’s no use trying to keep anything from you. He’s had the water in plenty, and bathed in the pool.”

“Well done, by my word. With you to look after him, he’ll have no choice but to mend.”

“Nyc ... could I be a healer, in truth? Will you really teach me?”

“I intend to,” Nyctasia said seriously. “But you will be a far better healer than I, one day. If you can be spared from the vintnery, I’ll put you to work in earnest soon. Come along, now, ’prentice, we’ve kept His Lordship waiting long enough.”

But with the change of the seasons, her plans were changed as well. By spring thaw, Lorr was well enough to travel, and reached Amron Therain in safety. Jenisorn was now free to apply himself to his studies, and the family was willing to let Nyctasia make a scholar of him if she could, But the opening of the Trade Road brought other travelers and a courier from Osela with news and messages for the household. Nyctasia’s letters from Chiastelm were finally delivered.

They were bound together in a packet, and neither bore Nyctasia’s name, but Mesthelde handed them to her at once when the messenger said that they’d come all the way from the coast.

“They must be intended for our westerner,” she said.

Nyctasia seemed to receive them with a certain reluctance. “Yes, I believe these are mine. This one’s from an old friend, an herbalist. She always seals her letters thus.” She showed the others the clear impression left by a leaf that had been pressed into the warm wax.

“Nightingale’s-tongue, the minstrel’s herb,” said Mesthelde. “A good choice for you. A tisane brewed of it is supposed to preserve a singer’s voice.”

Nyctasia nodded. “And I was born with the Nightingale in the ascendant, you see.” She examined the other letter, which was stamped with the seal of a crudely carved hare. “I don’t know this mark, but it must be from Corson. Only she knows that I’m here.” She broke open the seal and immediately recognized Corson’s untrained scrawl.

“Ah, my adored Corson,” sighed Raphe. “Goddess of Danger and Desire. How fares the glorious warrior, Nyc?”

“Nyc ...?” said ’Deisha anxiously.

Nyctasia had read the beginning of Corson’s letter, gasped sharply, and suddenly turned a deathly white. In a choked voice she whispered, “Forgive me, I must—I can’t—” and hurried from the hall with the letter crushed in her hand. Greymantle loped after her.

“I fear I’ve brought ill tidings,” said the courier apologetically.

“Were those letters from Rhostshyl?” Jenisorn asked him.

“Chiastelm, I was told, though Rhostshyl’s not far from there. But if it’s news of Rhostshyl you want, there’s plenty, and none of it good. Outright war broke out a few months ago, between the two ruling families. I forget which side won, but it was a doubtful victory either way. Fires destroyed half the city, and hunger and sickness followed, as they always do. Rhostshyl’s a ruin, hadn’t you heard?”

Nyctasia sat staring at Corson’s letter without seeing it, as the words she had read seared her spirit and her understanding. She had known that war must come, of course she had known. Even here in the Valley folk had heard rumors from the coast, leaving little doubt that the fragile peace in Rhostshyl could not last.

Yet she was unprepared for the news, now that it faced her at last, no longer a fear for the future, not a rumor or a vision, but an inescapable fact. No warning could have prepared her to accept the reality.

Winter in Vale had been so still, so changeless, that time might have been frozen like the mountain lakes, like the wagon-ruts of the great Southern Trade Road. With news of the lands beyond the valley

walled out by snow, and travelers almost unknown, it had seemed as if nothing could possibly be taking place anywhere in the world. Lost in her studies, sheltered and cherished by her newfound kinsfolk, Nyctasia had almost ceased to feel herself an exile and a stranger. But now as the land woke to spring she too was roused from her dreams to receive the thaw's tidings. Rhostshyl in ashes ...

She had been living as if she meant to settle permanently at Vale, and she had nearly deceived herself, but now she understood that beneath all her plans had lain the belief that one day she would live again in Rhostshyl, and someday die there. Only now did she realize that she had taken this for granted, for the future suddenly seemed to stretch before her empty and meaningless. If Rhostshyl perished, she would be homeless forever. It was unthinkable.

"When feeling returns to the numbed flesh, there is pain," she thought ruefully. Did the earth too suffer when the winter ice melted away, and life seized the land again?

Shaking off such thoughts, she forced herself to reread Corson's words, but could find no comfort in them. The offhanded hopelessness of "It's over now" filled her with a sickening, chill despair. She read on, but Corson had soon lost interest in the subject and turned to her own affairs. She was enthusiastic in her thanks for the wooden comb. She complained that her life in Chiastelm was a bit dull at times. "Sometimes I even miss you, with all your endless nonsense," she had written. "Charms and chatter and rhymes and riddles. But when I'm sober I remember all the trouble you put me to. No one here believes the half of it, and I don't blame them much. I hardly believe it myself."

She ended with fond greetings to the rest of the Edonaris clan—especially to Raphe—but she had no more to say about the plight of Rhostshyl.

But from Maegor's letter Nyctasia learned all the particulars of the tragedy. Corson had not exaggerated, it seemed. "My Dear 'Tasia," Maegor began, "I have been tempted to spare you news that can only distress you, but your loyal courier shames me to the truth. It is, as she says, your right to decide for yourself what you must do. Yet if your spirit knows peace where you are, then you will bide, if you are wise. When you left, you told me that you'd be crazy to return to the city, and that worries me greatly, for you are an Edonaris, and therefore mad, as all the world knows. Consider well, 'Tasia—Emeryc and Lehannie were among the first to be slain, and not by chance, as you will well understand. Would you not be the next target, if you returned? And even if the enemies of your house are no longer a threat, can you be sure of a welcome from those of your kin who survive? You always opposed their claims to sole rule of the city, and now that they've achieved their desire at last, and done away with the only challenge to their power, will they allow you to share in that power? What will be gained by your joining the ranks of the dead?"

Nyctasia shuddered, remembering with cruel vividness her dream of Rhostshyl as the abode of the dead, a city of fallen stone and blackened timber, where only ghosts dwelt—ghosts who had invited her to become one of them. Now she recalled that her brother Emeryc and her mother's sister Lehannie had been among them, though both had been alive when she left the city. Maegor's warning seemed prudent indeed. Nyctasia read further.

"They came to me for news of you, not long ago," Maegor had written. "I could tell them nothing, of course, but I think they believe that I could send word to you if I chose, for they left this message with me nonetheless. I would that I had burned it before the doughty Corson sought me out, for now I must, in all conscience, let her send it on to you. I have not read it, and it is my hope that you will not do so either. For the good of your spirit, 'Tasia, leave it unread, and destroy it."

Nyctasia knew that she would be well-advised to heed this counsel, and knew just as surely that she wouldn't. Maegor's advice was always wise, and Nyctasia rarely followed it. She snatched at the other page and shook it open at once. It was unsealed, and bore neither salutation nor signature, but Nyctasia knew that the writer was Therisain ar'n Edonaris, one of her staunchest allies at court, who had joined with her in calling for a treaty of peace with the Teiryne. The others had not thought him a serious threat to their ambitions, since he was only of minor rank, but things had changed in the city now ....

Not for the salvation of her life or her spirit would Nyctasia refuse his message while the faintest hope yet remained to her. For her dream had shown her another vision of Rhostshyl as well. She had seen herself as a young bride, heralded by horns and banners, leading the living back into the heart of the city.



With that image before her, she did not hesitate to read Therisain's words, and as she read she began to understand for the first time what these shadows might mean.

His letter repeated some of what she'd learned already from the others, though without referring to any person or place by name. But then, unlike Corson or Maegor, he spoke not only of the city's present state, but of its future. "We have your letters of warrant, and by their authority we have thus far prevented the execution of the heir and many other prisoners. The matriarch is persuaded that more deaths might spur further uprisings among their supporters, but she will not be satisfied to hold her hand forever. She has been weakened, and this is the time to act. You must return to claim your prerogatives soon, if our plans are ever to bear fruit. We shall have the support of the populace and much of the nobility, I believe, for this conflict has devastated the high and the low alike, and folk remember that you sought to prevent it. Even the twins now oppose further bloodshed, and agree to await your word. They are still licking their wounds and are grown less bloodthirsty, having once tasted blood.

"I tell you, reconciliation may be within our grasp, but you must make your presence felt and establish your power beyond question. Only you are in a position to impose order and stability upon this chaos, and to assure that peace and mercy prevail in the city. Your duty is manifest."

The hope he held out was a ray of light piercing the dark wilderness of Nyctasia's grief. She could bear any bereavement, she thought, if Rhostshyl might yet be saved. She hardly knew what she felt about the death of her brother. He had been a follower of the matriarch Mhairesstri, devoted to keeping Rhostshyl in the hands of the Edonaris at any cost, and he had condemned Nyctasia's efforts at every turn. He had been as one dead to her for years, and she had long since ceased to mourn him. It was too late to regret their differences now. His death changed nothing between them.

But it changed the balance of power in Rhostshyl a good deal.

Neither Corson nor Maegor had realized the full significance of the news they'd sent, but Lord Therisain had understood it very well, and he knew that there was no need to explain it to Nyctasia. The titular lines of descent of the Edonaris were as familiar to her as her own name. Emeryc and Lehannie had both been of Rhaicime rank, which, as Maegor had suggested, was why they'd been marked for assassination as soon as hostilities had been openly declared. But the heir to Emeryc's title was his young son Leirven, still a child, and Lehannie was to be succeeded by Nyctasia's sister Tiambria—one of the twins—who would not come of age for another three years. With the heads of the House of Teiryn dead or defeated, there was no one at liberty who had the right to serve upon the council of the Rhaicimate. Nyctasia was entitled, quite legitimately, to declare herself the absolute ruler of the city of Rhostshyl.

## 15

ANXIOUS AS SHE was to depart, Nyctasia would not have considered leaving without making her formal farewell to the Lady Nocharis. Indeed, when she presented herself, the matriarch seemed to be expecting her.

"Ah, here you are, my dear." She beckoned Nyctasia closer, and looked searchingly into her face. "And so, after all, you found the treasure you came here to seek?"

"I did not know what I was seeking when I came, but I believe I did find it here. And I shall always be grateful."

"Already you have flown in spirit. When will you start out?"

"Tomorrow, at first light, by your leave. But you will give me your blessing. Mother, before I go?" She knelt by Lady Nocharis's chair.

The old woman touched Nyctasia's hair lightly with one frail hand, murmuring a ceremonial phrase, then took Nyctasia's hand in both her own, "We shall be sorry to lose you so soon, but you must not stay here. You're like an arrow shivering on the string, waiting to be released. How impatient is youth. Our poor Jheine will be a lost fledgling without you."

Nyctasia sat on the floor at her feet. "Yes, I promised to speak to you about him. I do think he should be sent to study with the scholar-physicians of the Imperial University." She sighed. "That's what I most longed for, myself, when I was Jheine's age. I even cast the lots about it once."

“And how were you answered?”

“With ambiguities, as always. ‘You shall not have your desire, yet in a manner you shall’—or something of that sort. The fates never did reveal more than that to me. Perhaps it meant that Jheine would attend the university in my place. He’d do well there, I’m certain of it, and his heart’s not in his work here.”

“I suppose we must see to his education, now that you’ve spoiled him for lesser things,” said Lady Nocharis with a smile. “But I thought you did not trust the skills of leeches?” It seemed that nothing was said or done in the household without Lady Nocharis’s knowledge.

“So I told Lord Marrekind,” Nyctasia admitted, “And it’s true that a false physician is worse than a murderer. But Jheine has the makings of a true physician and healer—and they are rare. He has the gift of compassion, which never should be wasted.”

“It never is wasted, my dear. It cannot be. But is compassion a gift? Or is it a responsibility?”

“To be kind is a duty, to be kind-hearted is a gift,” said Nyctasia. “Well, it loses something in the translation. To those who do good and are good, there seems to be no difference, perhaps, but to the rest of us kindness is a Discipline.”

Lady Nocharis shook her head. “Philosophy,” she said indulgently. “Don’t fret too much over the heart’s secret reasons. Such scrupulous distinctions may cloud the judgment, and make confusion of what is simple. Jheine is a good lad, yes, but you are not less good than he—you are simply less innocent. And that is to be expected of one who has more experience. There is no great mystery to it.” She raised Nyctasia’s head and met her serious, questioning gaze. “Only remember that you are a healer. Let nothing persuade you to forget that. Then all will be well.”

“You have the second sight, Mother ’Charis, have you not?”

“Oh, my dear, everyone has, to a greater or lesser degree.” She sighed and released Nyctasia’s hand. “And now you must be gone, child. I shall rest for a while.”

Nyctasia stood, and kissed her cheek. “I feel somehow that I’ve bid you farewell before.”

“Do you, daughter? You know that means we’ll meet again, so they say.”

“I hope so,” Nyctasia said. But she knew how very unlikely it was.

One of the most difficult lessons Nyctasia had learned in her exile was to moderate her habitual caution and suspicion. She had soon come to trust her second family as she had never trusted her first, but still it was some time before she could accustom herself to being without a weapon, or sleeping behind unbarred doors, with only Greymantle on guard. Such carelessness could have been fatal in Rhostshyl.

But now she had grown so well used to the free and open household that she was not at all alarmed—or surprised—when ’Deisha slipped into her room that night and perched on her bed, waking her. Greymantle only looked up and wagged his tail lazily, recognizing her familiar scent.

“Nyc, I know you want to make an early start in the morning, but I’ve had no chance to speak with you—it’s been so sudden, all of this. I still can’t believe that you mean to go off and leave us all heartbroken. How *can* you?”

Nyctasia chuckled and threw back the covers to allow ’Deisha to slip in beside her. “Lass, you are shameless.” It was not the first time ’Deisha had stolen into her room, and her bed.

’Deisha kissed her. “Shameless I may be, but not heartless,” she said reproachfully. She propped herself on one elbow and let her other hand rest gently on Nyctasia’s cheek.

Nyctasia turned her head and kissed ’Deisha’s palm, “Deisha, my wanton dove, in a week’s time you’ll have forgotten me.”

But ’Deisha, suddenly serious, regarded her sorrowfully. “Don’t tease, Nyc. It’s you I’m worried about, in truth. I’m afraid for you. You’ve told us often enough how dangerous it is in Rhostshyl.”

“Sacrifices must be made,” said Nyctasia. “When a life is taken, it is lost, but when a life is given it is received.”

“Well, it oughtn’t to be given, or bought, or bartered, whatever the philosophers say! Life’s not an outworn pair of boots.”

“Well said,” Nyctasia laughed. “But never mind—I don’t intend to be killed. I promise you. The city is changed now, love. Many of my enemies are dead or defeated, and my people are in power. I’ve nothing to fear.” Like most of Nyctasia’s lies, this one was partly true. There was less to fear, now.

’Deisha sighed. “I promised you, when you first came, that I’d never let you go back, Nyc. But how am I to stop you, when even honey-tongued Jheine can’t persuade you to stay?”

“You’ve kept your word,” Nyctasia said, after a silence. “I shan’t go back, not to the way things were when I left. I mean to go forward now, not back—to look to the future, and not repeat the past. It is not only Rhostshyl that is different now, but I too. And that is your doing. You’ve made it possible for me to return home, not because I need to be there, but because I’m needed there.”

“I? I don’t understand. What have I done?”

“You’ve set me an example—all of you, just by your way of life. Whether you’re caring for the grapes, or the animals, or the children, or one another, whatever you do is done only that life may continue and flourish. Your lives are not spent in the service of ambition or fear, but only of life itself. And that’s as it should be. You’ve taught me what peace means, and what it could mean to my city and my people. Knowing that, I could never go back to what I was.”

’Deisha found all this unintelligible, like most of Nyctasia’s explanations. But if Nyctasia was satisfied with matters as they stood, she would be content. “Well, I insist that you take Grey-mantle with you, at least,” she said. “He’ll look after you in my place.”

Not long afterward she woke Nyctasia again, this time to rouse her from the nightmare that gripped her. ’Deisha had to shake her and call her name for a good while before she could make her awaken, and then Nyctasia only lay and stared into the darkness as if she saw her dreams anew with waking eyes.

’Deisha held her and tried to comfort her. “Nyc, it was only a nightmare. It’s over now.”

“No, no, he’s dead, but it isn’t over.”

“Dead? Who’s dead?”

“Thierran ... my cousin. We were betrothed as children.” Nyctasia had begun to recover herself, and she did not tell ’Deisha that Thierran had once held her prisoner, or that it was Corson who’d killed him. “I was dreaming of a time, when we were quite young, and he was wounded in the hunt—*vahn*, how he bled! They all believed that he’d die, and at first they kept me away, but he called for me all that night, and finally they had to let me stay with him and tend him.”

(“Tasia, don’t leave me,” he had whispered, and for days she had refused to move from his bedside.)

“And so you saw him die?” ’Deisha asked sympathetically.

“No—not then. He did recover, and I was exceedingly proud. I believed that I’d healed him. Perhaps I did.”

(But in her dream he was a grown man, and he whispered, “Tasia, come back to me.”)

“It doesn’t matter,” said Nyctasia. “I’m all right now. Come, we’ll sleep a few hours more.”

’Deisha was too sleepy to question her further. They nestled together, and she soon slept like any healthy, hard-working farm girl. But Nyctasia lay awake for some time, haunted by the figure in her dream. He was Thierran, and yet she had somehow recognized in him the embodiment of her afflicted city. It was Thierran who called her, and yet it was Rhostshyl.

Her journey was uneventful until she reached Larkmere, where a great many things seemed to happen to her at once. First of all she was robbed, while watching the acrobats perform in the town square. They were the same troupe she’d seen at Osela the autumn before, and she was more impressed than ever at their mastery. The rope-dancer had somehow stretched her rope between the two tall towers of the city hall, and her performance at that dangerous height drew all eyes irresistibly. The watchers gasped as she leaped and turned in the air, landing firmly on her feet on the quivering rope. Someone in one of the towers tossed gleaming gold-painted balls to her, and she juggled them deftly, capering back and forth along the rope.

Nyctasia was by no means the only spectator to have her pocket picked while gazing upward in rapt fascination. Indeed, she did not even discover the theft until the acrobats’ drummer came round to collect

coins from the crowd. When she reached for her money-pouch, she found that the thongs had been cleanly cut from her belt.

But she had no time to consider how best to deal with this loss, for just then Greymantle gave a great tug at his leash and suddenly bounded off across the square, dragging Nyctasia after him. Nose to the ground, he galloped through the marketplace, following a chosen scent, and Nyctasia could barely keep up with him, much less stop him. But they did not have far to go.

Greymantle, followed by Nyctasia, ran into a long, open shed roughly divided into stalls. Wagging his tail wildly, he searched through these till he found Lorr and pounced on him to lick his face. Then he pranced proudly back to Nyctasia's side, looking to her for praise.

"Lady!" said Lorr, astonished. "How did you know I was here?"

"I didn't know," gasped Nyctasia, still trying to catch her breath. "How do you come to be here?" She looked around uneasily. Lorr was not alone. There were perhaps a dozen people in the shed, linked together in small groups by chains fastened to the wall or the roof-posts. Lorr was joined to a one-armed man and a middle-aged woman, neither of whom would fetch a good price in the slave-market, Nyctasia realized. The more profitable merchandise would be on display outside.

"By ill luck," Lorr was saying. "Bandits attacked our party. They let the others go, but those who were marked they sold to bounty-hunters. We were ... forced ... to tell whose we were."

Suddenly he blanched and his voice rose in fear. "Lady, you said—if I was brought back—Lord Marrekind would give me over to you! But if you're not there—"

"Hush," Nyctasia warned him, as one of the guards looked in through the far door. Like everyone else, he and his cohorts were neglecting their business in order to watch the daring performance of the rope-dancer. There was little danger that the chained prisoners would escape in their absence.

But seeing Nyctasia within, he came in and swaggered unhurriedly down the length of the shed toward her, swinging his heavy whip at his side. Shrewdly appraising her patched cloak and worn boots, he assumed that she couldn't afford to buy. A minstrel, most likely, with that harp slung at her shoulder.

But plenty of folk came in just to look—or to touch—and often they were willing to part with a few coins to satisfy their curiosity. And they were most generous, he had found, when he chivvied the prisoners about for their amusement. He had to take care not to damage his employers' property, of course, for he was supposed to protect the slaves as well as guard them. He could claim that they'd attacked him, for his keys, and that he'd had to beat them off—no one would heed their denials—but that tale would wear thin with too much use. A little extra silver now was not worth a loss of pay later.

So he merely lashed out with the whip and kicked at a few of the prisoners as he passed, snarling, "On your feet! We've a customer here—look sharp." As he approached Nyctasia, he seized one of the men and thrust him to the front of the stall, ordering the rest to show themselves as well. They shuffled forward, cowed and silent, and the guard looked down at Nyctasia with a leer. "Do you see anything you like, mistress?"

She glanced around briefly and shrugged. "Not a very choice lot, are they?"

He was not deceived by her pose of indifference. "I thought this young fellow seemed to catch your fancy," he said, taking Lorr roughly by the arm and turning him this way and that for Nyctasia's inspection. "He may not look like much now, but clean him up and a pretty lad like this will fetch plenty in Celys." He grabbed a fistful of Lorr's hair and pulled his head back, the better to display his features. "If you want him, you'll have to chaffer with the traders, though. He belongs to some estate in the valley, they say, and his owner'd probably pay well to have him back. But I daresay they'd part with him for the right price."

Greymantle growled, and Nyctasia hastily quieted him. The guard pushed Lorr aside carelessly, and turned back to Nyctasia. "But perhaps you haven't that much to spend, eh?"

Nyctasia had been considering whether or not to make an offer for Lorr, and now she came to a sudden decision. She had money enough, for she carried her valuables safely hidden, and had lost only a few crescents when her pouch was stolen. But the money she had left she needed for her passage from Larkmere to Stocharnos, and if she spent it now there might be days—perhaps weeks—of delay before she could arrange for payment. She was desperate to reach Rhostshyl as soon as possible. Too much

time had been lost already, and lives might depend upon haste now.

Now, as she watched the guard bully Lorr with obvious enjoyment, she made up her mind what to do, compelled as much by rash anger as by necessity.

“You’re right,” she told him, “I haven’t much money. But I do see something I like, after all, and maybe I can afford just that much.” She looked him up and down in a way that made her meaning unmistakably plain. He was tall and broad, with large hands and a muscled neck, rugged, coarsely-carved features and thick, tightly curling hair. He was probably a southerner like Corson, hired for his size and strength. But Corson, Nyctasia knew, would starve sooner than work for slave-traders.

She ran the tip of her tongue over her lips, and smiled seductively. From her shirt she drew a small leather bag and took out a shiny ring, set with a red gemstone, which she slipped on her finger and held out for the guard to see.

He grinned. Oho, so she was *that* sort, was she? That was common too—some folk couldn’t resist a chance to lie with a slave-handler, and they liked a bit of rough handling themselves, he had found. He pulled Nyctasia into an empty stall and dragged her down onto the straw. The trinket she offered wasn’t worth much, but then she didn’t ask much in return. And she was a pretty little thing, too, now that he had a good look at her. He wouldn’t mind satisfying her curiosity for free.

Nyctasia laughed and threw her arms around his neck, clasping her hands behind his head, as he rolled on top of her, tugging impatiently at her breeches. Feeling completely calm, she pressed her finger firmly against the red glass jewel in the ring, to release the tiny, curved spring-blade it concealed. Then she turned her hand and just scratched his neck with the needle-sharp crescent of steel. He gave one cry as the merciless, burning poison seized him by the throat, but he was dead within the moment, Nyctasia crawled free of his lifeless weight with some difficulty, then carefully sealed the deadly ring and put it away. It ought not to be dangerous until it was dipped in *manna*-venom again, but she had no intention of pricking herself with it, all the same. She straightened her clothes, grimacing with distaste, and picked up her harp before she bent to pull the keys from the guard’s belt.

The slaves in the shed did not realize what she’d done until they saw her emerge from the stall alone and release Lorr and his two companions from their fetters.

“You really do have that poison!” Lorr whispered. “You said—”

“I thought you wouldn’t need it. I had Marrekind in hand, and I wasn’t planning to leave, then.”

By then the rest were clamoring to be freed as well, calling for the keys and crowding around Nyctasia as she hastened from stall to stall. Having just committed murder, she did not hesitate to augment her crime with theft, and she was able to unlock a good many manacles and leg-irons before the other guards noticed the commotion, and remembered that they weren’t paid to watch the acrobats. They ran in through the far door, whips swinging, and were set upon at once and outnumbered. In the confusion, Nyctasia tossed the keys to the last set of prisoners, grabbed Greymantle’s leash with one hand and Lorr’s arm with the other, and dashed out the way she’d come, hoping to disappear into the crowd.

No one paid much attention to them as they mingled with the throng of marketers and idlers gathered in the square to gape at the troupe of tumblers plying their trade in a space cleared before the town hall. Had she been less intent on escaping, Nyctasia too would have lingered, entranced by the spectacle. The rope-dancer had finished her act, but the performance on the ground was well worth watching.

Dressed in colorful costumes and fantastic masks, adorned with ribbons and feathers and crystal beads, the dark-skinned acrobats balanced on tall poles, juggled flaming clubs, and did astonishing leaps and flips to the dramatic rhythm of the drumbeat. A boy clambered up an unsupported ladder, launched himself into the air, flipped over, and landed gracefully on the upturned feet of a woman balanced on her hands on the shoulders of one of the men. A girl with a wooden flute stalked among them, embellishing their tricks with trills and flourishes of music.

Nyctasia and Lorr made their way to the edge of the crowd, but looking back they saw one of the guards from the slave-market pushing through the press toward them—a woman tall enough to see them over the heads of the crowd. She was pointing in their direction and shouting something over her shoulder.

During their travels together, Corson had given Nyctasia some practical—and often painful—lessons in swordfighting, and now a piece of Corson’s advice came back to her. “When your opponent is bigger than you are, keep the fight in a tight place, where the enemy will be hampered while you can move freely. You can’t help being such a little speck of a thing, but you can put your size to use.” Nyctasia hurried Lorr into a narrow, cramped alleyway that led to the back of the town hall.

When they turned the corner, Nyctasia drew her shortsword and waited. “Keep going,” she ordered Lorr. “Get away from here, find someplace to hide.” With surprise on her side, and Greymantle at her command, she felt confident that the odds were in her favor.

But Lorr’s escape was cut off. “Someone’s coming the other way,” he cried, panic-stricken.

Nyctasia thrust Greymantle’s leash into his hand. “Take the dog, he’ll defend you. Now run!”

She very rapidly revised her plans. No one could prove that she’d killed the guard, after all. There was not a mark on him to show how he’d died. Suppose she claimed that she’d run off in fright when he collapsed—who was there to contradict her? And the slaves might have stripped his body of the keys themselves. They were not likely to bear witness against her, and if they did she could deny it all. Even the word of a penniless minstrel-lass was worth more than a slave’s. Why would a harmless harper commit such a crime in the first place?

And if matters came to the worst, she could always reveal her exalted rank to the magistrates. It was true, as Jheine said, that the law often gave way before a title. Perhaps it was a slim chance, but Nyctasia had talked her way out of tight straits before this. She only hoped that she wouldn’t be delayed too long in Larkmere by the formalities. But Lorr was truly in danger—he must be given time to get away.

She had not long to wait till her pursuer rounded the corner, but by then she had sheathed her sword and merely stood with her hands on her hips, looking aggrieved and defiant. “Why are you chasing me?” she demanded. “It’s nothing to do with me! Leave me alone—”

But the guard was in no mood to be reasoned with. Several of the slaves had escaped while she was supposed to be on duty, and if she came back empty-handed she’d be blamed, perhaps accused of theft and held accountable for the loss. She could be enslaved herself for such a debt. But if this sneaking minstrel was somehow responsible, she might redeem herself by capturing the wretch. She seized Nyctasia triumphantly, ignoring her protests, and twisted her arm painfully behind her back.

Nyctasia revised her plans again.

Swinging her feet off the ground, she made herself a dead weight and pulled her captor completely off balance, breaking her grip and allowing herself a chance to draw her blade again. The guard was armed only with her whip, and there was not room enough to swing the lash in the confining space of the alleyway. Nyctasia was able to hold her off for a time, but her skill with a sword was no match for the enemy’s longer reach and superior strength. Wielding the haft of the whip like a club, she soon drove Nyctasia back against the wall of the building that loomed over them.

“It’s not enough to defend yourself,” Corson had taught Nyctasia. “In a fight, you must always be on the attack.” Nyctasia ducked to avoid a blow, scooped up a handful of dirt and pebbles, and flung it straight into her opponent’s face with all the strength of desperation.

When the woman staggered back, Nyctasia pressed her advantage, gripping her shortsword with both hands and swinging from her shoulders, forcing the strength of her whole back into the blow. Corson would have been proud to see the result of her teaching.

Nyctasia had aimed for the knees, hoping to cripple her adversary and flee, but though she strained every muscle, the wound she inflicted had little effect. The guard suddenly crumpled to the ground in a spreading puddle of blood, but it was not Nyctasia’s sword that had felled her. It was a large chunk of masonry pushed from the parapet of the city hail.

## 16

A HEAVILY KNOTTED rope-end thudded to the ground at Nyctasia’s feet, and a voice from overhead said urgently, “Catch hold, hurry! There are more of them coming.”

Perhaps the most important lesson Nyctasia had learned from Corson was that there were times

when action, not thought, was called for. This, unquestionably, was one of those times. She grabbed hold and began to climb.

The rope was drawn upward, and for a moment she found herself face to face with a stag with silver antlers—a sight that nearly made her fall. But then the masked acrobat dropped to the ground, landing on his feet in a practiced crouch. “Here, I’ll give you a boost,” he said. Taking Nyctasia by the ankles, he half-lifted, half-tossed her up to where the rope-dancer, hanging by her knees from a carved waterspout, could catch hold of her arms. For a small woman, she was surprisingly strong. She quickly pulled Nyctasia up to a ledge, somehow righted herself, and clambered over the parapet, dragging Nyctasia after her.

While Nyctasia lay hidden behind the stone battlement, the rope-dancer leaned over the crenellated wall, looking down into the alley. A moment later, Nyctasia heard her call, “They went down that way—a woman and a boy—”

“We saw them from up there,” the other acrobat said excitedly. “Follow me, you might still catch them.”

When the sound of running footsteps receded, the rope-dancer helped Nyctasia to her feet, and for the first time she had a good look at her rescuer. Like her confederate, she too was disguised, but her mask was painted directly onto her face, so as not to hinder her vision when she was doing her daring aerial tricks. A lacy pattern of green leaves and white blossoms adorned her dark skin, as if she were spying out from behind a screen of flowering vines, and her close-fitting leggings and vest were embroidered with the same design. It was impossible to discern what she really looked like.

She grinned, returning Nyctasia’s scrutiny. “I’m Ashe,” she offered, “and that was Auval who ran off just now. He’ll lead them a merry chase.” She spoke with an accent Nyctasia did not recognize.

“But they’ll suspect you,” Nyctasia worried. “That guard—”

“Not a bit of it. Auval will tell them we saw the lad attack her from behind, while you fought with her. He knocked her off her feet, and she hit her head on that fallen stonework. See for yourself.”

The woman’s body had been moved so that she lay on her face near the bloody masonry. Nyctasia looked down at her, then turned away. “Come,” said Ashe, “we’d best not stand about here.” Nyctasia followed her along the narrow stone walkway to the twisting stairs that led to the roof.

“They’ll not suppose we had anything to do with it,” Ashe continued cheerfully. “We’d nothing to gain by it, had we?”

“No, nothing. But you’d plenty to lose. Why in the *vahn*’s name did you take such a risk?”

“You took the greater risk, harper, setting loose half the chattel in the marketplace, all on your own. We can see quite a lot from up here. You went in alone, and came out running, with the boy in tow, and it rather looked as if you might have forgotten to pay for him, no? Then the slaves were scattering and the warders chasing about—a fine to-do you caused! I don’t ask why you did it, but as for us, we don’t like slave-traders, or their minions, and we have our reasons.” They had reached one of the twin towers, and Ashe began to fasten her tightrope to a stout pillar. “No one will notice you up here, friend,” she assured Nyctasia.

Nyctasia looked around her, feeling half-dazed, as much by the strange course of events that had brought her there as by the height and the long climb. Her companion was right, she realized. From this vantage point she could see all the chaos of the town square below, and anyone who looked up could see her—but not recognize her. In full view of the whole marketplace, she was as good as invisible.

“Forgive my ill manners,” she said, “I ought to have introduced myself. I’m Nyc brenn Rhostshyl. And I’ve not even thanked you for your help.”

“Well, we’ve no time for that. You’ll have to help me now, since Auval’s busy elsewhere. There’s more of a crowd than ever down there, thanks to you, and that means it’s time I went back to work. Wait here.” She darted off across the steep roof with her rope, and made it fast to a column of the other tower. After testing the knots, she tightened the laces of her supple doeskin slippers and ran nimbly across the rope back to Nyctasia. A few people below stopped and pointed. “Now hand me the horn,” she ordered Nyctasia.

Flourishing the long, straight brass trumpet, Ashe marched boldly to the middle of the rope and blew

a few loud, clear notes to catch the attention of her audience, then swept them a low bow. Nyctasia held her breath, but Ashe's balance never wavered. She straightened up gracefully and strutted to and fro, with her head thrown back, playing a lively song on the horn, and not seeming to pay any mind to where she stepped. Then she threw the horn down to another member of the troupe on the ground, who caught it and took up the tune, while Ashe—to Nyctasia's horror—performed a series of cartwheels from one end of the rope to the other. The crowd cheered lustily, and the drummer (and the pickpockets) collected a tidy sum.

Nyctasia was kept busy tossing out wooden balls and clubs for Ashe to juggle. When she finished with one set Ashe threw them to her fellow tumblers below, not trusting Nyctasia to catch them. A large hoop she used like a skipping-rope, rapidly swinging it over her head and hopping through it, over and over again. A dozen times Nyctasia restrained herself from crying out in alarm, or playing the fool by begging Ashe to be careful. But much to her relief, it was not long before the rope-dancer called a halt, at the first fading of the daylight.

"I *could* do this in the dark," she boasted, "but if no one can see me, there's nothing to be gained." She dropped the remaining objects down to the waiting jugglers, including—before she could protest—Nyctasia's harp. "You'll not want to be seen with that," she explained. "They know it's a harper they're looking for. We'll wait till after dark, of course, but you'll find the climb easier if you're not hampered with a harp."

"Climb ...?" said Nyctasia uneasily.

They made their way across the closely crowded roofs of the city, silently and slowly, with Ashe in the lead. When she found that Nyctasia was fairly surefooted, and could follow her with only occasional help, they moved more quickly from building to building, only stopping to wait, lying flat on the slate shingles or crouching behind a chimney, while warders of the night watch patrolled the street below them.

"This is the place," whispered Ashe. When a sentry on his rounds had ridden past, they dropped to the top of the high wall that circled the city, and she gave a low whistle, which was answered almost at once. A tall pole was leaned up against the wall between the two of them, "I'll hold this end steady for you," she told Nyctasia. "You've only to slide down."

Nyctasia drew a deep breath, then leaned over the edge to grasp the pole, and let herself swing tree of the wall, out into the night. She wrapped her legs around the pole, and it held firm, but she seemed to drop down through the darkness for a very long time before strong hands caught her and set her on the earth.

Ashe was beside her on the instant, and the three moved off together without a word. There were encampments of tinkers and gypsies and peddlers outside the city walls, but Nyctasia and the others took care to stay out of sight until they approached the wagons belonging to the troupe of acrobats. Then Ashe laughed in relief and said, "You did well, Harper Nyc. I believe we could make a tumbler of you."

"Yes, let's," agreed the other. Nyctasia could barely see him, but she recognized his voice as Auval's. "She weighs no more than a walnut—I could toss her as high as the treetops and catch her in one hand."

"I would like to learn your trade, in truth," said Nyctasia. "To me it seems a most beautiful Discipline. But I fear I cannot take it up now."

"You could, you know—I can tell. We'll first teach you to juggle. You must be good with your hands or you'd not be a harper."

"I'm not a harper," said Nyctasia, with unwonted candor. "I'm a scholar and a healer, and much as I admire your art, I cannot take to it now because I must get to the coast just as soon as I can."

"Well, don't try to take a riverboat. The city guard will be watching the waterfront for you."

"You'd best travel with us as far as Stocharnos," Ashe was saying, when they were interrupted by howling and shouting from the acrobats' camp.

"Let him loose, he'll pull over the tent!" Nyctasia heard mixed with words of a language that was unknown to her.

*"Kestrai chelno, ifca! Libos!"*

"You let him loose! I'm not going near that monster."



A moment later, Greymantle came loping out of the darkness and hurled himself on Nyctasia, whining and wriggling with delight. “Good lad,” she laughed, pushing him down, and rubbing his great head affectionately. “Be still, now!” He frisked about her as they hurried into the encampment, and was very much underfoot as Ashe introduced her to the rest of the troupe of acrobats. They were sitting about the cooking-fire, most eating bowls of stew, or mending their motley costumes.

The girl who’d been playing the flute that afternoon was now playing Nyctasia’s harp, and singing a song in the same unfamiliar tongue.

*“Bai vrenn ifca, onn mid n’arved,  
Arved, bai vrenn ifca hloe?  
Hyal, mid shahn ath ypresharved  
Nastle’ im ver, ad dinascoe.*

*Nastle’ im ver, ad dinascoe,  
Cendri y’ath—”*

But she broke off when she saw Nyctasia, and called out, “*Cleyas shi, merisol bircordas!*”

“That’s Lhosande,” said Ashe, and translated, “She says, ‘Welcome, sister!’ She’s a music-maker, like you.”

From their dark skin and their strange speech, Nyctasia guessed that the acrobats were of the Lieposi, a mountain-dwelling people from the other side of The Spine. They greeted her with the mountaineer’s handshake—not a clasp of palms, but a firm grasp about the wrist, which, after a moment’s surprise, she returned.

The Lieposi were known as much for their fierce independence as for their strength and agility. The Empire, having failed time and again to conquer them, had at last wisely decided to corrupt them instead. Ambassadors had been sent, to persuade them of the advantages of citizenship, bringing gifts of fine silk and precious metals, jewels and rare spices, delicacies and luxuries that were not to be had in the heights of Mount Liepos.

Those whose curiosity overcame their suspicion went as emissaries to the Imperial Concourse, and came back with thrilling accounts of the splendid city of Celys and the magnificence of the court. In time, more and more of the younger Lieposi had been *corrupted* to experience these marvels for themselves. With their race and comeliness, their musical language and their remarkable skills of balance, they were a welcome novelty for a time, to the wealthy and noble denizens of the capital. Though they were well-nigh invincible on their own ground, the Lieposi had been ill prepared to defend themselves against the dangers of imperial civilization. The work of conquest was now well under way.

The Lieposi were rarely seen on the coast, and Nyctasia knew little about them, but her brief acquaintance with them so far had impressed her very favorably indeed. She gratefully accepted a bowl of hot stew and devoured it ravenously while she listened to the curious mixture of Eswraine dialects, Linivathe, and Lieposi which the various acrobats were speaking. There were a great many questions she wanted to put to them, but the day’s adventures had left her famished, and it was not until she’d scraped up every morsel of the savory stew that she paused to ask, “But how did my dog get here?”

One of the boys bowed to her. “He came with me, m’lady. When I ran up the alley I met with someone coming the other way—but it was one of these folk, and he brought me here.”

“Lady’...?” said Ashe. “Well, well!” But she asked no questions.

Nyctasia was completely taken by surprise. Had Lorr not given himself away, she would never have recognized him in this merry Lieposi youth. The acrobats had stained his skin as dark as their own, and dyed his fair hair black. In gaudy tatters, in bells and beads and ribbons, he was like one minnow in a school, among the other tumblers.

Nyctasia took his hand, examining it curiously. “Walnut-husk dye?” she guessed.

Ashe nodded. “It doesn’t wash off.”

The brand was still visible, though not nearly as noticeable. “I can still see it,” said Nyctasia

doubtfully.

“Because you know it’s there, and look for it,” said Ashe. “But you never saw this one, did you now?” She held out her hand to Nyctasia, as she had done often that day, and there indeed was the mark that Nyctasia had completely failed to notice every time. “We don’t come close to others when we perform,” she explained. “Especially not those of us who’ve been branded. And we keep to ourselves, of course. We stay in our tents and wagons, not at inns, and we never eat in company. But we don’t hide—folk look at our masks and our finery, not at us.”

“People see what they expect,” Nyctasia agreed. “Are *any* of you really Lieposi, then?”

“I don’t remember, *m’lady*,” said Ashe, with a grin.

“Some of us are,” the drummer laughed. “I think.”

“All of us are,” someone else insisted.

“None of us are.”

“*He* is,” one of the boys said, pointing to the surprised Lorr.

“I’m one,” said a woman who spoke with the accent of a Midlander.

“No you’re not. *I* am.”

“You’re a Liruvathid!”

“*You’re a—*”

Ashe lit a lamp at the fire and beckoned to Nyctasia. “Whatever we are, *you’d* best be Lieposi, at least till we reach Stocharnos. Come along.”

Nyctasia meekly followed her to one of the gaily painted wagons, and submitted to having her hands and face covered with a dark, oily paint. So many bizarre and unexpected things had already happened to her that day, that it seemed useless to do anything but accept what fate had in store.

“Ashe,” she began, “I can never repay you and the others for all you’ve done, but I—”

“Close your mouth,” Ashe said curtly, “or you’ll get paint in it.”

Nyctasia obeyed, and Ashe, smoothing the stain around her lips, could feel her smiling. She began to stroke Nyctasia’s face and throat, leaving dark streaks, and gently working the coloring into Nyctasia’s skin. Nyctasia closed her eyes, and felt Ashe carefully brush a layer of paint on her eyelids with one fingertip. “Don’t open them yet a while,” she cautioned. Taking Nyctasia’s face between her hands, she softly blew on her eyelids to dry them.

Nyctasia shivered. “If you keep on like that, I’ll not be responsible for what happens,” she murmured.

Ashe chuckled, unlaced Nyctasia’s shirt and playfully kissed the hollow of her throat before she spread the dye over her collarbone, and above her pale breasts. “You’re safe enough for now, my piebald lady—this stuff tastes foul. Turn around.” With tickling fingers, she stained the soft skin behind Nyctasia’s ears, then rubbed the paint into the back of her neck and shoulders. “You’ll never make a tumbler with such stiff sinews,” she scolded. “I can well believe that you’re a scholar. You need to use your limbs more.”

“What I need’s a hot bath,” said Nyctasia wistfully.

“Well, that you can’t have. This paint will wash off. The walnut really changes the skin’s color, but this only hides it.”

Nyctasia suddenly grew serious again. “Ah, that’s what I meant to tell you, Ashe, in return for your help—you must listen. The white flowers painted on your face—wash them off, and never wear them again! None of you must wear that poisonous paint on your bare skin. Perhaps the walnut-stain offers some protection, but that’s far from certain.”

“But I’ve worn it before, and come to no harm,” Ashe protested.

“The effects make themselves known only over time,” Nyctasia explained. “That very pure white is made from powder of lead, and lead’s a slow-working poison, but a deadly one. Paint your masks with it if you will, but don’t let it touch you. And if you make the mixture yourself, bind a scarf about your face and don’t breathe in the powder. I tell you, an ancestor of mine was murdered by means of a leaden goblet that turned everything he drank to poison. It took a long while to do its work, but his enemies were patient.”

Ashe frowned. "It sounds like great nonsense," she said skeptically. "Probably just an old tale."

"For the *vahn*'s sake, you *must* believe me," begged Nyctasia, miserably aware that she was never less convincing than when she was telling the truth. "You came to my rescue today—let me rescue you from a worse fate. If you continue to wear lead-white, in time it will poison your very blood. At first it will make your head ache, and turn the food to bile within you. Then your hands will commence to tremble and your limbs to shake, till you no longer have the mastery of them. And when it has crippled and maddened you, *then* perhaps you will be fortunate enough to die ...."

Ashe had already taken up a flask of vinegar, poured some onto a rag, and begun to scrub at her face, muttering to herself in Lieposi. "It's only the white that's dangerous?" she demanded.

"So far as I know. You could still paint on the leaves."

Ashe opened a chest and rummaged through the heap of tawdry trappings within. "I can wear this instead," she said, pulling out a worn chaplet of white silk blossoms, "And here's what *you* need, my dark beauty." She held up a long, tangled black wig of human hair. It was none too clean, Nyctasia noticed with dismay, but it would disguise her cropped hair most effectively.

With Ashe's help she put it on and combed it, trying her best not to think about head-lice.

By the time they rejoined the others, Nyctasia could easily have passed for one of the troupe, A shirt sewn with glass jewels, and stitched with stars of silver thread, lent her the same air of shoddy splendor that graced the rest of the company, and her gift for masquerade and deception completed the transformation. There was nothing of the stoop-shouldered scholar or the gracious lady in her bearing now. She moved with the same free, dancing step as the tumblers, holding her head high and imitating their loose-limbed grace with seeming ease. She put on their bold manner as well, laughing at their surprise. "Did you lot think you were the only imposters on the roads?" she mocked. "They call me Mistress of Ambiguities who know me best," Greymantle sniffed her and sneezed indignantly, confused by the smell of the paint.

Ashe repeated Nyctasia's advice about the lead-white, in a variety of languages, until everyone had understood the warning. "That lady knows all about poisons and potions, according to him," one of the boys affirmed, gesturing toward Lorr. A young woman, half of whose face and one of whose hands were a stark white, got up hastily and hurried off to wash.

Auval frowned at Lorr. "Learn right now, youngster, not to tell what you know about your friends, not to anyone. You'd no call to speak to us about her, and you're not to speak to others about us, do you understand? You're a fugitive, you ought to know better."

Abashed, Lorr mumbled an apology. "I ... I do know better. I was foolish. I may trust you with my life, but not with someone else's."

"Yes, that is a necessary lesson," said Nyctasia. "Yet I begin to think that there may be a time to give one's trust freely, to follow the promptings of the spirit alone. I too, Lorr, trust these new friends of ours." There was a time when she would have blamed herself for allowing strangers to learn anything about her, but somehow it did not alarm her now. The acrobats already knew her for a criminal, but they were hardly in a position to betray her, Her real secrets lay elsewhere, and Lorr knew nothing of them. She turned to Auval. "In truth, there is little enough he could tell you about me. He only knows that I'm a healer, and anyone may know that."

"Indeed they may not. Why would a healer be traveling with the likes of us? You're no juggler, so you'll have to be a minstrel, or perhaps a fortuneteller. Can you sing?"

Nyctasia smiled to herself, amused that he should find it necessary to teach *her* guile and caution. Was it possible that she had changed so much as that? She must take pains to relearn her wary and mistrustful ways before she dared return to court!

"I can sing," she said. "And I can interpret dreams, and tell the secrets of the stars, though the stars be silent. I can read the future in folks' eyes and tell them just what they wish to hear. I can brew love-potions that do no one any harm. I should think I could earn my way, and be most useful to you."

"Why, let's hear what you can do, then, and we'll judge your talents for ourselves," said Ashe. "We've more use for a singer than for a charlatan!" She spoke to the girl with the harp, who reluctantly handed the instrument to Nyctasia, asking her something in a puzzled tone.

Someone translated, “Lhosande wants to know how to tune the strings. Those silver pins won’t turn like the ones on her *bircorda*.”

The girl took up a small, long-necked lute and pointed out the wooden tuning-pegs, then gestured at the harp, clearly demanding an explanation. As soon as Nyctasia had shown her how to use the silver key, she insisted on trying it herself, and Nyctasia understood her well enough without translation. She almost cried out, “Tell her not to tighten them too far!” but when she saw how carefully Lhosande turned the key, she held her tongue.

“She’ll not be satisfied till we get her a harp like that,” Ashe predicted.

“Tell her to keep it for me, till I send for it. I’d best not carry it about Stocharnos. Perhaps the magistrates will set a watch for the harper who escaped from Larkmere.” The harp was beautifully crafted of polished ebonwood, its fore pillar ornamented with inlaid silver, and it had been designed as much to be looked at as listened to. It was almost small enough to seem a toy, and there were only fifteen strings, which had to be re-tuned for each new song. It was a lady’s instrument, not a harper’s, and Nyctasia had owned far better ones. But this harp had been Erystalben’s last gift to her, and she did not want to lose it. “She’ll take good care of it,” she said, “and I’ll send her a finer one in its place.”

“How will you know where to send?” Ashe asked reasonably. “We don’t know ourselves where we’ll be from week to week.”

“But a messenger could find you at the Osela fair next autumn, I’ll be bound. Performers never miss it, so I’m told.”

“So you *do* remember. I saw you there too.”

“What, among all those people? Surely not.”

“Oh, I told you, I can see quite a lot from my roost, and I was no higher than your head, in Osela. Auval and ’Rashti held the rope. Isael noticed you too”—she pointed to the drummer—“because you gave him two crescents in good silver, and he wondered that a harper should have such a sum to squander. He thought you must want something in return, for an offering like that. We rather expected you to visit our camp that night.”

“Oh? And do folk often try to buy your favors?”

Ashe shrugged modestly. “Who could blame them? But the reason *I* remembered you was the way you gazed at me all the while, like someone lovestruck.”

“So I did. I’d never seen a rope-dancer before. I thought you were a Manifestation of Grace and Balance.”

“Well! I’ve been called a mountebank and a mudlark, but never a maffestation. I hope it’s something pleasant—it sounds like a plague.”

“It is a sign to the seeking spirit that there is, after all, order and significance in the world we know,” Nyctasia said slowly. She seemed to weigh her words carefully, and she wore a faraway look, as though she were alone and only speaking her thoughts aloud. Had Corson been present, she would have warned the company that Nyctasia was about to embark upon one of her learned lectures, if nothing was done to stop her.

But Ashe insistently recalled her to their conversation, complaining. “I know every tongue twixt the woods and the water, and I can’t make sense of that. Is it flattery or philosophy—that’s all I want to know. And given my choice, I’d prefer flattery,” she added.

“Why then, you shall have it,” laughed Nyctasia, and reached for her harp again. She thought for a moment, fussing with the strings, and then sang:

*“Not more nimble is the spider,  
Strider on a silken strand,  
Than the web-walker, graceful glider,  
Who owns the air and scorns the land.  
Ruler of a realm no wider  
Than a maiden’s velvet band  
Is her Highness the rope-rider.”*

“Highness ...?” someone groaned, making a wry face.

*“There is the riddle, here the answer—  
Queen of the acrobats is the rope-dancer!”*

sang Nyctasia.

“More!” shouted Ashe, delighted.

“Mercy, Your Highness, I haven’t the strength,” said Nyctasia, with a yawn. “We stiff-limbed scholars need our repose.”

“One more verse,” Ashe urged, “then I’ll show you to a bed, my word on it.”

“Only one, then.”

“Hush!” Ashe commanded the others. Lhosande took her flute and played a soft harmony to Nyctasia’s harping.

*“For the bird that takes its rest  
On a twig as slender as a thread,  
With one foot tucked to its downy breast,  
The while beneath one wing it hides its head,  
Is not more certain of its perch, I vow,  
Than the rope-dancer on her hempen bough.”*

“Enough!” cried Auval. “You’ll make her vainer than she is already.”

“No fear,” said Nyctasia, “my rhymes are spent.”

Had she only landed in Larkmere that morning? It seemed that she’d been running, hiding, climbing for days without a rest. She handed the harp back to Lhosande, and hung the key around the girl’s neck on its silver chain. Some of the others rose too, stretching.

“We’ve room for another in here,” said Ashe, leading Nyctasia to her wagon. “For a little one like you, at least.” She began to push aside chests and sacks and bolts of cloth, to make a bit more space on the floor. “I was disappointed that you didn’t seek us out, in Osela,” she remarked. “I was sure you would.”

Nyctasia sat wearily on one of the chests, and watched her unroll the bedding and blankets. “Do you know, I might have come, but I couldn’t. I was in prison that night, as it happens.”

“Prison! What did you do, set free all the slaves for sale a Osela market?”

“Alas, no, it was quite a different matter—disturbing the peace of the fair. But it wasn’t *my* fault—”

“Oh, I daresay,” Ashe mocked, shaking her head. She dropped onto a pallet in the corner, and pointed out a place against the far wall, for Nyctasia. “The first abed sleep to the back, so the others needn’t step over them,” she explained. “Leave the lamp for them, they won’t be long. You can put your boots and things on that shelf above your head.”

Nyctasia was accustomed to more comfortable accommodations, but she was too tired to mind. She crept into the small space allotted to her and collapsed onto the lumpy pallet with a grateful sigh. “It wasn’t,” she said sleepily, “my fault ...”

Ashe chuckled. “You must be of very high birth indeed, Lady Nyc brenn Rhostshyl.”

For a moment, Nyctasia was startled to wakefulness. Calm denials and thoroughly convincing lies, inspired by a lifetime of suspicion and secrecy, immediately suggested themselves to her, but were just as quickly discarded. For one thing, it was unnecessary, she told herself. For another thing, Ashe deserved better of her. And it was also just more trouble than it was worth ....

With a feeling of relief that was almost luxurious, she replied simply, “Yes, I am. But how did you know that?”

“By your lawless habits, of course—only aristocrats think they can do whatever comes into their heads and get away with it.”

“Aristocrats and lunatics,” Nyctasia agreed. “Lunacy’s not unknown in my family. But I’m not always as impetuous as I was today. Usually I’m uncommonly circumspect.”

“As you will, lady,” said Ashe, with unconcealed disbelief. “But I’d not be surprised to learn that you disturb the peace everywhere you go. I’ll wager you’re always in trouble of some sort, no?”

Nyctasia sighed. “Yes, I am,” she said again.

## 17

WHEN MAEGOR HAD finished her morning’s marketing, it was not long after dawn, but already there were plenty of people about and busy. She carried a milkjug in one hand, and her basket was heavy with cheese and bread, honeycombs, a sack of meal, marrowbones for broth, and eggs nested in straw. Before she had gone far, a gypsy girl, half her size and narrow as a needle, darted up to her and offered to carry it, to earn a few pence.

Maegor tossed her a silver penny. “Get along with you, and have something to eat. I don’t believe you could carry a sprig of lavender.”

The girl snatched the coin and curtsyed clumsily. “I thank you, mistress greenwoman. For your kindness, I’ll tell you your fortune, if you will.”

Maegor stopped. “How do you know I’m an herbalist?” she demanded.

“Nothing is hidden,” said Nyctasia, “from one who knows the secrets of destiny.” She grinned at Maegor’s look of astonishment and recognition. “You will soon have a visit from an old friend,” she predicted.

“Tasia, how long is it since you’ve eaten?” Maegor chided. “You look like a wraith.”

Nyctasia was busy eating most of what Maegor had just brought home from market. “Oh, well, I’m used to fasting, you know,” she said vaguely. “It took most of my money to buy a horse in Stocharnos, and Grey had to be fed, of course.”

At the sound of his name, Greymantle looked up and slapped the floor with his tail, then went back to gnawing on one of the soupbones. “It’s past believing how much the creature eats,” Nyctasia complained, scratching his back with her foot and looking down at him with obvious pride. “I’ll need some of the money I left with you for safekeeping. You told me I’d be back to claim it one day, and you were right, as you always are.”

Maegor began to fry more mealcakes. “I told you you were just crazy enough to come back, as I recall it.”

“I’ve missed your scolding, Maeg. And your cooking. Now, the one thing I need most of all—”

“A bath, of course. I knew you must be starving if you were willing to eat without bathing first. But aren’t you afraid your dusky hue will wash off?”

“I only hope it will. And as for *this* filthy thing”—she pulled off the wig, holding it at arm’s length with her thumb and forefinger—“it ought to be burned at once.” She dropped it on Greymantle, who regarded it with surprise and shook himself.

“No, not burned, buried in the garden. Human hair’s good for the soil. But is it wise, Tasia, for you to go about undisguised?”

“Why, Maeg, you always reproached me for being too sly and secret, and now I’m too free and forthright to suit you. I declare, there’s no pleasing you.”

Maegor turned the mealcakes and slid more butter into the pan. “Forthright’s one thing, and foolhardy’s another. And you’ve never been either of the two before.”

“Well, I’ve never been sole claimant to absolute rule of the city before,” Nyctasia said, through a mouthful of egg and bread. “Soon enough, everyone will know where I am. But I shan’t be so very foolhardy, I promise you—I mean to have Corson brenn Torisk at my back, if she’s to be found. With her, and Greymantle here, for protection, I’d defy an army of enemies. What did you make of my Corson, then?”

“She looks like a cutthroat—until she smiles.”

“Oh, that’s when she’s most dangerous. But of course she’s a cutthroat. One of the best. I couldn’t have a better bodyguard.”

“I can well believe it. You’ve cast your charm over that one, and no mistake. It’s plain to see that she’s devoted to you.”

Nyctasia laughed. “*Corson!* That she-demon claims that she’s only saved my life time and again lest she be cheated of the pleasure of killing me herself. You’ve never heard the like of her insolence.” But she was pleased by Maegor’s opinion. “I’ll go to the Jugged Hare later, and see if she’s in Chiastelm. I’ll be sending for some of my own people from Rhostshyl too, so you needn’t worry over my safety. And no one will be looking for me in these parts, not yet.”

“That’s not so, ’Tasia. There are rumors of your coming already, even here in Chiastelm. It must be common talk in Rhostshyl.”

At this, Nyctasia grew more concerned. “But how can that be? I’ve not sent word to anyone.” Who could possibly have betrayed her plans?

“I think it must have been Therisain who started the stories, to strengthen his own position. He hinted as much to me once. When he left the letter here, he suggested that it would help your cause if I encouraged such rumors.”

“Of course,” said Nyctasia, disgusted with herself for her suspicions. “My letters of warrant would carry more weight if folk believed that I’d soon return to direct my affairs myself. Therisain was quite right, but this does make matters rather more difficult. It will be just as well, perhaps, if I adopt a less conspicuous guise ....”

So soon, Nyctasia brooded, before she had even set foot in Rhostshyl, she was caught up in the scheming for power, the endless intrigues of the court. She could play the game as well as anyone, if she must, but it was not for that that she’d come back to her homeland.

“I truly believed that I’d escaped, Maeg. But now it seems as though I’d never been gone at all.”

“Then go back, ’Tasia, for the *vahn*’s sake!” It was not an oath Maegor used lightly.

“For the *vahn*’s sake,” Nyctasia echoed, her voice bitter. “Of what use is it to appeal to me in the *vahn*’s name? I’ve no right to call myself a Vahnite—I’ve betrayed the Principles too often, and I shall do so again. I’ve no doubt, before many days have passed. I killed a man, on my way to the coast, only to save myself a few days’ delay.”

“I don’t believe that of you, ’Tasia,” said Maegor. Yet she knew that Nyctasia would never say something so outrageous unless there were some truth in it.

“Oh, very well, don’t look so shocked—perhaps my reasons were better than that. But I can hardly claim that it was the act of a Vahnite, nor even that I’ve suffered true remorse. And there’s no telling what measures I may have to take soon ....” She looked away, not meeting Maegor’s eyes, but she spoke with calm certainty. “I only know that I can’t be an able ruler and a good Vahnite. Sacrifices must be made, and I care more about my city than about my spirit. This is wrong of me, I have no doubt, but sometimes it is a luxury to be right, an indulgence one must deny oneself.” Nyctasia had faced this paradox before, but never had her duty seemed so clear to her. If she was to be more honest with others, she must be more honest with herself as well.

“It is not for me to judge you, ’Tasia,” Maegor said gently. “What is right for one is not so for another. You bear burdens that I am thankful to be spared.” She sighed. “But you were happy in the home you’d found?”

Nyctasia smiled. “I was taking root very well, so I was told. I was among a clan of vintners, you see, and they were distant kin to me as well. They regarded me as a delicate foreign scion, grafted to their hearty Midland root-stock, and they tended me with every care. You’d have liked them, Maeg. They taught me much.”

“So I see. You’ve grown so forthcoming, I scarcely know you.”

Maegor had asked Nyctasia nothing about where she’d been or what she planned to do, and she certainly had not expected to be told. Nyctasia might deny the *vahn*—or believe that she had done so—but she seemed more at peace with herself than Maegor had ever known her.

“Well, I’ll prepare that bath for you now, shall I?” said Maegor.

By the time Nyctasia emerged from the apothecary, she had transformed herself yet again, into a travel-worn messenger, or a vagabond student—or, indeed, almost anything else. In her completely commonplace leggings and tunic, her old boots and patched cloak, she was ready to assume any role that was necessary, at a moment's notice. She had even reluctantly left Grey-mantle behind, the better to slip through the streets unnoticed. From her walk, and the set of her shoulders, she seemed a slight, carefree youth as she sauntered down Market Street, a servant-boy on some household errand.

Vroehin the Moneychanger was alone in his shop, and Nyctasia no sooner entered than he gave an exclamation of surprise and pushed past her to slam and bolt the door. Standing with his back against it, he frowned down at her fiercely and jabbed a long, bony forefinger at her face.

"So you've appeared again! You've some explaining to do, my fine young scapegrace. You're no more page to Lord Heirond than I am—whose money was it you left here, Master Rastwin, *if* that's your name? Speak up!"

Nyctasia backed away, holding out her hands placatingly.

"Just as you say, sir. Rastwin is not my name," she admitted, "but however did you find me out?"

"Very simply! When Lord Heirond died, I sent to know what his heirs' orders were, and his steward knew nothing about the sums you'd deposited with my house, nor about you. The household had never employed a messenger the likes of you. Now I'll have the truth from you, my lad—I'd be within my rights to keep that money, you know. You'd best have a reasonable tale to tell, or I'll have you up before the magistrates for theft."

"Mercy!" Nyctasia laughed, not at all contrite. "I'm a liar and a deceiver, but not a thief, I promise you. So His Lordship died at last. He'd been ill for so long that I expected him never to die, I suppose. Carelessness has ever been my greatest failing."

Suddenly she was tired of carrying on the masquerade, and galled by all the deceptions she had practiced for so long. She sat down on a bench and regarded Vroehin with composure, abruptly abandoning the manner and affectations of the impertinent rascal Rastwin. "It is not a violation of the law to arrange one's affairs under an assumed name and guise," she pointed out, "provided that one acts for one's own protection, and not for the purpose of cheating others. The money I've kept here was my own, you may be quite easy about that. It's true that I was never page-boy to Lord Heirond—"

"You were never a boy at all!" said Vroehin in an astonished whisper. "For the love of Asye, who are you, woman?" He had never before seen Nyctasia's features in repose, nor heard her so serious and softspoken. Now for the first time he saw her clearly, and he could not understand how he'd failed to perceive the truth about her before.

Nyctasia smiled. "I know you to be perfectly trustworthy, sir, but I have reasons, good reasons, to be secret in my dealings. It would not do you—or your daughter—any good to know who I am. You understand." She stood. "I only came here today to tell you that the money still in your keeping is to go for Mellis's dowry. I meant to send instructions as to that, but—"

"So it *was* you who sent Mellis that valuable gold locket," Vroehin interrupted, "She declared that it must be your doing."

"*Vahn*, so I did. I'd forgotten it. I couldn't resist the temptation to send her some little keepsake—I didn't expect to pass this way again, but my plans have changed, you see."

Vroehin was thinking hard and fast. He was a shrewd man, and by now he had begun to suspect whom he was dealing with.

Not long before Lord Heirond's death there had been much talk of the mysterious disappearance of the Witch of Rhostshyl, and Vroehin had seen the last of young Rastwin at much the same time. This woman was wealthy enough to be a Rhaicime, and witch enough to convince him for years that she was nothing but a common messenger-boy .... And he'd heard the rumors from war-torn Rhostshyl that folk were calling for the return of the exiled lady of the Edonaris... Decidedly, it was as well not to question her further.

"Well, you've a right, I suppose, to dispose of your own goods in what way you will," he said. "But you might have made your wishes known sooner."

"Forgive me, sir—I'd have done so if I'd known of Lord Heirond's death, but I've been far away."



I'm sorry to have given trouble."

Vroehin hesitated. "I thank you for your bounty on my daughter's behalf," he said uneasily, "but, meaning no offense, I'd as soon you were gone before she returns from market."

Nyctasia nodded. "That is wise," But at the door she turned back to him for a moment, with Rastwin's impudent grin. "Farewell, Vroehin. Pray give my best love to the fair Mellis, and tell her I sigh for her still."

"Get about your business," snapped Vroehin, from sheer habit.

Nyctasia bowed. "It may be that we shall not meet again," she said with mock solemnity, "and so, good luck to this house!"

Vroehin watched till she reached the market square and vanished into a side street, "And to you, my lady," he murmured.

## 18

"SOMEONE'S ASKING FOR Corson," Trask reported to Annin, in the kitchen. "Take a look. The little one in the corner."

Annin peered through the knothole in the kitchen door, which was convenient for spying on the taproom. "Looks harmless enough," she observed. "What did you tell her?"

"Nothing," said Trask, drawing a mug of foaming cider from the cask. "Do you think Corson's in trouble again?"

"Probably. Get rid of her, and we'll lock up for the night—it's almost time. I'll start chasing the others out." There were only a few customers left in the tavern, and the kitchen had already been set to rights for the morrow. Walden had gone home not long before, and Steifann was in his own quarters, scowling over his accounts and downing a large tankard of ale.

Trask set the cider before Nyctasia and asked curtly. "Will there be anything else, mistress? We'll be closing our doors soon."

Nyctasia had told too many lies in her life to be misled by the likes of Trask. She had not for a moment believed that he could give her no news of Corson, but she knew that further questions would only make him more suspicious. She sipped at her cider and said only, "I shan't keep you, then. I'll come back another time for a meal. Corson always says you have the best cook on the coast here. Tell her Nyc's looking for her, if you happen to see her, will you?"

"You're *Nick*? Oh, well then—Corson's told us all about you. She talks about you all the time."

For someone who denied having seen Corson for months, he seemed remarkably well informed about her habits, Nyctasia thought. She saw that she would soon find out whatever she wanted to know from Trask. "Does she indeed?" she murmured encouragingly. "And what does she find to say about me?" It was gratifying, in a way, to hear that Corson had spoken about her, but exactly what had she said? Surely she knew better than to tell her friends too much ...?

"Corson claims that you're a great lady." Trask eyed Nyctasia's worn garments dubiously. "Not that we believed her."

"Oh, but I *am*," said Nyctasia, in a tone which could only invite disbelief.

"And I'm High Lord of Torstaine," said Trask, with a grin. "As if a great lady would take up with Corson! But she always has some fool story to tell when she comes back here."

Nyctasia smiled. "She's told me about all of you, too. You must be Trask. And *that*—" She broke off and stared as Steifann came out of his room to fetch himself more ale, slamming the door behind him. He was simply the largest person she had ever seen. "That *must* be Corson's he-bear, Steifann."

"Does she call him that?" Trask asked eagerly.

"Well, only when she's been drinking."

Trask was delighted. "Steifann!" he called. "Look here, this is Corson's friend Nick we've heard so much about."

It should be said in Steifann's defense that he *was* rather drunk. It took a great deal of ale to affect Steifann's judgment, but he'd been worrying about Corson, and when he worried he drank even more

ale than usual. Corson should have been back days ago. She'd only been escorting a shipment of merchandise to Ochram, and that couldn't have taken more than a fortnight. Unless she'd tangled with robbers on the way .... ? The roads were most dangerous in the spring, Steifann brooded. Bandits were desperate and reckless after the scanty pickings of the winter, when travelers were few—and the coast road led through deep woodland at more than one point. He pictured Corson lying dead in the forest, hewn by swords, impaled by arrows, maybe devoured by wolves .... Or it might be that she was just tarrying in Ochram, spending her pay with some newfound friend, and letting him worry. By the Hlann, he'd kill her himself when she came traipsing back—!

All in all, he was in no fit frame of mind to meet Nyctasia.

So this was the one Corson had spent half the year with—the scholar, the enchantress, the high-born lady. He might have known she'd be just some vagabond in a patched cloak. All the same, she had a knowing look about her that Steifann didn't care for in the least. Corson was too rutting easily impressed by folk with a little learning, like that blasted student 'Malkin she sometimes talked about. Frowning, he strode over to Nyctasia's table and glowered down at her fiercely. "Do you sleep with Corson?" he demanded.

Nyctasia nearly choked on her cider. What had she let herself in for *now!* A man whose fist looked larger than her head was looming over her like a ferocious giant in a fable—a hungry giant who'd caught the hapless human hero trespassing on his property and meant to dispose of the intruder in a few bites. Nyctasia didn't know whether to laugh or flee for her life.

But an Edonaris ought always to maintain her dignity in the face of threats or insults. Turning to Trask, she asked coolly, "Tell me, is that the way he greets everyone?"

"Not always," said Trask. "Sometimes he's downright rude." At a look from Steifann, he scurried off back to the kitchen, where he lost no time in informing the others of the situation. They soon gathered in the doorway to watch.

"Why don't you ask Corson that?" Nyctasia was suggesting to Steifann, with a sneer in her voice.

"I'm asking you!" Steifann bellowed, hitting the table with his fist, and spilling Nyctasia's cider.

Had he been of her own station, or at least a nobleman, Nyctasia would have flung the rest of the drink in his face and challenged him to a duel. As it was, however, she struck at him instead in the way such low-bred insolence deserved.

"Who is there that Corson *doesn't* sleep with?" she said, and saw with satisfaction that her blow had hit home. With a shrug, she added, "And for my part I think it no wonder that she should prefer my company to yours." It is not easy to look *up* at someone contemptuously, but Nyctasia was one of those who know how to do it.

Steifann had reddened like a victim of the Surge. "Look here, you little slut, you may be someone important where you come from, but this is my place, and—"

Nyctasia had heard enough. She stood, and tossed down some money for her drink. "I'm a Rhaicime where I come from," she said evenly, "but if I were a fishmonger I'd not waste words with an ill-mannered boor like you."

"On your way!" shouted Steifann, throwing out one arm to point to the door.

It was this threatening gesture which brought Greymantle out from under the table, snarling and baring his fangs. He'd seen no harm in Steifann's shouting—the Edonaris were always shouting at one another—but to a dog a hand raised in anger means only one thing. His mistress was in danger. Greymantle advanced on Steifann slowly, with the obvious intention of tearing out his throat as soon as he made the slightest move in Nyctasia's direction. His fur bristled, and his every muscle was tensed to spring.

Nyctasia grabbed his collar and held him back, as Steifann slowly lowered his outflung arm.

"You heard me, take yourself off," Steifann said, though not in quite as menacing a tone as he'd used before.

Ignoring him, Nyctasia turned to Trask. "Tell Corson that she can find me where she found me before," she ordered, and took her leave without so much as a glance at the furious Steifann.

She missed Corson by only a matter of hours.

“Oh, well done,” said Annin drily. “Idiot! What if that woman’s really a Rhaicime? She’ll have your head for talking to her like that.”

Steifann knew he’d made a fool of himself, and the knowledge did not improve his ill humor. “Plague take her, brazen little bitch! She’d no call to—”

“Sit there drinking cider and minding her own business? Certainly not. Villainous of her.”

“I’ll go after her and offer your apologies,” Trask announced, taking one of the lamps from its bracket. “If she has you thrown in a dungeon, who’ll chop the wood?”

“You get back here—”

“Go!” said Annin. “Hurry up or you’ll lose her.” She turned on Steifann with real anger. “Don’t you see, she might have done something for Destiver, and now you’ve set her against us!”

Steifann hadn’t thought of that. And Annin was right, he realized. If this was the same woman who’d fled Chiastelm with Corson last year, as he suspected, then she did have reason to be grateful to Destiver. Fool that he was, had he not only made trouble for himself, but helped put Destiver’s neck in a noose as well? “Curse Corson, this is all her doing!”

“And how do you make *that* out?”

“If she’d been here, it wouldn’t have happened in the first place. And where *is* she, for that matter—answer me that. Probably dead in a ditch.”

Annin shook her head, and turned back to the kitchen. Steifann followed, drew a pitcher of ale and sat down to resume his interrupted brooding. Now there was twice as much to worry about.

Nyctasia heard someone running behind her in the dark street, and she thanked the *vahn* for the second time that night that she hadn’t come out after dusk without Greymantle. By the time Trask caught up to her, she had turned to face her pursuer and was waiting for him, sword in hand.

Trask halted abruptly and fell back a step. “Er—Your Ladyship—pardon me—” He had no idea how to make a formal bow, but he did his best.

“Well, what is it, boy?” Nyctasia said imperiously. “I left payment for my drink.”

Her manner and bearing, even her voice, were so different from what they had been at the tavern, that Trask wondered for a moment if he’d followed the wrong person in the dark. “You really *are* a Rhaicime,” he said stupidly.

Nyctasia sheathed her sword. “And did you chase after me to tell me that?”

“No, I—that is, Steifann—he didn’t mean to offend you, lady ....”

“Indeed?” She sounded amused, now.

Encouraged, Trask grinned winningly, assuming his most deferential demeanor. “Well, he didn’t mean any *harm*, I promise you. He’s always in a temper when Corson’s late coming back. He growls at everyone, but he wouldn’t hurt a flea. You’ll like him when you come to know him better.”

“I do *not* mean to know him better.”

“No, of course not,” said Trask hastily, “but, you wouldn’t complain of him to the City Governors, would you, m’lady?” His tone was wheedling, but Nyctasia saw that he was genuinely worried.

She had in fact dismissed Steifann from her mind almost as soon as she’d left the Hare. She had been angry, but as much with herself as with him, and it would never have occurred to her to seek to punish his loutish behavior. Nyctasia had been taught that one could not expect a commoner to behave like a gentleman. If one mixed with base-born folk, one had only oneself to blame if one encountered unpleasantness.

“A lady,” she said to Trask, “does not stoop to resent the ill-advised scurrility of an inferior.”

Trask would have found this more reassuring if he’d understood what it meant. “As you say, my lady,” he said glumly. “But really, I swear—”

Nyctasia couldn’t help laughing. “Never mind, lad, you may tell the host of the Hare that he’s forgiven. I wouldn’t dare to make trouble for him, you see—Corson would kill me.”

THE PLACE WHERE Corson had found Nyctasia before was an old stone house on the cliffs just outside of Chiastelm, known as the Smugglers' House. Nyctasia had bought it years ago, as a retreat from the duties and dangers of her life in Rhostshyl, but she had never passed much time in the place. Now she meant to establish her household there, for the time being, and send for those with whom she must meet—her allies first, and then the others.

It was important that she make them come to her. To obey her summons would be to acknowledge her powerful position, and only if her right to govern was recognized by all could she hope to fulfill her dream for the city's future. She must return to Rhostshyl as its ruler, or not at all.

She was not surprised to find the house standing open, the locks broken. It had been long empty and unguarded, easy for thieves and vagabonds to invade. But there was nothing left to steal, and Nyctasia found no further sign of intruders as she explored the building by lamplight. She'd heard it said that the house was haunted, and she supposed that such talk kept trespassers away, but she did not suspect that the sinister reputation of the place had grown since the mysterious murders there the year before. The killer had reportedly vanished in the very midst of a troupe of guards, leaving three dead—or six, or eight, according to the varying versions of the tale. But most folk agreed that it looked like the work of demons, and shunned the place more than ever.

Nyctasia wandered through the deserted rooms with Grey-mantle, searching the cellars and the scullery, then each floor above, to be certain that she was alone in the house. There was nothing to find but dust and cobwebs and the ash of long-dead hearthfires. She could have the locks seen to in the morning, and the house cleaned and readied for habitation. She would send for sentries from her own guard in Rhostshyl to garrison the premises while she dwelt there. But tonight while the house stood empty, she had one thing to do there alone.

When she reached the topmost story, Greymantle at once led the way to the one door in the corridor that was closed, and sniffed at it mistrustfully, his ears pricked for any sound within. But Nyctasia looked into all the other rooms before returning to this one, the room where Thierran had been killed, where she herself had come so close to death. Greymantle was pawing at the sill and growling softly, and Nyctasia wondered if it were true that animals possessed a special awareness of immaterial Influences. Perhaps the Smugglers' House had not been haunted before, she thought grimly, but it surely was now. "You will make me a good familiar, Grey," she said, and pushed open the door.

She half-expected to see Thierran still lying there, his throat slashed, though she knew that he must have been long since interred in the crypts beneath the palace of the Edonaris in Rhostshyl. As children they had defied their elders' orders and explored those crypts together, frightened but fascinated, knowing that they would lie there themselves one day among their ancestors—yet not really believing that they would ever die.

But the dark, dried blood staining the far wall and the floor reminded her of how wrong those children had been. Greymantle sniffed at it, and she called him away hastily. Then, when she had looked around the room, she hung her lamp in the corridor outside and came back to the chamber in darkness. The window was still open, as it had been on the night Corson clambered through it to find her, and the wan moonlight it gave the room was quite sufficient for Nyctasia's purposes.

While she knelt by the spot where Thierran had fallen, Grey-mantle examined every corner of the room, even resting his front paws on the windowsill to sniff the night air suspiciously. When his searching led him out to the corridor again, he looked back, waiting for Nyctasia to follow, but she remained on her knees, silent and motionless. Greymantle came back to her and nudged her chin with his nose insistently until she took heed of him.

"Talk to a hound with your hands," said Nyctasia. "Talk to the dead in your dreams." She stroked Greymantle's rough fur, then gently pushed him away. "You stand guard. Grey. Go on now." The dog gave a whining sigh and resumed his restless prowling.

*We ourselves are the true link between the world of the spirit and the world of matter,*

Nyctasia mused, *and thus the gateway where the two realms meet is rightly to be sought within ourselves and not elsewhere* .... Nevertheless, in this room she had last seen Thierran in life, and here she had met him again, in her troubled dreams. The way she must take lay within, yes, but here if anywhere was the place from which to depart.

Nyctasia drew her dagger, and slowly closed her hand around the blade. The edge bit deep into her palm and fingers, but she barely felt the pain at first.

*“Approach, I am near you.*

*Speak, for I hear you ...”*

Nyctasia chanted, over and over again, as the throbbing swelled in her wounded hand.

Behind her closed eyes she thought she saw the reflections of fallen stars, or of stars which had never been. Finally she pressed her hand against the stained floorboards and waited, silent, while the living blood mingled with the dead.

Corson couldn't stop laughing. Her ribs ached, she could barely breathe, and tears of laughter flooded her eyes. Every time she thought of Steifann and Nyctasia face to face, his red-hot rage facing her pale, cold fury, she collapsed in howls of helpless glee. She could picture them both perfectly.

Trask had reported every word of the quarrel to her, with a few embellishments of his own, emphasizing Steifann's folly and his own heroism in braving Nyctasia's wrath to intercede on Steifann's behalf.

Steifann had contributed an indignant denial here and there, but he was content to let Trask tell the tale while he sat by with a sheepish grin and nursed a mug of ale. Now that Corson was back safe and sound, his good humor was quite restored, and matters did not look nearly so grim. Trask claimed that Her Ladyship had graciously forgiven his behavior, and Corson clearly did not think that much harm had been done. She sat with one arm around him and leaned against him, breathless with laughter. Her hair had started to come undone, and it tickled his neck pleasantly. He was mellowly drunk by now, and feeling far too comfortable to mind her mockery and teasing.

Indeed, the whole affair now seemed nearly as funny to him as it did to Corson. He could already hear himself repeating the story over his ale in years to come, telling friends about the time he'd threatened to throw one of Corson's countless lovers out of his place. (“An insolent little minx, no bigger than your thumb, she was, with a way of looking at you as if you smelled of the cesspit. And then when I'd finished telling her just what I thought of her—not leaving out much, you understand—she simply looked me up and down as cool as you please, and said, ‘I'm a Rhaicime where I come from ...’ I thought I'd be in the pillory before dawn and on the scaffold before dusk! How was I to know Corson was telling the truth about knowing a Rhaicime? It's not as if she'd ever told the truth before.”) Steifann chuckled to himself. It would make a fine story—the only trouble was that he didn't yet know how it ended.

Corson wiped her streaming eyes on her sleeve. “You dolt!” she said for the twentieth time, and kissed him heartily. She didn't know which delighted her more, Steifann's jealousy, or the thought of Nyctasia being called a little slut in public. “You must have scared her half to death, you brute—a little mite like that! For shame!”

Steifann was, in truth, ashamed of that. No one who knew him would have supposed for a moment that he would strike anyone as small as Nyctasia. He might at the worst have taken her by the collar and pitched her out the door. But how was she to know that? Still, if she'd been frightened, Steifann thought, she'd certainly hidden it well. “It was that hound of hers scared *me* out of my wits,” he protested. “I was nearly chewed up and swallowed, but do you care? Anyway, it was all your fault, Corson,” he concluded with drunken complacency. “You should have been here to deal with your Rhaicime yourself—and to protect me from her.”

“By Asye, I wish I *had* been here. I'd give a fortune to have seen it.” She kissed Steifann again. “Well, I daresay she deserved it. She's the most vexing little gadfly ever born.”

“And where *were* you while we were entertaining the nobility here? I expected you days ago.”

“They kept me waiting for my pay in Ochram till a courier arrived with letters of credit. But I made

them pay for the delay, and for a room at The Golden Goblet too. I had a fine time.”

“I’ll wager you did,” Steifann said sourly. “You could have sent a message, curse you.”

Corson shook her head, and her braid tumbled down the rest of the way. “No one I met with was leaving for Chiastelm any sooner than I was. *I’m* not to blame that you’re too hot-tempered by half. You should try not to be so hasty.”

“Hasty! If I weren’t such a forbearing fellow, your ragged Rhaicime would be in shreds and splinters now.”

“Why *does* she go about looking like a peddler?” said Trask suddenly—a question Steifann and Annin had known better than to ask, and which Corson knew better than to answer. She sent Trask off to the kitchen to find her something to eat.

“Nyc would try anyone’s patience, it’s true,” she said to Steifann, “but really she’s a pet when you come to know her. She doesn’t mind a few rough words. You’ll see.”

Steifann snorted. “Know her! Rhaicime or no, if she sets foot in here again, I’ll—”

“You’ll beg her pardon,” Annin put in sharply, “if it’ll help us get Destiver back alive. What of that, Corson?”

“I don’t know ...” Corson said thoughtfully. “You see, Nyc’s *met* Destiver, and I don’t suppose she thinks of her very fondly. Destiver was even less respectful to milady than you were, love. Threatened to have her keelhailed, as I recall.”

Annin groaned.

“But all the same, if I ask her, she might do what she can. She’d do anything for me,” Corson continued, grinning at Steifann. She lowered her voice. “If she’s here in secret, though, she can’t very well make herself known to the Guild. I don’t know what she means to do, but I’ll ask her about Destiver—after I’ve had something to eat.”

“What, tonight?” Steifann objected. “You just got here. Wait till morning.”

Corson hesitated. It was late, and she’d been riding since dawn. But Maegor’s words came back to her: “If she returns, she may well be assassinated.” Suppose Nyctasia had sought her out because she needed her services as bodyguard? Corson knew that she wouldn’t rest easy till she’d seen for herself that Nyctasia was safe. “You might have to make do without me tonight, poor creature,” she told Steifann vengefully. “That must be hard to bear. But I’d better go see whether Nyc needs me. She might be in danger. Asye knows she usually is.”

## 20

NYCTASIA WAS, AS usual, in danger. But she knew nothing of her peril till it was past, till Greymantle roused her from her stupor, licking her face and whimpering. She clutched at him, struggling to rise, and felt that his coat was wet and matted. Her hands came away dark and shiny with blood. When she saw the still figure lying near her on the floor, she believed for one dizzying moment that it was Thierran, and she cried out in confusion and denial of the sight. She seemed to have stepped outside of time itself, and returned to the night of his death, as if everything that had happened to her since had been only a strange dream.

But as she came slowly to her senses, the moonlight and the dim lamplight from the hallway revealed who it was who lay there, his throat torn open raggedly, not slashed by Corson’s keen-honed dagger. She reached out a trembling hand to stroke Greymantle’s massive head. “Good lad,” she whispered. “Well done.”

Greymantle flicked his ears, listening, then trotted back out to the corridor on some quest of his own. But this time he wagged his tail in welcome. This was a scent he recognized.

Corson laughed at the eager hound who greeted her like a skittish puppy, tugging at her cloak then running ahead of her and turning back to bark impatiently. “All right, beast, I’m coming. Get out of my way, then.” But when he came back a second time to herd her along, she saw that his muzzle and ruff were caked with blood, and her laughter died in her throat. Sword in hand, she followed him at a run the rest of the way, calling, “Nyc! Where are you?” But she knew, somehow, where she would find

Nyctasia.

Greymantle darted to Nyctasia's side but Corson stood frozen in the doorway, faced with the ghost of the man she'd killed, and Nyctasia standing over him with the same half-dreamy, absent look she'd worn that night.

"It's not Thierran, Corson," she said, in an unnaturally placid voice that Corson remembered.

"I didn't think it was!" Corson lied, beginning to breathe again. "He's dead and gone, and good riddance to him. The dead don't return."

"Our dead do not return to us," Nyctasia agreed, "but we may go to them betimes, if we will. It is written, 'To seek to commune with the dead is forbidden, but if the dead would commune with us, it is permitted to listen.'"

"What are you babbling about?" Corson demanded. She strode over to the dead man and shoved him with her foot, angry at him for giving her a fright. "Who's this, then?"

Nyctasia did not seem to hear. "But why should it be easier to listen to the dead than to the living? If I'd listened to Thierran while he lived, perhaps he'd not be dead now."

Corson had been with her only a few minutes, and already she was exasperated. "Nyc, talk sense! Are you hurt?"

Nyctasia looked at her blindly. "I? I'm never hurt. It's those around me who suffer ... Corson, the night we left Rhostshyl, he came to warn me about the attack waiting outside the city gates. Oh, but he was pleased with himself, that he knew something I didn't—I with all my schemes and precautions. He'd defied Mhairestri to save me. Even Mescrisdan didn't know his plans. He believed that I'd be forced to stay in the city, under his protection ... that I'd be *grateful* to him. *I, grateful!*" She laughed bitterly.

Corson shook her head. "He'd drawn on you, fool, don't you remember?"

"How else to make me listen, save at sword's point?"

"You're dreaming, Nyc. He was a madman, that cousin of yours, and his brother no better. Now, what—"

"Oh yes, he was mad. He had the madness of the Edonaris, and the pride, and after that night madness and pride were all that was left to him."

"If you mean to say that I shouldn't have killed him, you're crazier than he was. He was after your blood, and mine too!"

"Of course you'd no choice. Corson. He might not have killed me, but he'd certainly have killed you. Not because you wounded him in my defense, not even because you killed Mescrisdan, but because you spoke to him with scorn. You sneered at him." She seemed quite unaware that a dead man lay at her feet.

Corson wondered whether it would do any good to slap her. Probably not, she thought glumly, but *I'd* feel the better for it.

"Let be," Nyctasia said, as if to herself. "I know now what he wanted to tell me."

Corson did not ask how she knew, and didn't want to hear more. "Perhaps, if it's not asking too much, you'd be good enough to tell me," she began, making use of expressions she had learned from Nyctasia. "what you're bloody, rutting well doing here with a corpse in the middle of the night, curse you!" she concluded, in her own words.

Nyctasia seemed to see her for the first time. "How charming to meet you again, Corson. This—" she added, gesturing toward the body as if introducing it, "is one of the Lady Mhairestri's henchmen, unless I much mistake. His name escapes me." She sighed, sounding tired and vexed. "She must have set him to watching the house some time ago. She's admirably thorough. I expected something of the sort, of course, but I searched and found no one. He must have entered afterward. I wonder that Grey let him come so close, though."

But Corson pointed to the open window. "More likely he came in that way. He might have been here all the while and climbed up to the roof to hide when he heard you coming. It's easy to do."

Nyctasia nodded thoughtfully. Corson waited for her to say something about carelessness, but she only remarked, "I suppose he didn't see Greymantle in the dark. That dog is almost as good a bodyguard as you are, Corson—and he has much better manners."

“But you enjoy my company, you know,” Corson reminded her with a grin. She handed Nyctasia her lantern, then bent and pulled the would-be assassin up by one arm, hoisting him over her back. “Over the cliff with this one, I think. The gulls and fish will make short work of him.”

Something fell from his hand and lay gleaming on the bloodstained floor, catching the moonlight. Nyctasia picked up her silver earring, and Corson saw her face harden with a fleeting fury, but when she spoke her voice was still calm and flatly amused. “A token for Mhairestri that the job was done,” she said lightly. “I’ll send her this instead.” She took one of the plain brass earrings the dead man wore, and slipped it into the pouch at her hip. “She’ll understand.”

She turned to the door, then, and called Grey mantle to her. “Thank you for disposing of the carrion, Corson. I must take Grey down to the shore and give him a washing. I could do with one myself, come to that, I’m filthy. Seawater’s as salt and sticky as blood, but cleaner at least. Cleaner ...” Her clothes were bloodstained and dusty from the floor, and her hands were grimy with gore, though there was no longer a knife-wound slashed across her palm and fingers. Only the drying blood remained to show where the cuts had been.

Corson followed with her lifeless burden, wondering what could possibly happen next. She could not remember that Nyctasia had ever before thanked her for anything, in all the time she’d known her.

## 21

CORSON FOUND THE new arrangement much to her liking. She was once again personal bodyguard to a Rhaicime—a position of some prestige for a mercenary, and one which she could at last boast of openly. Nyctasia made no secret of her rank and station now but rather made every effort to enhance her own dignity and authority. She had a company of guards about her, as well as an entourage of servants—a steward, maids, pages, scribes, cooks, scullions and other menials, and people whom Corson classed vaguely as “courtiers,” whose duties were a mystery to her, although they always seemed to be extremely busy.

And the cream of it was that, with Nyctasia in Chiastelm, Corson could watch over her by day and then spend her nights at the Hare, while sentries patrolled the Smugglers’ House, and Greymantle defended his mistress’s chamber.

Nyctasia’s days were spent in a series of meetings with the lords and ladies who arrived from Rhostshyl to confer with her—meetings which took the form of furious disputes more often than not. Corson stood by, keeping a wary eye on these confrontations. It was plain to see that some of Nyctasia’s fellow nobles would have liked to kill her there and then, and even some of those she counted as allies condemned her plans as mad and foolish. And all were afraid of her, Corson thought, and trusted her no more than she trusted them.

“You’ll beggar the city, do you understand that?” one nobleman or another shouted at her, pacing angrily about Nyctasia’s audience-chamber, while Corson watched his every move and kept her hand to her sword-hilt. Greymantle lay with his nose on his paws and looked on with disapproval, occasionally uttering a warning growl.

But Nyctasia merely reclined in a cushioned chair and said slowly, never raising her voice, “The city is already beggared, from all report. What you mean to say is that I’ll beggar the nobility—and so I shall, for the present, so I shall. We are responsible for the condition the city is in. Would you have it said that we do not pay our debts?”

Corson did not give much heed to what was said, but even so she gathered that Nyctasia meant to expend most of her personal fortune, and that of her House, to buy grain to feed the hungry of Rhostshyl—and she expected the other noble families of the city to do the same. The countryside around Rhostshyl had been nearly as ravaged by the war as the city itself, fields and granaries put to the torch, the harvest all but lost. Foodstuffs would have to be brought in from neighboring municipalities, perhaps shipped up the coast from the fertile lands to the south, at a cost which the City Treasury alone could not begin to meet. Nyctasia had already sent out emissaries to nearby courts to ask for terms, and she had seen to it that rumors of her plans were spread through Rhostshyl to folk of every degree. There was



more of an outcry than ever for her return, and prophecies arose that the Witch of Rhostshyl would work her magic to save the city. If Nyctasia's proposals failed to find favor with her peers, yet they had support enough among her people.

But it was not only her designs upon the wealth of the city that outraged her friends and foes alike. Even more contention was caused by her insistence that she would declare a general pardon when she assumed power—a pardon which was to include the enemies of the House of Edonaris.

"You're mad, sister, to consider such a thing," cried the Lady Tiambria, Nyctasia's younger sister. She and her twin, the Lord Erikasten, spoke up boldly enough to Nyctasia, but Corson thought that they had the air of angry, frightened children, who wanted to be told what to do. The sight of them had startled her at first, for they looked much like Raphe and 'Deisha, though years younger. Not yet twenty. Corson judged them.

"Tasia, if we don't put an end to this rivalry now, our victory, and our losses, will have been in vain," argued Tiambria. "You've not seen the destruction in the city—"

"I have seen it," said Nyctasia softly. "And I tell you that all such victory is in vain. If we allow ourselves to profit from it, how are we to learn not to let it happen again? Perhaps we could destroy the rest of the Teiryne, and their followers, but in time another house would arise to challenge us. No, you need not repeat Mhairestri's arguments to me. You may tell her that I shall give her views a respectful hearing when I return to court, at any time she may consent to receive me."

The twins looked at each other, mantling, shifting their shoulders uncomfortably. Corson half expected them to break into tears. "We may repeat the matriarch's words, 'Tasia, but she didn't send us," Tiambria said at last.

"She forbade us to come," Erikasten put in wretchedly.

Nyctasia regarded the pair thoughtfully, one eyebrow raised in mild surprise. "Could it be that you two are finally growing up?" she asked, almost smiling.

Nyctasia was playing a new role, one that was unfamiliar to Corson, though she had seen Nyctasia in many guises and many humors. Was she at last seeing Nyctasia as she really was—an autocratic ruler, responsible and duty-bound, unyielding in her resolve, wielding her authority as readily as Corson wielded her sword? If so, Corson did not find it an improvement in her character. She was rarely alone with Nyctasia now, and when she was, Nyctasia hardly seemed aware of her presence. But Corson was not the sort to put up with that for long.

"I'm leaving now," she announced one evening. "Do you hear, Nyc?"

It was much earlier than Corson usually left for the night, but Nyctasia only nodded, without looking up from the document she was studying. It had been delivered by messenger that morning, but she'd had no time for it all day. "Tell Ioras to post another guard at the door, then," she said absently, frowning at the papers.

"No," said Corson.

That drew Nyctasia's attention.

"You won't need another guard," Corson explained, "because you're coming with me to the Hare."

"I haven't the time for an outing now, I'm afraid."

"You'll find time. You've not set foot out of this cursed house in a fortnight. The place is haunted, right enough, and you're the ghost."

Nyctasia drew a sharp breath and remained silent for a time, but then said, "Corson, no doubt you mean well, but—"

Corson paid no attention. "You can have a decent meal at the Hare, at least, and not fear that it's poisoned. You don't eat enough to nourish a gnat, when you remember to take a meal at all. You look like a half-starved beggar-brat, and you act like a queen, and I've had my fill of it!"

In spite of herself. Nyctasia started to laugh, and Corson knew that she'd won. "But, Corson, I daren't go there—what of that jealous giant of yours? He'll tear me to pieces."

Corson grinned triumphantly. "He'll be most pleased to make you welcome. Steifann's no fool—he's thought of the distinction it would bring his place to have the patronage of a Rhaicime. He never ceases to

plague me about it. And Walden wants a chance to cook for the nobility, too, and Annin wants a better look at you, and Trask's simply in love with you. I'll have no peace till I've presented you to them."

"Well, I should hate to disappoint them. Perhaps another time."

"Now," said Corson firmly. "Nyc, do you remember when we were in Yth Forest, and you all but changed into an Ythling yourself?" Giving Nyctasia no chance to answer, she continued. "Well, you're even stranger now than you were then. It'll do you good to get away from here. Here's your cloak." She whistled for Greymantle, who trotted to the door at once and looked back at Nyctasia expectantly.

"Are you coming?" said Corson, "or must I throw you over my shoulder and carry you off?"

"Greymantle wouldn't let you lay hands on me."

"Oh, wouldn't he though? Did he go for Raphe's throat every time he and 'Deisha got to swatting each other? We'll just see." She started toward Nyctasia.

Nyctasia hastily rose and grabbed her cloak. "Very well, we'll go! Perhaps you're right." When Corson insisted on having her way, she was usually right, as Nyctasia had discovered—and it was always less trouble to give in to her.

Nyctasia's second visit to The Jugged Hare was less eventful, but more successful, than her first, and it was by no means to be her last. She found it a relief to escape her retinue for a while, and be again Nyc of the roads, the harper and minstrel. Her harp was the first thing she'd had sent to her from Rhostshyl, and she often brought it to the tavern and sang for the entertainment of the house. Had Steifann not known who and what she was, he'd have offered her a job singing for her supper. She soon became something of a favorite at the Hare, once Steifann and the others had lost their awe of her lofty rank and title. Surely no one who was on such familiar terms with Corson could hold herself very high, they felt.

Steifann forgave Nyctasia for everything once she told him that Corson had never ceased talking about him, the whole while they were journeying together. And it was thanks to Nyctasia, after all, that Corson's work kept her in Chiestelm with him. He was disappointed that Nyctasia did not arrive in state, and that she usually ate in the kitchen, out of sight of his other customers, but she assured him that he could tell whom he liked that she frequented The Hare—after she'd returned to Rhostshyl.

Annin too was well disposed toward Nyctasia because she had promised to lodge an appeal with the Maritime Alliance on Destiver's behalf. As a mark of her particular favor, she took to scolding Nyctasia as freely as she did the others.

Destiver had been more heartened by this news than by anything she'd heard since Annin had brought her word of Hrawn brenn Thespaon's murder. If she was grateful for Nyctasia's help, however, her appreciation did not manifest itself in any noticeable way, "Who would have thought that bothersome little chit was a Rhaicime?" she remarked. "I should have charged her more."

Trask was enthralled at the unheard-of opportunity to ingratiate himself with a personage of such undoubted influence and eminence. He made even more of a nuisance of himself than usual, pestering Nyctasia to take him to court, where he declared he really belonged, among people of polish and breeding. Everyone had other suggestions as to where Trask really belonged, from a barn to a brothel, from the gutter to the gibbet, but Trask was not easily discouraged. Nyctasia was of the opinion that there was indeed a place for him at court—a deep dungeon far below the palace, which she offered to make available for him at any time.

Walden also approved of Corson's new friend, on the whole. She praised his cooking with obvious sincerity, and ate like a growing child whenever she came to the Hare, which was a sure way to Walden's good graces. "Only those who eat heartily can be trusted" was his motto, and it had never failed him yet. Nyctasia was too skinny, true, but no doubt she hadn't been properly fed. And she might be a Rhaicime, but that was probably not her fault. He did not hesitate to swat her with a wooden spoon when he caught her stealing raisins from the barrel in the kitchen.

All in all, Corson was well satisfied with the way matters stood, and it came as a bitter disappointment when Nyctasia told her that she'd soon be returning to Rhostshyl.

"Is it safe for you to go there yet?" Corson asked.

"Not at all. But it's time, you see. I've done all I can here—the nobility dare not defy me openly, now. I've seen to that. They fear uprisings in the city if it's known that they oppose my plans. They'll

conspire against me, though.” She gave a sudden cheerless laugh. “And they’ve not heard the worst of it yet! When they find out what more I have in mind, the screams of rage will be heard all the way to Tierelon. Oh, no, it’s not safe.”

“I suppose you expect me to go with you, then.”

Nyctasia appeared to hesitate. “Well, no, I think you needn’t. Ioras can serve as my bodyguard at court.”

“Ioras! I could worst him with one hand, and my right hand at that.”

“I don’t doubt it, Corson, I’m well aware that I’d be better protected by you, but, after all, do you want to call me ‘my lady,’ bow to me, walk a pace behind me, stand while I sit ...”

“I’m cursed if I will!”

“Well, there we are.” Nyctasia smiled, but her voice was serious. “I must command the respect of those around me, Corson, if I’m to work my will, in the days to come. You must see that I can’t have a bodyguard who undermines my authority by speaking insolently to me before others, Folk will say, ‘How is she to govern the city, when she can’t even govern her own servants?’ It would make me appear weak, and I cannot afford that. My people may not be your equal with a sword, but they know what behavior is expected of them at court.”

“Do you think you’re the first noble I’ve served? I know how to conduct myself in any household in the land—I’m not just out of the army! I can bow and grovel as well as another, when I choose.”

Nyctasia looked doubtful. “Perhaps ... but if you attend the ruler of the city, there’s no choice about it. Formalities must be observed.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll remember my place,” Corson snapped. “I’ll stay till you have matters in hand there, at least. You’d only get yourself killed, without me.”

“Very likely,” Nyctasia admitted. In fact, she had never had any intention of returning to Rhostshyl without Corson, but, noticing her reluctance, she had immediately resorted to the surest way to make Corson do anything—which was to suggest that she *couldn’t* do it. “Well, if you insist on accompanying me, I don’t suppose I can stop you,” she said resignedly. “But you won’t like it.”

“I know,” said Corson. Steifann wouldn’t like it either, but at least Rhostshyl was within two days’ ride of Chiastelm. Corson privately resolved that she’d make Nyctasia pay dearly for every humble bow and dutiful show of deference.

## 22

NYCTASIA MADE A ceremonial entry into Rhostshyl not long afterward, riding at the head of a cortege of her followers, surrounded by a troupe of guards. She had sent heralds ahead to proclaim her coming, and to make known that a distribution of meal and flour would take place at mid-day in the city square. Word spread quickly that well-guarded wagonloads of grain followed the procession, and cheers of welcome greeted Nyctasia on all sides. She was flanked by her brother and sister—in grim defiance of the matriarch—and Corson was not far behind.

The rest were dressed with splendor, as for a celebration, but Nyctasia wore mourning, her chain of office the only brightness about her. She sat straight, almost stiff, but she did not look proud to be returning to her city in triumph. Somber and unsmiling, she was every inch the earnest, careworn ruler. Even Corson was impressed with her regal dignity.

She did not ride straight to the palace of the Edonaris, but insisted on making her way through every part of the city, to learn for herself what Rhostshyl and its people had suffered. The destruction was perhaps less extensive than she had feared, but it was nonetheless pitiful to see, and to one who loved the city as Nyctasia did, it was nothing less than heartbreak. The poorer sections of the city had fared the worst, of course, but fire had not shown mercy to the more prosperous districts either. Nyctasia was met by throngs of the hungry and homeless, some holding out their ailing children to be healed by her magic. The guards kept back the crowds, but Nyctasia would not spare herself the sight of her needy subjects. She looked into the eyes of those she passed, and held out her hands toward them in a Vahnite gesture of benediction. Tales of miraculous cures would soon begin to spread through the city, she knew, not

because she had any such power, but because folk wished to believe that she did. They themselves would work the sorcery, by means of a powerful and mysterious Influence that no mage or philosopher truly understood. To Nyctasia it was but another deception, to be numbered among many. By the time she had turned toward the aristocratic quarter of the city, she felt far older than her years, and deeply shamed.

She had dreamed that the city's great palaces lay in ruins, but now she found that they had in fact suffered least, being the best defended, and built of stone. Some roofs still gaped where wooden beams had fallen to fire, though the mansions of the victors had of course been set to rights. But Nyctasia was not comforted to see that the palace of the Edonaris stood whole again, in all its grandeur. She understood now that the fallen walls she had envisioned were emblematic of a more profound destruction, a loss that could not be repaired with timber and mortar. Her family's honor was in ruins, the proud heritage of the Edonaris, and she doubted that it could ever be restored.

With a heart burdened by such thoughts as these, Nyctasia and Edonaris returned to her ancestral home.

Corson decided to speak to Nyctasia about her guards. They were not alert enough to suit her. They watched Nyctasia attentively, yes, but what was the good of that? Nyctasia wasn't a prisoner; it was not she who ought to be watched but those around her, any one of whom might be a deadly enemy. Corson looked everywhere, searching the crowd for any sign of danger, noticing every threatening glint of steel. Though she was satisfied that no one could approach Nyctasia, she also knew that she herself had never been prevented by mere distance from felling her intended prey. It was wisest to assume that anyone stalking Nyctasia was equally skillful, and Corson was not in the least surprised when she caught sight of a man crouching beside a chimney, with a knife poised to throw. She had pushed past Erikasten and caught the blade neatly on her shield before Nyctasia or her retinue realized what was happening. It was Corson who pointed out the culprit, who ordered the house surrounded before he could reach the ground and make an escape—and though she had no authority to give such commands, she was obeyed.

Nyctasia did not wait to see the capture. "A partisan of the Teiryne, no doubt," she said indifferently, adding in a lower tone, "It doesn't look like Mhairistri's work. Not at all subtle." Turning to Corson, she announced, "Henceforth the palace garrison will be answerable to you in all particulars."

Corson bowed, "As Your Ladyship wishes," she replied.

Nyctasia dismissed everyone but Corson, and barred the door behind them. Greymantle—who was groomed to a gleam and now wore a jeweled collar—she kept with her as a matter of course, having ignored all suggestions that he be sent to the kennels. She crossed to the balcony, but Corson made her wait while she pulled back the curtains and searched behind the tapestried arras for intruders. Then, leaving Greymantle to guard his mistress, she went through the rest of Nyctasia's apartments to see that all was secure. She had never been in rooms so spacious and splendid, lit by great traceried windows, bright with mirrors and crystal candelabra. Ornamental tiles adorned the fireplaces, and their pillars and mantles were carved with vine-leaves and faces and intricate scrollwork. The floors were carpeted, the walls hung with rich draperies, and even the ceilings plastered and painted with elaborate designs. Corson decided that she could best carry out her duties as the Rhaicime's bodyguard if she shared her quarters, instead of withdrawing to the warders' barracks at night. She now had the final word on all matters regarding Nyctasia's safety, after all. She only regretted that she couldn't show Steifann her magnificent lodgings.

"Gods! I've never seen such a bed," she said gleefully, when she returned to the first room. "It's as big as a hayfield. You've room for ..." She stopped, but Nyctasia took no notice.

She still stood at the window, just as Corson had left her, gazing out at the ravaged city. To Corson she looked as white and rigid as a figure of marble. Greymantle pawed at her hand and whined.

"Nyc ... ?" said Corson uneasily. "Eh, Your Nycship, do you hear me?"

And Nyctasia turned to her at last, her eyes as grey as stone, the color of a leaden, sunless sky. "The walls are still standing," she said dully. "Why did I come back here?"

"Asye knows," said Corson, though she saw that Nyctasia did not expect an answer. "Nothing you do makes a rutting bit of sense to me. Maegor said you'd think it your duty to come back."

“My duty as an Edonaris and a Vahnite, yes. But a true Edonaris would not have gone, and a true Vahnite would not have returned .... I told Maegor I’d no right to call myself a Vahnite, and now I find I’ve no desire to call myself an Edonaris. What am I then?”

“You’re a maundering half-wit!” Corson shook her, and the gold chain slipped off and struck the floor, where Greymantle sniffed it without interest.

Nyctasia let it lie. “Did you know that the chain of office signifies that the ruler is slave to the people? And that is fitting, for in Rhostshyl only the criminal are bound in service to the city.”

“You’re mistress of the city, fool—what does the rest matter? Stop carrying on like a stranded fish, I don’t like talking to a half-dead hake.”

Corson had thought to make her laugh, but instead she suddenly, helplessly, broke into tears. Her throat was torn with harsh, hoarse sobs, as if she did not know how to cry, and found it painful. Corson was bewildered, but relieved as well. She knew that Nyctasia rarely wept, but if she was grieved for her city, why shouldn’t she cry, as anyone else would do? It was better than that deathly calm of hers. “At least I know you’re alive,” she said. “Only the living weep.”

Startled, Nyctasia looked up at her through her tears. “What ... what do you mean by that, Corson?”

“Asye, I don’t know! I’m even beginning to sound like you now. Come along and rest—you’re tired out, that’s all that ails you. You’re half-asleep on your feet.” She picked Nyctasia up as if she were a child, and carried her into the bedchamber. “What you need’s a nursemaid, not a bodyguard.”

Nyctasia did not object. “I’d forgotten how exhausting it is to cry, rather like spellcasting,” she sighed. “No wonder the Discipline forbids it.” When Corson dropped her onto the high, wide bed, she gestured vaguely and mumbled, “boots,” then fell at once into a deep, dreamless slumber.

“So now I’m to be your lady’s maid as well, am I?” Corson said indignantly, but Nyctasia made no reply. She hardly stirred when Corson pulled off her boots for her, nor even when Greymantle scrambled up onto the bed and lay across her legs.

Corson took advantage of the opportunity to examine the rooms again, this time to satisfy her curiosity. She handled delicate ivory carvings, and toyed with a gameboard with pieces cut from jade and agate. She marveled at a gilded harp half as tall as Nyctasia. She opened chests and coffer and lidded bowls, discovering now clothes, now books, rings or brooches, small clay bottles or just fragrant dried flower petals. She tried on all the jewelry she could find, and draped herself with silk scarves and brocaded sashes. Then for a time she admired herself in a tall mirror, its wooden frame supported between two slender twin pillars like young trees.

This kept her amused for an hour, but finally, growing bored, she left everything strewn about for a chambermaid to tidy away later, and went to the door to summon a servant. “Her Ladyship’s not to be disturbed,” she ordered, “but you can bring me something to eat and drink.” She spoke confidently, but she half-expected to be refused, and she was prepared for an argument. (“I’m not to leave the Rhaicime—do you expect her to eat in the kitchen with me? Do as you’re told!”)

But instead the man only bowed and said, “Will that be all, mistress?”

Corson considered. Apparently, as Nyctasia’s bodyguard, she had privileges, and she meant to take full advantage of them. “I’ll have a bath now too,” she decided. “Hot water, and plenty of it.” After all, if she was to attend the ruler of the city, she had to be presentable. And besides, someone else would have to fetch in the water.

When Nyctasia woke, she observed the disarray of the room, yawned, and said, “I see you’ve been enjoying yourself. Or possibly a herd of wild swine strayed through here while I was asleep ...?”

Corson grinned. “I think I could learn to like it here. The servants are obliging, and the food’s not bad at all.”

“I’m glad you approve of my domestic arrangements. Tell them I want a bath now, if you would.”

“I’ve already ordered a bath for you, Lady Indolence. Hurry up, or you’ll be late for dinner.”

“I can’t be late,” said Nyctasia, stretching. “They can’t start dinner without me, you see. Let them wait—they’ll not go hungry.”

She lingered over her bath, and dressed in somber mourning-clothes hardly more formal than those she’d worn to receive the Saetarrin. After some searching, she discovered her chain of office around

Greymantle's neck, where Corson had put it for safekeeping. By the time she went down to dinner, with Corson and Greymantle at her heels, she was as composed and aloof as if there were nothing whatsoever to distress her in all the city.

The company was indeed waiting for her, milling impatiently about the great hall, where tables had been readied along three walls. Only when Nyctasia took her place at the head of the highest table did the others move to their seats, murmuring greetings which she acknowledged with a nod. Corson stood behind her chair, satisfied that from this vantage point she could see everyone in the hall and watch for any suspicious movement. It was unlikely that an attack would be made on Nyctasia before all these people, but among her many enemies there might well be those crazy enough to try it.

Food was now set before them—platters of small roasted birds, joints of meat, whole baked fish brought live from the coast in barrels of brine—but Nyctasia's relations and guests touched nothing, still waiting for her to begin. She was testing them, Corson realized, deliberately flaunting her power, to remind them that she meant to use it as she chose. Now she only leaned back in her chair and regarded the choice viands with evident distaste, "We are well fed for people of a starving city," she said finally, to no one in particular.

The nobles stirred uneasily, some looking angry, some merely worried. Corson took note especially of those who exchanged furtive words or glances. "This banquet is laid in your honor, cousin," one of the men said, reprovingly, "therefore it behooves you to show the company more courtesy."

Nyctasia smiled graciously, "Forgive me, all, but after what I've seen in the streets of our fair city this day, I've little appetite for a feast. But in the name of courtesy, of course, let the meal commence."

She picked up one of the roast birds and tossed it to Greymantle, then sipped from a goblet of water, but took nothing else. If she had told the company to their faces that she considered them no better than animals, the insult could not have been more plain. There was a tense silence, but then a few of Nyctasia's followers began to eat, and the rest soon joined them.

"She has the whip-hand of them now," Corson thought, "and they all know it."

Lord Therisain turned to Nyctasia with a look of triumph. "It is for you to propose the first toast," he reminded her.

"Surely," said Nyctasia. "But it is yet too soon. We are not all assembled."

Again an uncomfortable hush fell on the table. "The Lady Mharestri did not feel equal to such an occasion," someone offered hesitantly. "She has been unwell of late."

"Oh. I hardly expected the matriarch to honor us," Nyctasia said smoothly. "No doubt she sent her regrets. But what of Anseldon, and Lhejadis? Are they indisposed as well?"

"I believe they are bearing Mharestri company," murmured Erikasten.

"How kind of them. But why do I not see my sister Rehal at table?" Nyctasia persisted.

Tiambria answered stiffly, "Rehal is confined to her apartments, under guard. She tried to leave the city secretly with her children."

"I was not aware," Nyctasia said, frowning, "that that was a crime."

"Rehal may go where she pleases, of course," an older woman said sharply. "But you know very well, Nyctasia, that she cannot be allowed to take Emeryc's heir with her."

Nyctasia sipped at her water again. "Not, perhaps, while he lived, Elissa," she agreed. "But once he was killed, his son was surely the next marked for death. I think it showed excellent judgment on her part to seek safely for him. And after all, a city at war is no place for children."

Tiambria shook her head. "No, it was only a fortnight ago that she tried to flee. We held the city, and the children were well protected. It was not our enemies but ourselves that she sought to escape."

"That, above all, shows her good sense," said Nyctasia drily. "Why have I not been told of this?"

"A fortnight ago, we first had certain news of your return—it is you Rehal fears," said Lady Elissa. Someone tried to silence her, but she continued in a furious whisper. "Rehal knows that the child will threaten your power one day, and you know it as well."

Nyctasia looked around the table at the faces of her kin, but most would not meet her eyes. "Oho," she said softly, "and so you have waited to know my wishes? I'm to be a child-killer now ...! Perhaps I could sacrifice young Leirven to demons, and so achieve two ends at once. Really, you begin to believe

your own fancies about me. Why, if anyone's to murder the boy, look to 'Kasten here. He would stand to inherit Emeryc's title if Leirven were removed from the succession."

Erikasten turned on her with an oath. "You think that I'd—"

"Have you not thought the same of me?" said Nyctasia coldly. She turned to Tiambria. "But if I were to kill someone, surely it would be you, sister. In only a few years Lehannie's title will come to you, and you'll be in a position to challenge my authority. You pose a much more immediate threat to me than Emeryc's heir does."

"I have thought upon that," Tiambria said evenly.

Nyctasia suddenly laughed. "Then you have wronged me, upon my honor. I have other plans for you—not death, but something you'll like far less." Though she sounded amused, Corson did not think she was joking. "And I have plans for my niece and nephew as well," she continued, addressing all of them, but looking at Lady Elissa. "Plans which I shall discuss first with their mother." She stood. "I must go to her at once and attempt to reassure her. She is not to be kept under guard, nor is her son to be forfeit to my ambition. I trust that that is now understood." She made a formal bow to the company, "Friends, family, a good appetite to all."

Corson followed a pace behind her until they were out of sight and hearing of the rest, then fell into step beside her. "Nyc, I thought you had only the one sister," she said, puzzled.

"Yes, Rehal is my brother's widow, my sister by marriage."

"Oh. Well, why hasn't she the right to take her children where she likes?"

Nyctasia sighed. "She has no rights in this household, Corson. She's a commoner, you see. She was only a laborer on one of our estates before Emeryc took a fancy to her."

"Do you mean to say that a brother of yours married a peasant woman!"

"He insisted upon it, in order to legitimize his children by her. She'd been his mistress for some years, but when she bore him a son who could succeed to his title, he wanted to make the boy his heir by law."

"And your family *let* him?"

"On the contrary, they forbade it. But Emeryc was of age, and willful, as we all are. Mhairestri gave way when she saw how determined he was, lest she lose her influence over him by thwarting him in this. And she wanted the children too. We Edonaris aren't as prolific as we once were—folk say that if we didn't bear twins so often, our enemies would soon outnumber us. Mhairestri worries that the dynasty will come to an end within a few generations. She didn't want Rehal, of course, but she reasoned that a mere farm woman could be easily set aside when the time came to establish an advantageous marriage-alliance for Emeryc. It would have been different if he'd sought to make an unsuitable match with a girl of good family, whose kin could demand that her rights be respected ...." Nyctasia's voice grew bitter, and Corson knew that she was thinking of her own bond with Erystalben ar'n Shiasfred, a bond her family had succeeded in breaking.

"Rehal didn't want the marriage either," Nyctasia continued, "She's no fool—she knew she'd never be accepted at court. But she agreed for her children's sake, so that they could be raised as nobles."

She fell silent as they approached the guarded passage to the widow Rehal's chambers, and Corson dropped behind her again, the patient, impassive bodyguard. Dismissing the sentry, Nyctasia unlocked the door and pushed it open herself.

Rehal was coaxing her little boy to eat his dinner, but at the sight of Nyctasia and Corson she gasped and caught the child up in her arms—"Deirdras, go into the other room, quickly," she whispered to the older child, a girl of perhaps nine years, but her daughter made no move to obey her. Quietly setting down her spoon, she only sat and glared at Nyctasia as if daring her to come farther into the room. Her little brother, alarmed by his mother's fear, began to whimper and wriggle.

"My lady, have mercy," pleaded Rehal. "They're only children! I'll take them away—they will forget that they are Edonaris." Though she spoke to Nyctasia, she stared in terror at Corson, sure that she was there to carry out the sentence of death.

"Corson, wait for me outside," Nyctasia said calmly. "You alarm the Lady Rehal to no purpose. I shan't need you." Corson bowed and withdrew.

Nyctasia shook her head in gentle reproof. "Rehal, sister, you should know me better. I mean no

harm to you or your children. You are under my protection here.”

Still clutching her son, Rehal sank to her knees, and Grey-mantle—taking this for an invitation—joined them, wagging his tail and snuffling curiously at Leirven. “Don’t be afraid, he won’t bite the boy,” said Nyctasia, smiling, “and neither shall I, you’ll find.”

Leirven, having forgotten his fright, was trying to escape his mother’s arms and embrace Grey mantle. “Want to *play*,” he insisted, crowing with delight as the dog licked his face thoroughly, washing off a good deal of the dinner which he had managed to smear over himself.

Nyctasia approached Rehal, offering her hand, to help her to her feet. “I’ve told you before, my dear, that you’re not to kneel to me.”

But at this, the other child suddenly shrieked, “Liar! Don’t touch him! Don’t touch my brother, or I’ll kill you!” She seized one of the table knives and threw herself between Nyctasia and the others, holding the knife high, ready to attack.

Nyctasia fell back a pace. “Well! I see I dismissed my bodyguard too soon,” she said mildly.

“Deirdras, stop that!” cried Rehal. “The Lady Nyctasia will help us—”

“You don’t understand. Mother. You’re not an Edonaris,” said the child scornfully, “She’s come to kill Raven, and me too. I know all about her.”

“Don’t speak to your mother in that way,” Nyctasia reprimanded her, “and don’t speak of me in that way either, bratling. You know nothing. Why should I kill Leirven? I’d only have Erikasten to deal with then—and he’ll come of age much sooner than your brother.”

“Kasten’s weak,” Deirdras said promptly. “You think you’ll be able to control him.”

Nyctasia was taken aback. “I see ...! And why should I kill you, then? You’re not important.”

As if repeating a lesson, Deirdras responded, “Because you know I’d avenge my brother. And you’re afraid of me—if *you* died, I’d be Rhaicime!”

“Sweet *vahn*, the child is a true Edonaris,” sighed Nyctasia. “Come, we’ll declare a truce, shall we? Lay down your arms and I shall do the same.” She loosed her sword-belt and let her weapons slide from it to the floor, but Deirdras only gripped her knife tighter as Nyctasia took a step toward her. “Very well,” said Nyctasia, “look to your guard, then.” As she spoke, she flicked the belt toward the girl’s face.

Startled, Deirdras struck out wildly, and Nyctasia seized her by the wrist, forcing the knife from her hand. “Let me go!” she shouted, outraged at the trick, but Nyctasia picked her up and kissed her, in spite of her struggles.

“This is no way to greet your aunt,” she laughed, holding her close. “I swear I don’t want to kill you, Derry, but I might give you a good beating if you don’t mend your manners in the future. A lady is always respectful to her elders.” She set the girl on her feet again, holding her firmly by the shoulders. “And you don’t know how to wield a knife, either. Always hold it low and strike upward. I’ll teach you one day.”

Deirdras tried to break free, beating at her with small, fierce fists. “You hate me,” she shrieked. “You were my father’s enemy, and you’re my enemy—Mharestri told me—”

Nyctasia’s face darkened. “I thought as much. The matriarch has taught you well. You’ve learned to hate the Teiryn, haven’t you? And to fear me, and to disdain your mother. Hate and bitterness and pride are all that Mharestri has learned in her long life, and all that she has to teach.” She gripped Deirdras more tightly. “Do you want a life like that for yourself, child? Do you want to be like her? *Do you?*”

Deirdras stared at her, wide-eyed, but to such a question as this she had no answer ready. Her chin began to tremble, and she seemed to grow limp in Nyctasia’s grasp.

“I’m sorry,” Nyctasia said gently. “I’m not angry with you. You’re brave and strong, Derry, and I’m proud of you. I shall rely on you to protect your family, remember.” She let the girl go, and Deirdras ran to her mother’s lap, sobbing in confusion.

Rehal gathered both children to her, and led them back to the table. “Finish your dinner now,” she said, “and let me talk to Her Ladyship. Deirdras, watch your brother.”

Deirdras began to eat her soup slowly, watching her aunt more than her brother. Leirven was too excited to eat, but he enjoyed feeding most of his dinner to Greymantle.

Nyctasia dropped onto a couch and gestured for Rehal to join her. “I remember now,” she said, taking Rehal’s hand, “I never could persuade you to address me by name. Rehal, it was Mharestri who



told you I'd have the children killed, was it not?"

Rehal dropped her eyes, "My lady ... Nyctasia ... I ..."

"And warned you not to say so, of course. She saw to it that you were frightened enough to flee, then had you watched and caught when you fled. Oh yes, you may be sure that your capture was her doing. She only needed some such reason to convince the others that the children shouldn't be left to your care. She has no intention of letting them forget that they are Edonaris, I assure you."

The bewildered Rehal had no way of knowing whom to trust. Her husband had been of the matriarch's faction, but she knew that Mhairestri had opposed the marriage—while Nyctasia had been one of the few people at court to show her much kindness. Most had simply taken no notice of her and she had thought to continue being safely ignored, but after Emeryc's death she had learned that she had enemies. She was not afraid for herself, but how could she possibly protect her children? "We should never have come here," she said helplessly. "Please—I only want to take them away. Let us go."

"But that is just what I want you to do, my dear. There *is* danger for them here—not from me or my followers, but from the enemies of the Edonaris. There are still those at large who will seek to destroy them because they are of Edonaris blood, and will one day be among the rightful rulers of Rhostshyl. Until there is true reconciliation in the city, I want the children kept out of harm's way. You're to take them into the Midlands, to an estate in the valley, where I have friends who'll make you welcome." She rose and began to pace back and forth, laying her plans. "It will be best if you tell no one of this, lest you be followed, but I'll send my most trusted people to safeguard you on the way. Will you do this, Rehal?"

For all that Rehal knew, Nyctasia might be sending them to their deaths, but she had no choice save to obey, and both women knew it. "If you think it best, Rhaicime."

"I would do the same if they were my own," Nyctasia said seriously. "I know you mistrust me, and the *vahn* knows I cannot blame you, but think on this, Rehal .... You and your children are in my power. If I wished them harm, I could just give my orders and have done with it—there is no one to stop me. Why then should I take the trouble to tell you lies? I've no need to deceive you, and nothing to gain by it, do you see? Their death is no part of my design. They are vital to my plans." She broke off to look over at Deirdras, who was staring solemnly at her over a cup of milk. "Their lives are as precious to me as if they were in truth my own children. I care only for the future of this city, and they are the future of this House. I need them. Why, Deirdras is my heir."

Rehal wanted desperately to believe her. Much of what Nyctasia said made sense, but she ventured to ask a question, feeling that she had to know the worst. "You may have children yourself one day, my lady—what then?"

Nyctasia had made sacrifices of which she rarely spoke. Now she said only, "You forget that I'm a witch, Rehal. My brother's daughter will inherit the Rhaicimate from me." She retrieved her sword and dagger, and put them on, then kissed Rehal and said, "I'll leave you now. You are not under guard, but if you wish to leave the palace, take an escort with you, for the *vahn*'s sake. The city's not safe, believe me."

She called to Greymantle, and Leirven clambered down from his stool and followed, dismayed at the prospect of losing his new friend. "Doggie," he explained earnestly to his mother and the lady with the shiny gold chain in her hair, "he *likes* him."

"He means that the dog likes him," Deirdras translated shyly. She stood a little to one side, now, watching Nyctasia warily lest she should suddenly decide to stab Leirven. When Nyctasia picked him up, she started forward, alarmed, but the bloodthirsty Rhaicime only set her little brother astride the great dog, much to the boy's delight.

Nyctasia winked at Deirdras. "You seem quite agreeable when you're not threatening one with cutlery," she remarked, then asked Leirven, "Would you like to live in the country, and learn to swim, and have a whelp of your own?"

The child considered this seriously. "Big one?" he asked hopefully.

"The pick of the litter," said Nyctasia.

Leirven gave a yell and kicked his heels into Greymantle's sides. "Derdis, look at *me*," he demanded. Greymantle, who was a patient animal, and used to children, simply settled back on his haunches and let

his rider slide to the floor. Deirdras caught him.

"I wish I could keep them with me," Nyctasia said to Rehal, her voice filled with longing. "Not long ago, I asked myself why I had come back to this *vahn*-forsaken city, but when I look upon them, I remember." She knelt and kissed Leirven. "Goodnight, little one. Time you were abed."

Deirdras submitted stiffly to her embrace. "Daughter," said Nyctasia, "this family has another matriarch, and you shall meet her soon, if all goes well. Learn what you can from her." She kissed Deirdras quickly and hurried away.

Nyctasia always claimed in later years that she had known, when she sent her brother's widow to the Edonaris of Vale, that she was sending them a bride for Raphistain. But if she knew, she said nothing about it at the time.

## 23

"UNBIND HIM!" NYCTASIA ordered curtly. "Do you think I cannot defend myself against an unarmed youth? Leave us." The guards obeyed, and Corson too retired, at a nod from Nyctasia.

Lord Jehamias ar'n Teirynd, son of Rhavor ar'n Teirynd, and principal heir of the House of Teirynd, looked around him uncertainly, trying to decide what to do. He ought to attack the Rhaicime, of course, but she could recall her guards in an instant, and she herself was armed with a sword. He could not possibly accomplish anything, except perhaps his own death. Still, he would undoubtedly be killed before long, so perhaps he should try to die heroically....

Nyctasia was sitting at the window, watching him closely. "Don't be a fool," she advised him. "Sit down."

Jehamias sat. He might as well hear what she had to say, though he thought he knew what to expect. If it were merely a matter of his execution, as an enemy of the ruling house, he would not have been brought before the Rhaicime. She did not need to see him to arrange that. It could only be information that she wanted from him, but though he might not be a hero, he was not a traitor either. When she discovered that he wouldn't willingly tell her what she wished to know, she'd surely order other means to be employed. Jehamias sometimes thought that he'd be able to stand up to torture, and at other times he was sure that he couldn't. He'd had more than enough time to think over such things as he sat in his small stone cell and waited to learn what the Edonaris would do with him. Now, at last, he was about to find out.

It seemed to him a long time before Nyctasia spoke again, and then she said only, "You favor your father, Jehame."

Stung at her use of the familiar form of his name, he said angrily, "It ill becomes the victor to taunt the vanquished. I expected better, even from an Edonaris." He was appalled, at his own boldness, but then what had he to lose?

Lady Nyctasia looked genuinely surprised. "What do you—oh, I see—but I didn't mean to mock you, upon my word. I took the liberty of addressing you thus because I was a friend of your father's. But of course you didn't know that."

"They say you killed my father."

Nyctasia sighed. "And do you believe that?" she asked with weary disgust.

"I've never known what to believe about you," Jehamias said carefully. "My father always spoke well of you himself, but he was the only one who did. The others all claimed that you'd cursed him—except for my father's servant-boy, Randal. He'd sworn to have vengeance on you and when he disappeared they said you'd killed him too." He shook his head in confusion. "But then he came back and told people that you were innocent after all, or so I heard. Of course he was sent away in disgrace. I was never allowed to listen to his story."

"He was devoted to your father. He tried quite sincerely to kill me, I assure you—he just wasn't very good at that sort of thing. But there were several professional murderers after my blood at that time, and they fared no better, so perhaps it wasn't his fault."

Jehamias half smiled. "My father once said that you were the only Edonaris with a sense of humor."

Nyctasia laughed, but she felt a stab of sorrow for her old friend. “I loved him, Jehame,” she said simply. “Here, we’ll have a toast to his memory. That would have amused him—I who always warned him against drink. But you look as if you could do with a little wine.” She went to the table and filled two small goblets, mixing her own till it was half water.

Jehamias had never in his life wanted a drink as he did then, but he refused the goblet Nyctasia held out to him. She had not touched her own. “Oh, come, use your sense,” she said. “If I intended to kill you, you’d have been dead days ago.”

It was not poison Jehamias feared, but a drug to loosen his tongue. All the talk of his father must have been meant to put him off his guard. “Why would you let me live?” he countered.

“Does this city need another corpse?” Nyctasia demanded. She sipped from his goblet herself, then offered it to him again. This time he accepted it. “Jehame, you could be very useful to me, alive.”

“Why should I be useful to you? If you think I’ll betray—”

“Not to me, then,” Nyctasia said impatiently. “Not to the House of Edonaris. To Rhostshyl! You can help me to save the city if you choose. Or you can go forth and gather the remnants of the people still loyal to your House, and lead them against me. They’ll be killed, of course, probably you’ll be killed, most likely more innocent people will be killed, but if that’s what you want I’ll see that you have the chance. And then I’ll destroy you, with a free conscience and clean hands. ‘They left me no choice,’ I’ll declare. ‘I offered them peace, but they demanded the sword.’ Will that satisfy you?”

Jehamias sat with his head bowed, looking at the floor. “No,” he said softly, “I don’t want more war in the city. We couldn’t win it, I know that, and even if we could, I’d not be the one to declare it. But I will not help you hunt down those of our people who’ve escaped, or give you the names of those still loyal to us—not even in the name of peace. Nor do I think that you can force me to it.” His jaw shook slightly, and he clenched his teeth to hide it.

But Nyctasia merely dismissed his words with a wave of her hand. “Oh, I could, you know,” she said indifferently, “if I had any use for such information. But you mistake me, my friend. I have a much crueller fate in store for you. I want you to marry my sister Tiambria.”

Jehamias could only stare.

“She’s a vixen, I admit, but perhaps time will mellow her temper. Think of it as a sacrifice of your personal peace in the interests of municipal peace,” she suggested.

Jehamias found his voice at last. “But—but—” he gasped, “marriage between a Teiryn and an Edonaris! It’s impossible, you’re mad—”

“You know what they say. Jehame—all the Edonaris are mad, and all the Teiryn are stupid. I may be mad, but I don’t think you’re stupid. Are you? Are you too stupid to see what such a marriage-alliance could mean? Think of it—true peace, not this worrisome waiting for the next blow to fall, and the next act of vengeance. You’ll be head of the House of Teiryn when you come of age, and Tiambria too will serve on the Rhaicimate. If you both declare that our two families are united, who is to withstand you?”

“That’s all very well, lady, but nothing would make my elders consent to this, even though it might be the last hope of our House. They’d die rather.”

“I know. The Teiryn aren’t the only fools in the city. My own kin will oppose the plan just as blindly. The matriarch Mhairestri will never forgive me.”

“The Edonaris have the advantage. Surely you can’t expect them to give it up?”

“I *demand* that they do so! This is no time to consider the advantage of our House. Only the good of the city matters now. I have the authority to overrule your kin and act on your behalf myself, in the name of the Rhaicimate. Tiambria is already my ward, by law, and the others have no say in the matter. It’s your consent that concerns me.”

Jehamias looked more wretched than ever. “I *can’t*, Rhaicime. It’s not that I scorn to wed an Edonaris, but if I did it I’d become an outcast, I’d be nameless, a ghost .... My family would disown me, and yours would despise me.”

“I know what I ask of you, believe me. I too have been called a traitor. One grows accustomed to it, however.”

“Worse, lady, I’d be called a coward. Folk would say I did it only to save my life.”

Nyctasia nodded. "You're right, I'm afraid. It will be hard, yes, but duty generally is."

"And if I refuse?"

"Oh, you'll not be put to death—nothing so merciful. If you won't help to save the city, you will have to live to see it die."

"It's true, then, that you mean to issue a general pardon?"

So the rumors had somehow reached even to the prisoners of war. That was well. "There is precedent for it," Nyctasia pointed out, "on occasions of extraordinary celebration—such as this wedding will be." She paused, letting Jehamias realize the weight of his own responsibility. "At the ceremony, you and Tiambria will declare a number of pardons, with my authority, and later—perhaps at the birth of your first child—certain others will be freed. By then perhaps they'll be resigned to the union of our Houses, and at least the affairs of the city will be more settled. Once order has been established it will be more difficult for them to make mischief."

"And so the fate of my kin rests with me," he said, his voice accusing.

Nyctasia shrugged. "Yes, in a way. I'll not tell you that the general pardon will only be granted if you fall in with my plans, but it will take place much sooner if you do. And if you don't ... then I fear that the pardons will be in vain. Unless a bond is first forged between the ruling families, those who are spared will only turn to the attack, again, and be crushed—you know it well. If your kinsmen and their followers were at liberty now, they would seek to avenge themselves on the Edonaris before the day was out. Can you deny it?"

Jehamias couldn't, and didn't try. "But do you believe that this marriage can prevent that?"

"I believe that nothing *else* can prevent it," Nyctasia said slowly. "Mhairestri and her party would solve the problem by killing all of you, and"—she paused in her pacing and fixed Jehamias with her grey gaze—"it may yet come to that. But we can try first to establish a marriage-alliance, a dynasty that shares Edonaris and Teiryn blood. If the next generation of heirs to the Rhaicimate belong to both Houses, there is at least a chance that both Houses will accept their rule."

"And a chance that neither will."

"Yes, curse you! But a chance is better than certain doom. I'm afraid, Jehame. Afraid that if I'm forced to put down a rebellion now the city will be crippled beyond recovery. Let us give Rhostshyl this chance—if it fails, we shall be no worse off than we are. All who are willing to let the past lie will be permitted to take part in the city's future. I know there will be those on both sides who will continue to foster the feud, but I have hopes that they will be too few to prevail, and I shall take no steps against them unless I must. But if they threaten the peace ..." She shrugged again. "Perhaps they could be sent into exile, but I expect they'll eventually force me to kill them. Rhostshyl has suffered enough for our families' pride, and I'll have no more of it. You too, Jehamias, may have to condemn your own people for the good of the city. I hide nothing from you. You will be cursed by your kin, as I have been, but one day they will see that you were right, I swear it." Jehamias wiped sweat from his face, but still said nothing. Nyctasia drew a long breath. "And it would have been your father's wish that you do as I bid."

At this he looked up, seeming almost hopeful. "How do you know that?"

"You will not believe me, I daresay, but I was nearly your stepmother. For years I sought to persuade Rhavor to marry me, and at the end he saw that there was no other way. Had he lived, I believe we would have married."

"I do believe you," Jehamias said unsteadily. He was like a man suddenly awakened from sleep. "Do you believe in dreams, lady?"

Nyctasia did not find the question strange. "You've dreamt of your father?"

He nodded. "He said, 'Greet your sister for me. It seems she's to have her way at last.' And he laughed. I have no sister, lady. But if you're to have your way, then that message is for you."

"He laughed at everything," said Nyctasia, smiling.

"He'd have thought it a fine joke to marry an Edonaris. He'd not have cared what the whole city thought of him. Why did he refuse, then?"

"Because he cared what the whole city thought of me. He wished to spare me the sacrifices—and the dangers—that I shall bring upon you, his son, and upon my own sister. And I would spare you both if I

could, but there's no time for such scruples now. There is only time to act, and act without hesitation, before it's too late."

Jehamias's sigh was almost a groan. "I wish I had your faith that it is not already too late, my lady."

Nyctasia was sure of him now, but she offered her final argument nevertheless. "You ask if I believe in dreams," she began, "and that is a matter that does not admit of certainty. But I can tell you this: I dreamed of this marriage before the idea had ever occurred to me. I saw a wedding-procession wend through the scarred streets of Rhostshyl, and it seemed to me that Rhavor and I were the newlyweds, though I knew that this could never be. Only long afterward did I begin to see the truth of it. You were the groom I took for Rhavor as a youth; the bride I took for myself as a girl was Tiambria. And, Jehame, wherever they passed, stone walls stood as if they had never fallen, and wooden walls were as if they had never burned."

Jehamias listened, spellbound.

"You understand, then," Nyctasia concluded, "that I will do anything I must, to make that dream a reality .... But I needn't threaten you. I think."

"No," said Jehamias, with a rueful grin much like his father's, "you needn't send for the thumbscrews, Rhaicime. I shall be honored to accept the Lady Tiambria's hand, if she'll have me."

"Well, my sister has not yet given her consent, not altogether," Nyctasia admitted. "But she will."

"I won't! Nothing could make me marry a Teiryn! I'll not oppose you over the pardon, 'Tasia, but I'll never agree to *this*, never! Why, it might have been he who killed Emeryc, for all that we know."

"That is not at all likely," Nyctasia said quietly, "Jehamias fought bravely, they say, but by all accounts Emeryc was set upon by several at once. It is of no consequence, however, whether he did or not. War is war. Emeryc would certainly have killed him, given the chance."

"That Emeryc would have killed him hardly seems a reason for me to marry him!"

As Nyctasia had expected, her sister was proving far more difficult to deal with than Jehamias ar'n Teiryn had been. After all, it was in many ways to his advantage to accept the alliance, but Tiambria could only lose prestige by marrying a vanquished enemy. Nyctasia would willingly have locked her in a tower and kept her on crusts and water, had she not known—being an Edonaris herself—that such treatment would only make Tiambria more stubborn. The only way to influence her would be to harness that Edonaris pride in the service of duty.

"This is my own fault, Briar, I suppose," Nyctasia sighed, deliberately using her sister's childhood nickname. "I spoiled you when you were a child. Before Mhairestri turned you against me. You and 'Kasten were always afraid of her, and you still are. You may have defied her to side with me, but you're afraid to break with her completely, aren't you? You know that if you take this step there'll be no appeasing her, no getting back into her favor."

"I see now that I was wrong to defy her at all. But even Mhairestri never dreamed you'd betray your own blood like this. If I'd known, I never would have taken your part."

"Of course not, my dear. That's why I didn't mention it before. But I am head of this family now, and ruler of the Rhaicimate, and it's my displeasure you should fear, not the matriarch's. You'll obey me or suffer the consequences, I warn you."

But Tiambria paid no attention to her threats. "It's past belief that even *you*, 'Tasia, could expect us to enter into kinship with the Teiryn. The very idea's degrading. It's indecent."

"Briar, I am aware that you were raised to regard the Teiryn as a breed of detestable vermin. So was I. But you're no longer a child. You're of an age now to understand that we were taught a great deal of malicious nonsense. The Teiryn line is as old and noble as our own—you may consult the City History if you doubt my word. I grant you that there are fools among them, but every family has its share of fools. And I don't propose to marry you to Lord Ettasuan or to any other who's unworthy of you. Jehamias Rhavor is not only your equal in rank, but your superior in good sense and good breeding. You could do far worse."

Corson was bored with the argument, which she'd heard so often of late that she could recite it almost as well as Nyctasia. She secured the doors, bowed, and went into the next room, where she

could at least sit down without committing a breach of court etiquette. She pulled a bench over to the curtained doorway and settled down to wait out the dispute.

Nyctasia had been arguing for days, with everyone from Teiryn prisoners to her own closest allies, but she had so far avoided confronting Tiambria directly, preferring to wait for the girl to come to her. Corson could well understand her reluctance to face Tiambria. If anyone was a match for Nyctasia, will for will and word for word, it was her young sister.

Corson was growing bored even with the luxurious life of the court. She trailed after Nyctasia all day, rarely letting her out of her sight, and regarding nearly everyone as a potential assassin. But except when Ettasuan ar'n Teiryn attacked Nyctasia with his bare hands, there had not been much for Corson to do. She occasionally caught people lurking about the grounds who couldn't account for themselves to her satisfaction, and these, if they were armed, she turned over to the guards. Those who tried to bribe her met with the same fate. She never heard any more about them afterward.

Nyctasia was always hard at work and had little time for Corson, though she was always with her. When she wasn't defending her plans, she was dictating letters, receiving petitioners, settling disputes, or studying reports on the spring sowing or the repairs to the city walls. She often rode into the city to inspect conditions in various quarters for herself, and to see that her orders were being carried out. When Corson tried to persuade her to go to Chiastelm for a few days' rest, she said grimly that there would be no occasion for rest till after the wedding.

The only diversion she allowed herself was to go out now and then with the hunters who scoured the countryside for game, to help feed the city. Hunting was not one of Corson's favorite pastimes, but it made for a change from the court, at least, and she dared not let Nyctasia go without her. She'd not be the first of the nobility to meet with a stray arrow in a hunting accident. Corson insisted that she wear a shirt of fine chain mail beneath her jacket, Nyctasia complained that it hindered her bow-arm, but she brought down her share of game nonetheless.

The hunting-parties had so far been peaceful. Indeed, there had been far less trouble since her return than Nyctasia had anticipated, "People have begun to believe that I bear a charmed life, that I can't be killed," she told Corson, "and that my enemies inevitably perish. It's a most expedient reputation to have. I encourage it." Corson had begun to think about traveling up the coast for a while. She wasn't needed here now.

Greymantle jumped noisily down from the bed and came to join her, nudging her hand with his nose. Corson scratched his head and muttered, "You're restless too, aren't you, Grey? You're no palace lap-dog. You need room to run." Grey laid his head on her knee and dozed contentedly. If he was dissatisfied with court life, he never gave any sign of it.

"You yourself refused to be married against your will!" Corson heard Tiambria shout. "You renounced Thierran, and yet you expect me to marry a Teiryn!"

Corson peered out at them from behind the curtains. The little she-wolf might try to push Nyctasia off the balcony, after all.

"I was willing to marry a Teiryn myself," Nyctasia was saying. "One reason—one among many—that I refused Thierran was that I hoped to establish a marriage-alliance with Lord Rhavor before he died. I failed, but I tell you, you and Jehamias are destined to succeed." Earnestly, she related her dream of the joyous wedding-procession.

But Tiambria was scornful of her visions. "Dreams show us what we wish to see," she said with a sneer.

"Briar, in that dream I saw Emeryc and Lehannie among the dead, with Thierran and Mescrisdan and Brethald. I was far away in the Midlands then. I'd had no news of them." (And in that dream she had seen Erystalben among the living, but of this she did not speak.)

Tiambria frowned. "You're lying."

"No, my dear, if I were lying you'd believe me without question. Rhavor too appeared to me, and said that it was not too late for our marriage-vows. That can mean only one thing."

"Very well then, *you* marry his wretched son."

"That wouldn't do, I'm afraid," Nyctasia said, sounding amused. "Jehamias is an appealing young

man, certainly, and no doubt he'd make a pleasing consort. It is I who am unfit for this union, sister. I am barren. This marriage-alliance must provide heirs to both Houses—I believe that the future of the city depends upon it.”

“If the future of the city depends upon my bearing brats of Teiryn blood, then let the city perish!” Tiambria cried, and for a moment the two stood face to face, both white with anger, grey eyes blazing. Their features were much alike. Then Nyctasia turned away to the window, looking just as she had when she'd stood there like a statue on the first evening of her return.

“There speaks an Edonaris,” she said in a low, harsh tone. “Let our honor be abandoned, let our duty be undone, as long as our name is inviolate, our power unchallenged. Look!” She pulled Tiambria to the window. “Look out there! It was no stray lightning-bolt or careless lamplighter that burned half the city. We did it ourselves. We, who are charged with the welfare of the people.”

“No,” said Tiambria. “It wasn't our doing. Blame the Teiryn—they began the feud.”

“They did, but we sustained it, Briar. We saw what they failed to see, that we were too strong for them, that they would never overthrow us. And so we refused peace whenever it was offered—oh, yes, the city records will bear me out. Your forebears and mine would have no terms of peace. They knew they had the upper hand. They forced the Teiryn to carry on the feud.”

“What they did is no fault of mine. Why should I be the one to pay for their pride?”

“All your life you've enjoyed the privileges they won for you, and never questioned your right to them. This war too is your heritage, never doubt it. And were you not of the matriarch's party? Did you not agree when she called for the destruction of the Teiryn?”

“Of the Teiryn, yes! I didn't know it would mean the destruction of so many others, of so much—”

Nyctasia looked almost pitying. “You didn't know? Do you suppose it is of any comfort to the suffering, to the bereaved, that you didn't *know*? Do you think it makes you any the less accountable for your actions? It's time you learned that an Edonaris has obligations as well as rights, and you yourself have much to answer for. Now go! And keep your face from my sight until you're ready to do your duty. I'm ashamed to call you sister!”

Tiambria stood her ground. “You looked exactly like Mharestri when you said that,” she spat.

Nyctasia's hand flew up to slap her, and she was prevented only by the sudden realization that this was precisely what Mharestri would have done. Meeting Tiambria's defiant stare, she slowly lowered her arm, saying. “And you, my dear, look very like Deirdras just now. Send for your cloak—you're to come for a short ride with me. The view from the palace windows is none too clear.”

Corson rejoined them at once, frowning to herself. Though a change was always welcome, she considered Nyctasia's visits to the heart of the city as an unnecessary risk. The Lady Tiambria too would be a target for the enemies of the Edonaris. They'd have to bring extra guards, and that would make them even more conspicuous. Nyctasia usually knew what she was doing, Corson thought, but since she'd returned to Rhostshyl she'd seemed to be courting danger. And if she cared nothing for her own life, no bodyguard could defend her.

They left the palace compound by a back gate, accompanied by two other guards and a groom, with Corson bringing up the rear as she watched to make certain that they weren't followed. The farther they rode from the palace, the poorer and more crowded the streets became. Some folk scattered at the sight of armed guards, but most had lost fear along with hope, and only stopped to stare at the riders, bowing as they passed. Few seemed to have any idea who they were.

At the mouth of a narrow alley, they left their horses with the groom, and he handed Nyctasia the heavy satchel he carried. The houses in this quarter had been gutted by fire, and the smell of charred timber was still thick in the air. As Nyctasia led the way through the litter of refuse and debris, Tiambria saw to her astonishment that there were people still living in these wretched, half-fallen dwellings.

Here Nyctasia was known, and when news of her arrival spread she was quickly surrounded by a knot of the city's most destitute and desperate. They dared not press close to the Lady Tiambria, but she had a far better look at Rhostshyl's poorest than she was accustomed to. A ragged beggar-child grasped at Nyctasia's sleeve, and she took his hand, stepping aside to let Tiambria see him. “Explain to this one that you didn't know what war would bring,” she murmured. Half the child's face was hideously scarred

by fire, one eye sealed shut forever, Tiambria turned away, sickened at the sight. "Perhaps we should take him back with us, make a page of him," Nyctasia suggested, "and have him before our eyes every day, lest we forget what we now know." Tiambria made no reply.

They visited several of the ruined houses, where people lay on the floor, injured or sick, and hungry children huddled in corners. Tiambria watched, silent, as Nyctasia changed the dressings on wounds and treated savage burns with salves and unguents. At each place she left medicines or bandages, money to buy food or to pay the gravediggers. Finally Tiambria too stripped off her costly rings and bracelets and gave them to those who appealed to her for alms. She spread her cloak over a woman who lay shivering with fever and whispering wordlessly to herself.

Nyctasia said nothing more to her for some time, and only when they were ready to depart did she seem to remember her sister's presence. "Do you know, it's the strangest thing, Briar," she remarked, "but none of these folk has ever asked me, 'Why should I be the one to pay?'"

"But ... even if I marry the heir of the Teiryne, 'Tasia"—it was the first time she had admitted the possibility—"it won't undo the harm that's been done."

"No, but you'll have done your part to see that it doesn't happen again. That's all you can do, now, and it's little enough to ask of you. You can never pay what you owe."

"I hate you," Tiambria whispered, her voice choking.

Nyctasia gave her a tired smile. "I love you," she said.

## 24

NYCTASIA HAD SENT her respects to the Lady Mharestri as soon as she first arrived in Rhostshyl, but she had received no reply and had not expected one. But when the day appointed for the wedding was only a fortnight away, she was suddenly summoned to present herself to the matriarch.

It was evening, and Nyctasia had already retired to her apartments, with only Corson and Greymantle in attendance. Corson was practicing her penmanship by writing a long letter to Steifann about the opulence of the court and the importance of her own position. When she stopped to rest her hand, she listened with pleasure as Nyctasia played the gilded harp and sang an old ballad. Nyctasia had been more at her ease of late, since preparations for the wedding ceremony had been set under way, and Corson had found her better company.

But when she had dismissed Mharestri's messenger, she leaned her head on her hands and said resignedly, "I might have known that matters were progressing too smoothly. I taunted Tiambria for her fear of Mharestri, but in truth I still fear her myself. Well, it won't do to keep her waiting. You may as well stay here, Corson. I can't appear before the matriarch with an armed escort."

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't be respectful. It would look as though I didn't trust her."

"You *don't* trust her," Corson pointed out, "She's tried to have you killed before."

"Oh, of course everyone knows that I don't trust her, but you see, it would be discourteous of me to *show* it. Don't worry, she'd not send for me in order to make an attempt on my life. She wouldn't put me on my guard first."

"Discourteous! I should have thought it more discourteous to try to have people murdered," Corson rejoined. "Take Greymantle with you at least."

\* \* \*

There was nothing welcoming in the matriarch's manner when she received Nyctasia. She remained as straight and stiff as the hard, narrow chair she sat in, and no word or gesture of hers acknowledged Nyctasia's presence.

Nyctasia dropped to one knee before her, in the proper attitude of formal humility, and reverently kissed her hand, "Madame," she said, "you do me honor. I hope I find you well."

The old woman pushed her away, looking down at her coldly. "So you have come to complete the destruction of this House, Nyctasia Selescq."



Nyctasia stood, but remained facing the Lady Mharestri. "I am sorry that I cannot please you, Madame, but I will allow no further bloodshed in this city, not Teiryn blood, nor that of the innocent. There is nothing to be gained."

"No, to you our name is nothing!"

"It will be to the honor of our name to show mercy to a fallen enemy, to allow peace to return to the city."

"Peace! Can you not see that the only way to bring peace to Rhostshyl is to destroy the enemy while they are in our power? If the Teiryn are not crushed now, they will rise against us again, and more will die on both sides."

Nyctasia was silent. It was the one argument which held any weight with her. Mharestri pressed her advantage, becoming persuasive, almost cajoling. Nyctasia was struck afresh by her resemblance to the Lady Nocharis. "I've lived long ... long, Nyctasia ... and I know that some things never change. I've seen your kind before. You are young, you believe that things which have never happened before may yet come to pass at your bidding, that words may do the work of swords, that two bulls may graze in one field. It must be so because you would have it so." She shook her head, unassailable in her certainty, "I tell you, *one* house must rule. As long as there are two, war will be inevitable."

Nyctasia leaned against the mantle, her hands pressed to her temples. "I am no longer so young," she said. "I know that you may be right—that is my greatest fear." (*Only remember that you are a healer.*) "But the future is always uncertain. I will not murder the survivors of this battle to prevent an uprising that may never come. I cannot." (*Let nothing persuade you to forget that.*)

"Then do not speak to me of the welfare of the city! It is the welfare of your own spirit that concerns you."

"Perhaps," said Nyctasia, more to herself than to Mharestri, "but if that were so, why would I have returned here?"

"You are weak, weak! Now, when this house needs a strong hand to guide it! Fool, ah—" the old woman leaned back in her chair, breathless, weak with passion, and there was a long silence in the chamber. "That I should live to see the end of this family ...!" she said at last.

"I mean to unite the family—"

"Traitor! You mean to unite the family to our enemies!"

"You have said that one house must rule—very well, I shall make one house of the two. And, Mharestri, I believe that that house will be the House of Edonaris. The Teiryn will become part of us—we shall devour them as surely as the she-spider devours her mate. Edonaris blood will tell, you know it is so. And I—I have reason to believe that many generations will not suffice to change that. If we continue to intermarry with the Teiryn, in time there will be no Teiryn."

"And no Edonaris! You will have us a bastard breed, our line polluted by Teiryn blood, all so that you may say you were not guilty of shedding that blood. You have ever been a dreamer, a madwoman. It is useless to reason with you."

"Certainly this discussion is useless, Madame," said Nyctasia, her courtesy unwavering. "I weary you to no purpose, I shall take my leave of you, with your permission."

The matriarch pierced her with an angry stare. "Do you love your House, Nyctasia Selescq?"

Nyctasia hesitated. "I love this city."

"Answer me!"

It was pointless to lie. "I do not, Madame. I did once."

"Get out of my sight," said Mharestri with surprising calm.

Nyctasia made one final effort, though she felt little hope of success. "Mharestri—Mother—" she pleaded—"You must love this House for both of us. I know that you want what is best for the Edonaris, as I want what is best for Rhostshyl, but the family and the city cannot be divided—surely our wishes must often be the same. Would it not be to the benefit of both if we should at least appear to be unified? Only let me report that you withhold judgment on my plans, not that you approve or support them, but at least—that way—"

"I see. Thus, it shall not appear that I was simply powerless to prevent you. My dignity will be

spared,” Mharestri said disdainfully.

Nyctasia spread her hands. “Yes,” she admitted. “And if I succeed in bringing about a truce, you will be honored for your farsightedness. If I fail, you have reserved the right to condemn my actions. Only permit me ...” her voice trailed off to silence as she regarded the matriarch’s face.

The old woman gripped the arms of her chair. “You are Rhaicime,” she hissed. “Do as you will—but not with my blessing! If I cannot save the honor of this House, I must look to my own. I have told you once to leave me—go! Get out! Get out of here!”

Nyctasia bowed low and said, “Give you a good night, Madame.” She backed out the door without once turning her back to the Lady Mharestri, a mark of respect usually reserved for royalty, and requiring considerable skill to perform with grace.

Corson sat on the edge of the bed, brushing her hair, and wishing she had the courage to summon one of Nyctasia’s maids to brush it for her. Most of the servants accepted Corson as a person of some authority, but the lady’s maids clearly thought it unsuitable that an ill-bred mercenary should share their mistress’s chambers. They seemed to regard Corson and Greymantle’s presence there with equal disfavor, and behaved as far as possible as if neither of them existed.

Nyctasia had explained that a few of them were Mharestri’s spies, and others simply jealous that a mere guard was on terms of greater intimacy with the Rhaicime than they were themselves. Indeed, they might well feel slighted, for Nyctasia demanded little attendance, and rather neglected them. She preferred privacy to being waited upon; she rarely wore clothes that were difficult to put on or take off unassisted, and her close-cropped hair required little attention.

“I need a maid more than she does,” Corson thought, “but I don’t suppose the haughty little chits would lower themselves to wait on me. Nyc would brush my hair for me, but not her rutting proud maids-in-waiting ....”

Corson brooded on the paradox of the aristocracy, then yawned and lay back on the bed, stretching. She removed her leather vest and chain mail and tossed them on the floor, leaving only her comfortable loose linen shirt.

But not until Nyctasia came in and barred the door behind her did Corson take off her sword-belt. She hung it carefully over the headboard of the bed, where her weapons would be near at hand should she need them in the night. “Nyc,” she said, “if I told one of your lady’s maids to brush my hair, would she?”

“Yes, I believe so. They’ll ignore you if they can, but they’d be afraid to offend you outright, because they think I make a favorite of you. But I’d rather you didn’t call for a maid just yet. I don’t want any of my people to see that Mharestri’s upset me.”

Nyctasia found Corson a welcome sight, lolling lazily on the bed with her long hair flowing about her. She looked warm and inviting after the company of the harsh, forbidding Lady Mharestri. Nyctasia was drawn to her as to a comforting hearthfire on an icy winter night.

“You do look like a hind harried by hounds,” Corson observed. “What did the revered matriarch do to you?”

“Nothing—yet. But she means to do something soon, and I don’t know what. Now I’ll not sleep tonight for thinking about it.”

“Ah, I’ve told you time and again, you think too much. And stop that pacing, you make me giddy.” She reached out her long legs and caught Nyctasia between them. “If I can’t have a lady’s maid, you’ll have to do. Here, you can take off my boots for a change.”

“Is that any way for a common swordswoman to address a Rhaicime?” Nyctasia chided, but she obeyed, kneeling before Corson as she had before Mharestri, and tugging at her heavy boots.

Corson grinned down at her. “If you don’t like my manners, you can get yourself another bodyguard,” she suggested.

Nyctasia sat back on her heels and regarded her with a wry smile. “I should,” she agreed, “but where would I find another so fetching? Raphe called you the Goddess of Danger and Desire.”

“Mmm, he did?” Corson said appreciatively. She’d be sure to tell Steifann that. “That one knew

something about lovemaking—did you ever have him?”

Nyctasia laughed and shook her head. “We couldn’t, Raphe and I. We’d flirt, but—well, he looked so like my brothers ... and of course he couldn’t see me without thinking of ’Deisha. It was impossible.”

“Well, in the dark what’s the difference? You should have kept your eyes closed. When Raphe stops talking, he’s very fine indeed. On my oath, you Edonaris can talk till the stars fall.” She nudged Nyctasia with one foot. “I’ll wager the *true* hindrance twixt you and Raphe was that neither of you could keep quiet long enough to—no! Stop that, you—”

Nyctasia had grabbed Corson’s ankle, and was mercilessly tickling the sole of her foot. Corson, who was unbearably ticklish, writhed and cursed, pummeling Nyctasia with her free foot, and laughing helplessly.

“Grey,” Nyctasia called, “you’re not to let people kick me! Help!” Greymantle barked and wagged his tail helpfully. Nyctasia surrendered, released Corson’s ankle, and fell over on the floor, holding her side and groaning dramatically. “Half my ribs are broken,” she complained. “I could have you hanged for treason.”

“Yes, and you probably would too, nasty little bitch,” Corson grumbled, rubbing her tingling foot. “That’s the thanks I get for saving your life—first I’m tickled, then executed!” Both women started to giggle. “Next time someone tries to assassinate you, you ungrateful wretch, I’ll—”

“That—ooph—reminds me,” said Nyctasia, sitting up. “Corson, how would you like to be a Desthene?”

Corson forgot what she was saying. She’s done it again, she thought. Nyctasia’s gifts always took her by surprise. But, a *title!* Was it possible?

“... was originally a military rank, you know,” Nyctasia was explaining, “so it seems most appropriate for you. It meant ‘commander,’ or something of that sort. You’d not get the proceeds of the estate, mind you—not for some years, at least. The deaths in the city have left me with a number of titles at my disposal, but all those who receive them will have to agree to turn the revenues over to the City Treasury until Rhostshyl has returned to its former prosperity. But you’d be entitled to style yourself ‘lady,’ and have lodgings befitting a noblewoman whenever you’re at court, and there are some other minor prerogatives. What say you?”

“Nyc, do you mean it? Can you give a title to anyone you choose? I thought the other nobles had to agree. They’d never accept the likes of me among them.”

“I couldn’t legitimately ennoble anyone I wished, no, not on a mere whim. But you have shown yourself worthy of the distinction, you see, in accordance with established custom. You’ve performed noble deeds—heroic deeds—in the defense of the Rhaicimate, and it is no more than my duty to reward such service as it deserves. Corson, I *am* the Rhaicimate, and you’ve saved my life more than once—before the whole city, on one occasion. My peers may think it extravagant of me to invest you with a title, but they cannot deny that I am well within my rights to do so.” She smiled at Corson’s obvious delight. Kneeling before her again, she took both Corson’s hands between her own. “Corson, my valorous and faithful servant,” she recited, “do you accept the authority, appurtenances, dues, duties, obligations, rights and perquisites pertaining to the dignity of the Desthenate of the City of Rhostshyl?”

Laughing, Corson seized Nyctasia by the wrists, pulled her up onto the bed and kissed her ardently, holding her in a crushing embrace. “Will there be a ceremony?” she demanded.

Nyctasia settled comfortably against her, pillowing her head on Corson’s shoulder and stroking her thick, tawny hair. “Indeed, yes. As part of the wedding celebration, I’ll be conferring pardons on my enemies and titles on my allies. You’ll be one of many honored.”

“Can I invite Steifann to see it?”

“You may invite anyone you like,” Nyctasia promised. “Even the odious Trask.”

Corson chuckled. “They won’t believe it—*me*, a lady of title and influence, just like that fortuneteller predicted, the night I first met you.” Nyctasia’s doublet soon joined Corson’s vest on the floor. “I *did* give you a bruise!” Corson exclaimed. “What delicate skin you must have.”

Nyctasia smiled. “But you know I heal quickly, love.”

Corson gently kissed the dark mark below Nyctasia’s breast. “Sorry,” she said contritely.

“Oh, all right, I won’t have you hanged.” Nyctasia teased, nuzzling her neck. “It *would* be a shame, when milady has such a lovely throat,” She continued to caress Corson’s hair, letting her fingers follow its long waves to where they spilled over her ripe, full breasts.

Corson drew Nyctasia’s hand beneath her open shirt. “Lady Corson,” she murmured contentedly.

Nyctasia raised her head and kissed Corson lightly on the lips. “Lady Corisonde,” she corrected, kissing her again. “For the occasion of the formal investiture, we’ll use the Old Eswraine form. You’ll be the Lady Corisonde”—another kiss, soft and clinging—“Desthene li’Rhostshyl”—a harder kiss, now—“brenn Torisk.”

“I like the sound of that,” Corson whispered. “Tell it to me again.” She took Nyctasia by the hips and pressed her closer, kneading her thighs.

Nyctasia had no difficulty falling asleep that night, after all.

In the morning she was wakened with the news that the matriarch Mharestri had died during the night, after taking poison.

## 25

NYCTASIA BREAKFASTED ALONE with Corson, having given orders that no one else was to be told of Lady Mharestri’s death. “Curse her! She did it so that folk would say I’d poisoned her,” she told Corson.

“Did you?” Corson asked, tossing a piece of cheese to Grey-mantle.

Nyctasia half smiled, and shook her head. “No. I’d have waited till after the wedding, you see. She thinks—thought—that I’d have to postpone the festivities, in order to observe the traditional period of mourning. But I’ll not play her game. This is no time to respect the proprieties.” She rose and began to pace about, chewing a honey-roll and frowning. “The wedding will be held sooner instead,” she decided, gesturing with the pastry as she spoke. “It shall take place in a week’s time, before news of Mharestri’s death has had a chance to spread. There will be a grand state funeral some days afterward, and I shall declare that it was the matriarch’s dying wish that it be so.”

“Will anyone believe that?” Corson asked doubtfully.

“Certainly not. But it will show a certain courtesy to her memory, to say it.” Nyctasia sat down again, and went on with her breakfast quite calmly. “She will not stand in the way of my dream, Corson. She cannot. Her too I saw among the dead.”

The days passed quickly with the hurried preparations for the wedding celebration. Corson was fitted for an elegant gown, and trained assiduously for her part in the ceremony of investiture. She would have to descend a staircase and cross the great hall with all eyes upon her, then perform an elaborate obeisance before the assembled nobles and kneel to receive Nyctasia’s formal commendation.

“It’s only a few phrases of Old Eswraine, meaning that you’re exceedingly brave and loyal and worthy,” Nyctasia explained. “Then I shall take your hand and raise you up, and all the rest of it, and you’ve only to stand aside and wait. It’s really very simple.”

Corson was beginning to have serious misgivings about the whole affair. “But I *can’t* walk down stairs wearing that dress, Nyc,” she said desperately. “Or kneel! I can’t even *move*. The bodice is so tight I can’t bend, and the hem falls all over my feet, and the *train*—it’s worse than full armor! I’ll make a fool of myself.”

“Nonsense,” Nyctasia said soothingly, “the gown fits perfectly, and you look magnificent in it. You’ll be the most admired person in the company.”

This appeal to Corson’s vanity had its effect, but she still sought further reassurance. “It looks well enough, if I stand still and don’t stir a muscle, but if I move one arm I’ll tear it to shreds.”

“There will be no occasion for you to swing a sword. You’re to hold your hands so, and keep your back straight, just as I showed you. You’ve plenty of time to practice, if you like, but you already do the curtsy beautifully, Corson. I’ve seen you.”

“Oh yes, in an old robe, in front of the mirror. But before a lot of strangers, in that miserable gown! I’ll fall on my—”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort,” Nyctasia said firmly. “You’ve only to put one foot before the other, and the whole ordeal will be over in a moment. I know that court ceremony is strange to you, but you’ve nothing whatever to fear.” She chose her words deliberately. “Still, if you truly feel unequal to it ...”

As ever, Corson’s resolve stiffened at the suggestion that she was afraid. “It’s not that,” she grumbled. “It’s your position I’m thinking of. You said you must command the respect of those about you, but if I don’t acquit myself well, your people will find fault with you for trying to make a lady of a lout.” She shrugged. “If you don’t care for appearances, I surely don’t. You’ve only yourself to blame if I disgrace you. And I’ll kill anyone who laughs at me, so I warn you!”

“Fortunately, no one would be so ill-bred as to laugh. And a lady, Corson, would simply take no notice if they did. It would be a mistake to dignify such behavior with death.”

“I’ll try to remember that. Well, and what then—after I fall at your feet and you pick me up?”

“Very little, since you’ll be the last. The trumpets will sound, and everyone will come flocking to be presented to you. They’ll kiss your hand and congratulate you and bow, but you needn’t curtsy.”

Corson immediately forgot her bravado. “But what am I to say to them?” she wailed.

“Just thank them politely,” Nyctasia said patiently. “Do stop fretting. If you remember that you’re a lady and as good as any of them, they’ll be charmed by anything you say, I promise you.”

Corson nodded thoughtfully. “It’s true that folk already treat me differently here. The lady’s maids are as respectful as you please. And even Lady Elissa deigned to address me directly today.”

“Did she now! What did she want of you?”

“Your brat sister’d told her about the sights of the city you showed her, and Her Ladyship asked me whether you’d visited other parts of Rhostshyl as well.”

“Oho. And did you tell her the truth?”

Corson looked pleased with herself, “Well, I exaggerated a bit, perhaps. I said there was no part of Rhostshyl where you weren’t well known. Then I told her, ‘If she should be overthrown, half the people of the city would rise up and storm the palace.’”

Nyctasia hugged her, laughing. “My dear Corson, you haven’t a thing to worry about. A courtier born and bred couldn’t have answered her better.”

“Is that what they do, then—spread rumors?”

“That, and carry tales. Upon my word, you do learn quickly, Corson.”

“Corisonde, you mean,” said Corson, with a grin.

## Epilogue

ONCE AGAIN A messenger had arrived at The Jugged Hare with a letter from Corson, and as usual Steifann did not regard its contents as the exact unvarnished truth. In fact, he believed very little of it, and it was only with difficulty that the courier succeeded in convincing him that he and his people were indeed invited to witness the investiture of Corson brenn Torisk with the title and rank of Desthene, at the court of the Edonaris in Rhostshyl, upon the occasion of the solemnities attending the marriage-alliance between the noble Houses of Edonaris and Teiryn.

And Steifann still found it hard to believe, a few days later, when he stood in the great hall of the palace among the distinguished citizenry and aristocracy of Rhostshyl, watching Corson’s pert little friend Nyc confer honors and dignities upon those who knelt before her. She had somehow taken on the manner and mien of an empress, and it seemed impossible that she could ever have been a familiar visitor at his own tavern. Steifann felt that he must have dreamed it all, and that he was dreaming still.

He had always before refused to leave the Hare for more than a day, no matter how Corson had urged him to go off with her somewhere. This jaunt would take nearly a week in all, but it was not one of Corson’s fool escapades, after all. This was an important event that would never come again. How could he fail her at such a time? In the end, he had determined not only to go but to do the thing handsomely—this once, he would close the Hare and give everyone a rest, to celebrate Corson’s good fortune. Walden had declined to join him, but Annin had accepted, curious to see the pageantry. And Trask had given him no peace till he’d agreed to take him along as well.

Everything had been arranged for them, at Nyctasia's personal order. Her courier had escorted them to Rhostshyl, and seen to their lodgings. A page was assigned to look after their needs and serve as their guide at court. They had even been provided with suitable clothes for the occasion. But Steifann felt out of place and awkward nevertheless. He was uncomfortable with his fine, stiff new clothes and with the refined, stiff courtesy of those around him. He was too tall to go unnoticed in any crowd, and he was sure that these elegant gentlefolk were all staring at him, calling him a clumsy, mannerless oaf. And why hadn't he had any sign from Corson since he'd arrived in Rhostshyl? When wine was offered to the company, Steifann partook of it very freely, and often.

Annin was indifferent to the behavior or the opinions of her fellow guests, but now that her curiosity had been satisfied she was beginning to grow bored with the spectacle. She wished that Nyc would get on with it, for the Hlann's sake, so that she could be off to keep an assignation she'd made with a handsome steward for a tryst when the morning's festivities were over. "It's a shame Corson's the last," she complained. "We'll have to wait through the whole lot, to see her."

"It's a place of honor," Trask informed her with the air, of one who had long been thoroughly familiar with court procedure. He was already learning to mimic the manners of the nobles around him, and he felt neither uneasy nor restless in their society. He had exhausted Nyctasia's page with his questions, then patronizingly promised to commend him to the Rhaicime, who, he explained, was an intimate friend of his household. The bewildered page had no idea what to make of Trask and his companions. They were clearly common working people, yet they were here as guests of the Lady Nyctasia herself, and they referred to her as "Nyc," speaking of her with the most shocking familiarity. It would seem that at least some of the strange stories about the Rhaicime must be true ....

Corson would have been on hand to welcome Steifann herself had she not been a prisoner, all that morning, of a formidable array of maids and seamstresses who were intent on making scores of final preparations to her apparel and her person. Corson was bathed, scented, powdered and fussed over endlessly before she was permitted to dress in the precious gown of brittle cloth-of-gold and ivory lace. Her hair alone took hours to wash and arrange to her handmaids' satisfaction. Corson would simply have braided it and pinned it up, but instead they somehow gathered much of it into an intricate net of pearls at the back of her head, and let the rest fall over her back, entwined with long skeins and loops of pearls. Another fillet of pearls circled her brow, and strands of them adorned her gown as well, fastened at each shoulder with an ivory clasp and falling gracefully across her breast just above the low-cut bodice.

Corson had been draped in layers of frothy undergarments that made the skirts of her gown stand out stiffly around her, like the wings of a golden pavilion. Then the long, trailing sleeves were stitched into place at last, making Corson feel more than ever like a ship in full rigging, becalmed by dead seas. She could not be expected to carry herself down a flight of stairs, not like this! It was impossible. It must be some mistake.

But then it was time to present herself to the assembly waiting in the hall below.

Nyctasia had anticipated the sensation Corson's appearance would make on the company, and she was not disappointed. Those who had disapproved of her raising her bodyguard to the rank of Desthene would never again question her judgment, she thought with satisfaction.

The sun was high in the sky, filling the tall windows with light, and Corson was bathed in a golden radiance as she began very slowly to descend the marble staircase. Her bearing was straight and graceful, her beauty undimmed by the splendor of her garments. She seemed to drift down the steps, holding up her billowing skirts slightly before her, with her long hands bent elegantly at the wrist, exactly as she'd been taught.

"The Lady Corisonde Desthene li'Rhostshyl brenn Torisk," announced the herald.

An absolute silence fell on the hall at first, but it gave way almost at once to an excited murmur of admiration and speculation. Few of those present recognized this statuesque beauty as the sullen, suspicious guard who had been following Nyctasia for weeks like a grim shadow. Even Trask forgot himself so far as to clutch Steifann's sleeve and gasp, "Asye's teeth! Look at Corson!"

"Don't be an idiot," said Steifann. "That's not—"

But, to his horror, it was.

Steifann had expected Corson to be preened and prettified for the celebration, in a fancy dress, but he had not been prepared to see her looking not only so breathtakingly beautiful, but so cold, so distant, so regal .... She seemed to belong in this palace with its noble lords and ladies, not in an ale-house with a common taverner. He'd laughed at her when she'd insisted, "I could better myself if I chose!" But now she seemed to have chosen, and chosen the life of a lady, and a stranger. When she passed almost within arm's reach of where he stood, she did not so much as spare him a glance, but glided past him like a proud young queen. Steifann felt as if he'd been kicked in the chest by a horse and forgotten to fall.

It was not pride of place, however, that lent Corson this air of majestic dignity—it was simply that she was rigid with terror. Fear of snarling her feet in her heavy hem made her move with a measured, stately tread, and dread of tearing the seams of her tight bodice kept her back stiff and unyielding. She held her head high and perfectly still, not daring to look to the left or right lest the pearls fall from her hair and clatter to the floor. Unthinking, unseeing, almost numb, Corson moved through the great hall like a puppet on strings, keeping her eyes fixed strictly on Nyctasia, in hopes that she could thus somehow cross the immeasurable distance between them and reach her without mishap. When she found herself kneeling at last before the dais where Nyctasia stood, she could hardly remember how she'd come there, and she was not at all sure whether she'd just performed her ritual curtsy or forgotten it entirely. But she must surely have done it, for Nyctasia was smiling as she took her by the hand and bade her rise.

Nyctasia had finally abandoned her mourning-clothes, and now wore a velvet doublet of purest white, crossed with a gold sash from shoulder to hip, and fitted with golden trimmings. Her hose were of a spotless white as well, and her boots of white kid with golden buckles. A cape of white ermine was fastened at her throat with a golden clasp, and she was crowned, as usual, with her heavy gold chain of office.

"I shall look as sallow as a stirred egg," she had complained to Corson, at the last fitting of these dazzling garments. "But vanity must be sacrificed to tradition on such an occasion, I suppose."

And certainly she did look even more starkly pale than usual, but she tipped a wink at Corson as she took the golden medallion and chain from a white velvet cushion held by a page in white silk. After kissing Corson ceremoniously on both cheeks, Nyctasia slipped the medallion around her neck, whispering in her ear as she did so, "Now aren't you glad you didn't kill me?"

Corson blushed and bit back a laugh, remembering where Nyctasia had first asked her that question. But then trumpets were sounding, and she realized suddenly that the formalities were over. She had done her part. She was a lady, a Desthene ...! In a moment she was surrounded by a throng of well-wishers and flattering courtiers, all lavishing extravagant compliments and congratulations upon her. If *this* was what it was like to be a lady, Corson thought, she would be well able to bear the burden.

Seeing Corson receiving the attentions of the nobility with seeming ease, Steifann felt more desolate and heartsick than before. He couldn't get near her through the crowd that pressed around her; Annin had disappeared, and Trask was busy explaining to someone how very well indeed he knew the Lady Cori-sonde. Steifann went in search of more wine, and found a great deal of it. By the time Corson had escaped from the circle of her admirers and sought him out, he was drunker than she'd ever seen him.

Trask and the page between them had managed to convey him to a small, empty antechamber, where they left him sprawled on a couch, senseless and snoring. When they led Corson to him an hour later, he hadn't moved a muscle.

She shook him indignantly. "Steifann, you rutting pig—where have you been? You're the only one I wanted to see, you bastard, and I couldn't even find you! You could have stayed in Chiastelm to get drunk and sleep all morning!"

Steifann opened his eyes on a vision of a golden goddess bending over him and cursing at him in a decidedly unladylike tone. "Corson," he said thickly, "thank the Hlann—!"

Reaching for her, he tried to rise, misjudged the whereabouts of the floor, and fell heavily against her, nearly knocking her over.

Corson pushed him off. "Let go, curse you! You'll tear the sleeve."

Steifann sank to his knees and embraced her clumsily. "You're so rutting beautiful, Corson," he said brokenly, almost sobbing.

Corson's resentment suddenly lost much of its force. Steifann had never said anything of the sort to her before, and his rather inelegant compliment was more welcome than all the polished praises of the courtiers. But she didn't mean to let him off so easily as that. Not yet—"Well, why didn't you come to congratulate me, eh?" she demanded, giving a spiteful tug at his hair. "Everyone else did, and they don't even know me. *They* weren't off somewhere getting stinking drunk while their friends were being presented at court."

But Steifann wasn't listening to her tirade. "Every time you go away, I'm so afraid you won't come back," he mumbled, burying his face in her skirts. "... so afraid ... I thought I'd lost you to those lordly folk. You're my treasure, Corson, you're my jewel ..."

Carson's bodice seemed somehow to have grown even tighter. Her heart was so filled with joy and gratitude that for a moment she couldn't breathe or speak. Steifann would probably deny it all when he was sober, she thought, but she would remember every single word. Forgetting to be careful of her costly gown, she leaned down and helped Steifann to his feet. "Up you get, you sotted swine," she said cheerfully. "You can't lie about here all day—it wouldn't be seemly. You smell like you fell into the wine-press at harvest time."

Steifann looked around the unfamiliar room, which seemed to be turning and moving away from him. "Where are we?" he asked suspiciously, swaying.

"Asye—!" Corson held him around the waist and pulled his arm over her shoulders. "You're worse than Nyc when she was drunk in Hlasven, and tried to raise a demon. And you're a deal heavier, that's certain. Come along, then, we'll take the back, stairs. I've rooms of my own here now—you'd not believe how grand."

Steifann leaned against her all the way, keeping his eyes closed much of the time, because of the unpleasant way the stairs were shifting. He trod on Corson's train several times, nearly tripping her, but somehow she dragged him up the narrow stairway and reached her own bedchamber with only one strand of pearls broken. "Look!" she said proudly. "All this space just for me. I have plenty of room for you. Did you ever see such a bed? Nyc's is even bigger."

Steifann muttered something disrespectful about Nyctasia's personal habits, adding sanctimoniously that everyone knew the aristocracy were nothing but a pack of brazen wantons and whoremongers. Then he collapsed on the bed, pulling Corson down with him.

Corson chuckled and kissed him. "They *sewed* this gown onto me—I don't know how to get the thing off. But maybe you can help me, hmm?"

Steifann's only answer was a thunderous snore.

He didn't wake when Corson pulled off his boots and breeches, unlaced his shirt, and drew the bedclothes over him, laughing to herself. "Sleep well, love," she said, kissing him again, and closed the curtains about the bed. Then she summoned a maid to set her gown to rights again, and went back downstairs to the celebration for a while, to garner more flattery and admiration.

## Mistress of Ambiguities

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### A DARKLING POWER

Before they reached the door, two darkly cloaked and hooded figures slipped swiftly through and blocked the way, daggers drawn at the ready. Nyctasia had time for only a moment's regret: neither she nor 'Ben was armed.

As the assassins started forward, 'Ben took a step towards them, as if to meet their attack, but the



intruders never reached their quarry. They crumpled suddenly to the ground, without a cry, before they came within striking distance, Nyctasia didn't bother to listen for the attackers' heartbeats.

"Ben," she said heavily. "What bargain have you made?"

## 1

*"Oh, I could complain  
That my life is a curse,  
But 'twould be in vain  
All my woes to rehearse.  
For one thing is plain—  
Things could always be worse!"*

sang Nyctasia. She ate one of the walnuts she'd been shelling, and tossed all the hulls onto the coals of the cooking hearth. "Corson, let me do that for you," she suggested.

Corson was trying to chop suet and scraps of meat, holding a wooden bowl awkwardly in her lap while wielding a crescent-shaped mincer. Her left arm was in a sling and kept getting in her way, but she ignored Nyctasia's offer of help. She was not in the best of humors. Her bandaged arm hampered her, and it was very hot in the kitchen of the busy tavern, where meats were kept roasting all day, even in the warm late-summer weather.

"That fool song of yours!" she said. "You were singing that the first time I laid eyes on you—cursed be the day. That's when all my troubles began, so I tell you."

"I remember it well," Nyctasia said mildly. "The moment you swaggered into The Lane Fox, I thought, 'There's the one I want. Strong, oversure of herself, and none too clever—perfect for my purposes.'"

The others laughed, and Corson turned and deliberately spat into the fire, knowing that Nyctasia found the habit revolting. "I must have been a fool, I can't deny it. If I'd had the wits of a newborn newt, I'd not have been cozened into taking your part. I'd have kept to my bargain with your enemies, and cut you into shreds." She demonstrated with the mincer. "That's what a *clever* person would've done."

"But you couldn't very well do that—you were in thrall to my artful charms and evil spells. You know I'm irresistible."

"Like a serpent." Corson agreed, "that fascinates its prey with its stare, then paralyzes them with its poison. That's you."

Nyctasia regarded her coolly. "Your braid is in the chopped suet," she observed, "which is not making either of them more appealing."

Corson cursed and tried to fasten up her long braid with one hand, but she soon dropped her hair-clasp and had to pick it out of the half-minced meat. Nyctasia let her struggle stubbornly with it for a while, then sighed and went over to pin up her hair for her.

"Don't get your hands dirty, m'lady," Corson grumbled.

The others, who had heard their bickering time and again, lost interest and went on about their own tasks. When Walden's back was turned, Nyctasia stole silently across the kitchen, intent on snatching a handful of sweet raisins from the barrel.

"Get out of that," the burly cook growled, without turning around, "or we'll be serving up Roast of Rhaicime with Raisins tonight." He sank a cleaver through a slab of beefsteak, with a threatening flourish. "If you've finished the walnuts, you can get on with the apples."

Nyctasia retreated hastily. "How does he *do* that?" she complained, "It's demonic. I never made a sound. I can stalk a deer within ten paces—"

Walden snorted. "I've a dozen children—I have to have eyes in my back. And you're always up to something. Skinny people aren't to be trusted. Don't they feed you at that fine court of yours?"

"Oh, the food's plentiful enough," Corson said with a grin, "but she doesn't dare eat much of it, for

fear someone's poisoned her share."

"Saves up her appetite for her visits here," Steifann put in, "then eats me out of a month's earnings. As if it wasn't hard enough feeding Corson, now there's two of the ravening leeches, and the one just as useless as the other."

Nyctasia paid no heed to his disrespectful remarks. She knew as well as the rest that Steifann's tavern profited from the patronage of a noblewoman of her rank. Word that she frequented the Hare had reached the local gentry and brought Steifann much desirable trade from among them, and her connections to a clan of eastern vintners had made the finest wines of the Midlands available to him as well. All in all, Corson's acquaintance with the Rhaicime of Rhostshyl had proven most advantageous for Steifann, but since he had taken a liking to Nyctasia himself, he naturally treated her as a nuisance and a burden.

"Nyc may be useless," Corson protested, "like all the aristocracy, but I'm—"

"Don't forget you're a lady now yourself," said Annin, the head serving-woman at the Hare.

"That's different! I earned my title by my sword. Nyc's a lady born and bred." Though Corson held the rank of Desthene, no land or fortune pertained to the title, and she still made her living as a mercenary swordfighter—much to the disgust of Steifann, who felt that she should settle down with him.

"Earned that wound by your rutting sword too," he said sourly, gesturing at Corson's bandaged arm. "Worthless halfwit. You could have been killed, and now here you are living on my bounty as usual, not fit for a scrap of work."

"I'm as fit with one arm as you are with two! It's you who won't let me lift a hand to the heavy chores—"

"Now, Corson," Nyctasia interrupted, "we all know that you like nothing so much as an opportunity to indulge your indolence, but—"

"What did she say?" one of the scullions demanded, poking the serving-lad Trask.

"She means Corson's lazy," he explained with a grin. Trask was no better educated than the rest, but was considerably more ambitious. He never lost a chance to learn fine phrases and aristocratic ways from Nyctasia.

"—but as your pride is even more excessive than your sloth," Nyctasia continued, "you'd try to carry on just as usual if we let you, and give that injury no time to knit. You're to rest easy till you're properly healed, you heed me. I'm not so useless that I don't know how to treat a wound."

Nyctasia was a skilled healer, and Corson knew it well, but she scoffed, "Fuss, fuss, fuss—you're as bad as Steifann. It's just a nasty scratch from a hayfork, no more. None of them had proper weapons. A border skirmish with a few peasants fool enough to attack the escort of an imperial emissary. It was my own fault I was hurt. I thought we could scatter them without killing the lot." She shook her head in wonder at her own behavior. "Fight to kill or run away—one or the other—remember that," she admonished a pair of the cook's children, who were listening wide-eyed to this martial wisdom.

The others ignored her bravado, as usual. "You'd not have to kill or be killed if you stayed here where you belong, instead of traipsing all over creation looking for trouble," Steifann pointed out. "I daresay as soon as you're whole you'll be off on some other addlepatated chase."

Corson laughed. "Addlepatated enough, but only as far as Rhostshyl. Nyc wants me to guard those precious books of hers on the road—if Destiver ever delivers them. Though why anyone would want to steal the moldy old things is more than I could tell you."

Nyctasia was in Chiastelm to receive a shipment of books from her kinfolk in the Midlands. With each lot of wine they sent to Steifann, they dispatched, at her instruction, certain works from the abandoned library of rare scholarly lore that had been discovered on their land nearly two years before. It was not easy for Nyctasia to get away from her duties in Rhostshyl for even a few days, but she had felt that she must without fail take possession of these particular volumes herself.

"These books are especially valuable, Corson," she explained. "And especially dangerous. To let them fall into the wrong hands would be unforgivable."

"Spells," Corson guessed. "With all your learning, Nyc, you'll never learn that no good comes of meddling with magic."

“Not from meddling, no,” Nyctasia agreed curtly. She frowned. “Where *is* Destiver? The *Windhover*’s been in port for hours.” She had sent two of her people to the docks to see that the books were safely delivered, but she would not feel easy about them until she had them under lock and key.

“Don’t worry, she’ll be here in time for a meal, if I know that one,” Corson said with a sneer. There had never been much love lost between the two of them, but since Corson had unwittingly taken part in the capture of Destiver’s band of smugglers, their mutual dislike had grown to new heights of loathing. It was only through Nyctasia’s intervention with the powerful Merchants’ Guild of Chiasm that Destiver had escaped hanging, and she held Corson to blame that she was now forced to make an honest living as a cargo-runner. Corson, for her part, resented any rival for Steifann’s affections, and she knew that Steifann and Destiver had shared a memorable past. She spat again.

“When the rest of her cargo’s unloaded, she’ll be along with ours,” Steifann assured Nyctasia. Most tradespeople fetched their own goods from Merchants’ Wharf, but Destiver usually delivered Steifann’s wares herself, so as to sample them, and to pass the time with her old friends Steifann and Annin.

“If she hasn’t drunk up our cargo already,” said Trask, smacking his tips. “That wine of yours is too good for a sot like her, Nyc. It’s fit for the imperial court. I don’t see why your kin in Rhostshyl disapprove of it.” Trask knew nothing about fine wines, of course, but this did not discourage him from talking as if he did.

“It’s not the wine itself they condemn,” Nyctasia told him, “it’s my impropriety in allowing our Midland cousins to export their wares to the Maritime markets. Now any commoner on the coast who has the price can purchase wine that bears our family name—as if the House of Edonaris were engaged in trade!”

“No one need be ashamed of those wines,” Steifann declared with satisfaction. “They’ll make my reputation yet among the gentry.”

“And they’ll destroy ours, according to some.” Nyctasia smiled. “There can be no greater disgrace for a family like mine than the taint of commerce. I believe that not even the marriage-alliance with the Teiryne has scandalized them so much as this. The Teiryne may be the arch-enemies of our House, but they are of the high nobility, you see.”

“And this latest outrage of yours will give your kin something to think of besides reconciliation with the Teiryne, no?” Corson asked shrewdly, “Divert your opponent’s eye from your true objective—that’s good strategy. How goes your grand scheme to unite the enemies? Has your vixen sister murdered her Teiryne husband yet?”

“By no means. Tiambria’s proud and willful, but she’s not a fool. One couldn’t keep company with Jehamias ar’n Teiryne for long without finding him an agreeable companion. And he was madly smitten with her at once, which rather helped matters along, I fancy. Half the city think him a traitor to his House, and the rest think I’ve spellcast him. Ettasuan ar’n Teiryne’s sworn to have his blood, and he’s not the only one. Tiambria did scorn him for a coward, at first, but she’s come to see that it took far more courage for him to marry her than to refuse. It’s not she who worries me now, it’s ’Kasten.”

“Your brother Erikasten, her twin? What stone’s in his shoe? Have you found a Teiryne lass for him to marry?”

“Would that I had! He’s so driven by jealousy he’s easily led by those who claim that the family’s been dishonored by the union. I think,” she added, more to herself than to Corson, “that I must find some pretext to send him off on an important mission soon, to somewhere at a considerable distance.”

“Eh, jealousy?” said Corson. “But he couldn’t very well expect to marry her himself—unless you Edonaris are even crazier than folk say.”

“No, but no one expected her to marry so young, least of all Erikasten. It’s hard on him—first he lost his brother to the war, then his sister to the peace. And no one’s ever come between him and Tiambria before, not like this. He’s always depended on her and followed her lead. Now that she has a husband and child to think of—”

“A *child*! I’ve not been away so long as that!”

“To be sure, you’ve not heard the news—I forget that others don’t concern themselves day and night with the tidings of Rhostshyl. Of course she’s not a mother yet, but she shall be, and that before three

seasons are out.” A radiant smile lit Nyctasia’s features as she spoke of her sister’s unborn child. She seemed suddenly illumined by an inner flame, and her words rang like chimes, joyous and confident. “All my hopes for the future rest with this child, the heir of two great Houses. I have dreamed of a new dynasty, and I believe that we shall soon see the birth of that bloodline—the lineage that will bring peace and prosperity back to the city, that will unite all the people of Rhostshyl at last!” The power of her vision was undeniable.

“It’s as good as a play to hear that one talk,” Annin said, amused.

“She wields words as well as I do weapons,” Corson agreed. “And she wins, too. I’m bound to say. I’ve seen it at court time and again—she makes them all do what she wants, just by talking at them till they surrender.”

“It seems you’ve learned some of her ways, then. When she’s not talking, you are.”

“Oh, Corson was always ready with her tongue,” said Nyctasia. “You can’t blame me for that.”

“True enough,” Steifann replied. “And talk’s all very well to pass the time, but there’s Destiver out back, and talk won’t get those barrels down the stairs. At least keep out of the way, the pair of you.” The wine casks would have to be brought through the kitchen to the cellarway, and there was little room to spare. “Why don’t you make yourself useful and go sing for the taproom?” he suggested to Nyctasia.

Nyctasia obediently took up her harp. “Very well. If I stay here, Walden will only set me to peeling potatoes, after all.” Though she occasionally made a formal visit to the Hare with the full retinue befitting a Rhaicime, she did so purely to enhance the tavern’s reputation, as a favor to Steifann. Usually she came, as she had today, in the guise of a commonplace traveler, a student or minstrel, and no one who chanced to see her would take her for a personage of rank and importance. “You come too, Corson. I’ve a new drinking-song you might like to hear. Just let me see to those books first, so please you, sir,” she said to Steifann with mock humility.

Corson was willing. She couldn’t help unload the barrels this time, and she didn’t much care to meet with Destiver, that was certain. Besides, she could tell from Nyctasia’s manner that there was mischief brewing. She went out to the taproom while Nyctasia attended to the unloading and storing of her books.

They were to be kept in locked chests in Steifann’s quarters until Corson was able to convey them to Rhostshyl herself. When they had been secured, Nyctasia dismissed her people, but before she could follow, Annin slipped into the room and shut the door firmly behind her. “I want a word with you, Nyc,” she said, sitting on one of the chests and gesturing for Nyctasia to take the other. “It’s about Trask. You’ll have to do something for him, you know. He’s not a child anymore. This place has no more to offer him.”

“I?” gasped Nyctasia. “What is it to do with me? Why am I to be responsible for every stray mudchild who follows Steifann home?”

“You’re the only one among us who can make a place for him,” Annin said reasonably. “It’s not as if he’ll inherit the Hare—Steifann and Corson will settle down and raise a brood of their own someday. No, you’ll just have to find a position for him, Nyc. That one could make something of himself, with half a chance. And it’s your fault that he has a taste for such things anyway.”

Nyctasia argued, but she knew it was a losing battle. Even her powers of persuasion were no match for Annin’s determination. Only by promising to give the matter her earnest consideration was she able to escape to the taproom.

Nyctasia’s new drinking-song proved quite popular with the patrons of The Jugged Hare, although they were not able to hear the entire work on that occasion. It was, she announced, entitled “The Host of the Hare,” and was a tribute to the estimable Steifann. She perched on a table like any common tavern-singer, pushing dirty platters and mugs out of her way, then winked at Corson and struck a few dramatic chords on her small lap-harp. When she had the attention of the house, she began:

*“In fair Chiastelm  
On the coast.  
Stands the far-famed tavern  
Of a worthy host.”*

*Tall as a tree  
Is the host of the Hare,  
Broad as a barrel,  
Big as a bear.*

*With eyes green as jade  
And a beard of black thatch,  
A neck like a bull's  
And a temper to match!*

*The song of his praises  
Could run on forever.  
He's strong as three oxen  
And nearly as clever.*

*He's feared for his fists  
Throughout the west,  
As a braggart and drunkard  
He ranks with the best.*

*As a lover, it's said,  
He's a man without peer.  
And folk flock to his bed  
From afar and from near.*

*From the woods to the water,  
It matters not where,  
You'll not meet the like  
Of the host of the Hare!"*

Steifann did indeed have quite a reputation, at least in certain quarters of Chiastelm, and not a few of his customers knew him well. Nyctasia's mockery was received with enthusiasm, and by no one more than Corson. By this time, Corson was leading the applause, pounding the table with her tankard, cheering after each verse, and shouting for more. Call *her* a useless layabout, would he? She intended to learn every word of Nyctasia's new ballad. Trust Nyc to fashion a sword out of words!

The song, Corson had realized, was Nyctasia's calculated revenge for Steifann's inhospitable reception of her when she'd first visited the Hare a year ago, in search of Corson. Goaded by jealousy, Steifann had all but flung her into the street, and though Nyctasia had forgiven his behavior, she had not forgotten it. She carried on with a few relatively tame verses about Steifann's prowess at brawling, boasting and drinking, but when he came into the taproom himself, to see what all the commotion was, he heard:

*"From border to border,  
Wherever you fare,  
You'll not meet the like  
Of the host of the Hare!"*

*For he'll swagger and strut  
For each strumpet and slut  
Like a cock among hens,*

*Or a stallion in rut!*

*His—*

But much to the disappointment of her audience, Nyctasia's performance was suddenly cut short at that most interesting point. Amid calls of "Let the lass finish!" and "Give us the rest, girl!" she dashed out the door to the street, two steps ahead of the bellowing Steifann.

## 2

"CORSON BRENN TORISK! Upon my word, it could be no other!"

It took Corson rather longer to recognize her fellow traveler. She reined in the horses and jumped down from the cart to take a closer look at the man who'd hailed her, but though his face was familiar, he might have been any one of a dozen townsmen she'd known. He was handsome enough, she thought, and had a haughty air about him, for all that his clothes were worn and shabby. It was his lofty manner, as well as the pen-case hanging at his belt, that spurred Corson's memory at last.

"Surely you can't have forgotten me?" he was saying reproachfully. "Thankless wretch! I taught you to read, to say nothing of—"

"To be sure, I remember you, you bastard—Desmalkin brenn Cerrogh, 'Malkin the scholar, 'Malkin the cheat, 'Malkin the toady, who forsakes his friends when he's grown too fine to be seen with them! I've not forgotten that, you'll find. I should wring your neck—"

"Why, Kitten, it wounds me to hear you speak so," 'Malkin said placatingly. "And after all I did for you. I tried my best to teach you the rudiments of civilized behavior, but you couldn't stay out of trouble for two days together. I had my position to think of, after all—a retainer of a noble household has to be careful. I'd have soon lost my place if I'd kept company with you much longer."

There was truth in that, Corson had to admit. When she'd first met 'Malkin she'd been just out of the army, aimless and wild, with no friend but her sword. War was all she knew, and she'd seemed to be at war with all the world in those days. She had survived her term in the army through cunning and ferocity and ruthless desperation, and experience had taught her no other way to meet life's challenges.

But Corson had since lived a good deal among respectable folk, and spent time at court as well. If her nature was still far from tame, she had nonetheless lost some of her rough edges, and could even display a little polish when occasion demanded. Though she had harbored bitter resentment of 'Malkin for years, she now found that she could better appreciate his point of view. And, after all, it didn't become a lady to bear a grudge against an inferior .... That was what Nyc would say, no doubt.

"Well, you're treacherous scum, but let that pass," she said grandly. "What's become of your fine position, then? Here I find you tramping the roads like a penniless student again."

"Oh, it was insufferably dull, Corson. When all's said, you know, one is a scholar, not a clerk. I've held better places since, but none, alas, that gave proper scope to my learning."

*Or to your ambition*, Corson thought. "You don't look much better off than you were," she pointed out, pleasantly aware that she herself did.

'Malkin shrugged, as if this were a matter of no consequence. "It doesn't do for a traveler to appear too prosperous. There are thieves about—"

"And you never were handy with a sword, as I recall," Corson put in, grinning, "though I did try my best to teach you the rudiments of fighting."

"I've heard that there's work worthy of a scholar in Rhostshyl," 'Malkin continued, as if she hadn't spoken. "That's why you find me on the road. The Rhaicime has let it be known far and wide that the services of sages are needed at court. They say Her Ladyship's a cultured woman. If I could attain an audience with her, my fortune would be made."

Corson made a half-hearted effort not to gloat, and failed completely. "I could arrange that for you, if you like," she said offhandedly, "I'm an intimate friend of the Rhaicime, as it happens. The ruffian you disdained has risen to the rank of Desthene while you curried favor with your betters and remained a

common scribe. They call me Lady Corisonde at court in Rhostshyl.”

But 'Malkin only laughed. “Why I'm delighted to hear it, Kitten. No doubt you can use your influence with the Rhaicime to have me made Palace Chancellor.”

For answer, Corson wrenched open one of the crates on the cart and pulled out an ornately tooled and gilded leatherbound volume, “Have a look at this, then, if you think it's all a lie. I'm bringing these books to the Lady Nyctasia, and she wouldn't trust them to anyone but me.”

He took it from her and examined it curiously, then suddenly gasped, “Hraestlind's *Elaborations*. Is it possible?” Reverently he turned over a few of the thick vellum pages. “And it looks to be genuine—Corson, this work is priceless! I don't know of a complete copy outside of YuVoes. What else do you have there, in the *vahn*'s name?”

“Only some wine. And a lot of other rare and valuable books—for the Rhaicime's library, you see,” Corson said smugly. “That's what she needs you scholars for, to help her take stock of the wretched things.” She held out her hand for *The Elaborations of Hraestlind*.

'Malkin surrendered it reluctantly. “I don't doubt that they belong to Her Ladyship, but all the same, Corson, it won't do to go about claiming that you know the ruler of the city just because you've been hired to deliver these books to her. I know you mean no harm by it, but you could get in trouble in Rhostshyl for talk like that.”

Corson could afford to bide her time. “Oh, don't worry about me,” she said, with a smile which Nyctasia would have recognized as dangerous, “Climb in, why don't you? You can ride in the cart—just don't try to make off with any of those books, so I warn you.”

'Malkin was not surprised that Corson was admitted to the palace without challenge. Evidently she undertook important commissions for the court and was known to the guards, who joked with her as she passed, asking, “Eh, Lady Corson, is that your squire or your latest conquest?”

“Him? He's no one at all,” said Corson, “Just another scribbler for Her Ladyship's collection.”

But when Corson led him to a luxuriously appointed chamber among the private apartments, and claimed it as her own, 'Malkin felt that she was carrying the game too far, in her desire to impress him. “Corson, let's go,” he began worriedly. “If we're found here—”

When the door was flung open, he immediately started to invent plausible reasons for their presence there, but explanations proved unnecessary. The woman who raced into the room was alone, except for a huge hound, and both were plainly quite pleased to find Corson there.

Nyctasia had left orders that she was to be informed straightway of Corson's arrival, and she came at once to seek her out and assure herself that the books had been delivered safely. She threw her arms around Corson, and the dog leaped up to lick her face in welcome. Laughing, Corson picked up Nyctasia and kissed her.

She couldn't be anyone of authority, 'Malkin saw with relief. She was dressed in worn breeches and an old tunic, her hands and face were grimy, and straw clung to her clothes and her close-cropped hair. Still, she was remarkably pretty, for all that ....

“Corson, my love!” Nyctasia was exclaiming. “I see your arm's quite healed. And you met with no mishap on the road?”

“Oh, Milady's beloved books are all here, don't worry. I gave them over to Ioras. But what have you been playing at, you unkempt sloven? You're not fit to be seen.”

“There's mange in the kennels again. I've been dosing the dogs, and this time I mean to—”

'Malkin felt that he'd been a bystander at this reunion for quite long enough. “Corson, present me to this dainty wench,” he broke in, slapping Nyctasia affably on the thigh.

She whirled around to stare at him in astonishment, the dog growled a warning, and Corson gave a shout of laughter. “Malkin, you rutting dolt, this is the Rhaicime, not a common tart! It's most likely high treason to take liberties with her.”

Nyctasia quickly recovered her equanimity. “Never mind, Corson, I'd not expect a friend of yours to have manners. But I must go bathe and dress now—I'll see you at dinner.” She dashed out as unceremoniously as she'd appeared, the great dog at her heels.

It did not occur to 'Malkin for a moment that Corson had been telling him the truth.

Nyctasia thought no more of the matter, but Corson resolved to take full advantage of 'Malkin's grave offense against propriety. "Now you're in the stew, and no mistake, my lad," she said ominously. "The Lady Nyctasia may act like a stable-lass when she chooses, but she doesn't stand for familiarity like that from a stranger. I'll try to excuse your boorish behavior to her, but you'll be lucky to get out of this scrape with a flogging, I fear. She didn't say much, but she was angry, I can tell."

"Corson, if you've quite finished spinning your fancies, we'd best be on our way before someone else discovers that you keep your trysts here."

"Very well, if you insist," said Corson. "Come along." She made no further attempt to convince him of her own or Nyctasia's standing at court, but merely turned him over to a page, with instructions to find him lodgings and a place at table among the students and other rabble.

It was not a place of distinction. Educated folk of every description had been flocking to Rhostshyl since word of the Cymvelan library had been heralded abroad, and 'Malkin found himself one of a motley crowd of scholars and scribes, all hoping to turn their learning to profit. He had to squint across nearly the whole length of the great dining hall to get a glimpse of the personages at the higher tables. He was at too great a distance to recognize Nyctasia when she first entered, though had he been nearer he might well have failed to see in her the sprightly grime-stained waif of an hour before. She now wore a graceful pearl-grey tunic of the finest linen, and hose of silver-grey silk which had surely never been worn within a kennel. It was not her elegant clothes which transformed her, however, so much as the air of nobility and dignity with which she made her entrance, bowing to right and left as she graciously acknowledged the greetings of the court.

Everyone rose, and there were murmurs, at 'Malkin's table, of "There's the Rhaicime ... the small one with the dark hair."

"Are you sure? I thought she was older."

"Look how she wears her chain of office, fool—round her head, not round her neck like the rest."

"Never mind *her*—what I want to know is, who's the tall one? *Vahn*, what a beauty!"

Corson had changed her travel-worn garments for a gown of fawn-colored silk, with a close-fitting bodice cut fashionably low, a full, flowing skirt, and loose sleeves slashed open and gathered at the wrist with a golden band. Her long hair had been woven into three plaits, braided together and entwined with strands of small gold beads. She looked even more stately than Nyctasia, and 'Malkin might not have known either of them had they not been followed into the hall by a very large and all too familiar-looking hound.

'Malkin suddenly felt faint.

"That's the Desthene Corisonde," someone was saying. "She used to be Lady Nyctasia's bodyguard, as I hear it, but they say she's more than that to Her Ladyship now ...."

Now that Nyctasia had arrived, the meal could commence. When she took her place at the head of the highest table, the rest resumed their seats, and food was soon placed before the company. But 'Malkin had completely lost his appetite.

### 3

"SO THIS FRIEND of yours is a scholar?" said Nyctasia.

"Well, so he says. I'm no judge of such things."

Dinner was long over, and Corson and Nyctasia had withdrawn to Nyctasia's private rooms to escape the court formalities and have a long talk in comfort. Palace etiquette had always been second nature to Nyctasia, but since her return to Rhostshyl she had begun to find it tedious and irksome. As she and Corson exchanged their news, she busied herself unpacking and examining some of the new shipment of books.

Corson had kicked off her tight, gold-tooled shoes and sat lounging on a couch, drinking some of the new shipment of wine. The dog, Greymantle, lay sprawled at her feet in great contentment as she idly scratched his belly with one bare foot, "Still, I think he must be a true scholar like you, Nyc," she said pensively. "He does nothing but talk and never says a sensible word, he doesn't know anything useful,



and he's never done a day's work in his life."

Nyctasia did not look up from her task. "You surprise me, Corson. I thought your old friends were all brigands and cutthroats. How do you come to know someone reputable?"

"Reputable! I met him in prison! He was only a mangy, vagabond student then." Corson chuckled. "But I took him for the fount of all learning, I confess. I traveled about with him for a few months when I was just out of the army. I didn't know my left hand from my right in those days."

"I can't imagine how you lasted a week in the army," Nyctasia said absently, blowing dust from a fragile, faded old volume, "with your insolent tongue and your savage temper. I know little enough about it, but I'd always supposed that a soldier had to observe a certain degree of discipline and obedience. I don't believe that you could be civil to the Empress herself for long."

"Oh, they beat the nonsense out of me soon enough," Corson said grimly. "I learn quickly, you know, and I learned first of all that there were worse things than following orders." She poured herself more wine and downed it at once. "I learned other lessons too—not just weaponry and strategy—I learned that real power is something you can't fight with your fists. Where I came from I could get by because I was bigger and stronger than most—I could bully anyone who was in my way. But we were all of us poor and powerless. It was in the army I found out that the wide world was different from a little swamp village. If you don't humble yourself before the powerful, you'll be crushed, no matter how big and strong you are. *That's* a lesson you couldn't learn from those books of yours, or from all the books ever penned by scholars."

"Yes, you're right," said Nyctasia, who was now listening attentively. Corson had rarely spoken of her years in the Imperial Army. "Only experience can teach such wisdom as that. There are many things that one doesn't learn from books, and humility is among them."

"Well, I never learned to like it," Corson brooded. "I hated the army and all its lessons. I swore I'd go my own way as soon as my term was over—if I lived that long—and that I'd never re-enlist, no matter how desperate I might be. And I kept to that, too, but I'd not have survived a season on my own if I hadn't first learned how to *serve*. I was lucky to have been a soldier, in truth. Asye knows what would have become of me if I hadn't been sold into the army."

"Sold! Were your people slaves, then?"

"No, we were free folk—free to starve or scratch a living out of scrub forest and swampland. Only the strongest could hope to be taken on by the army. The others envied me the chance."

"But, Corson, how could you be sold?"

"How not? If I'd been on my own I could have had the recruitment fee for myself, but I was still under my family's roof, so they got the money for enlisting me. That was fair enough, I suppose, though I grudged it to them at the time. They'd raised and fed me as best they could, after all. They were entitled to some recompense."

"But to make a soldier of you against your will—!"

"It wasn't against my will," said Corson, surprised. "All the young folk of Torisk hoped the recruiters would take them. We knew that the army fed you well and put clothes on your back. And it was the only way for folk like us to learn a trade—don't you know that?"

"That too," Nyctasia said seriously, "one doesn't learn from books. How old were you when you were ... sold?"

"Now how would I know? We didn't have the means to keep records. Someone once told me, 'You were born the summer that lightning burned three cottages,' but that didn't mean much to me—or to the imperial recruiters. They aren't supposed to take a child under fifteen years, but they're not choosy if one is big enough, as I was. They don't ask, 'How old is this child?' but just 'Is this child of an age to be enlisted?' And folk have learned to say just 'Yes.' No one asks more questions, and no one can prove that a recruit is underage."

"Then you don't know how old you are now?" Nyctasia asked, incredulous.

Corson shrugged. "Not to put a number to it. What difference does it make?"

Nyctasia was dumbfounded. Such numbers were of immense significance for those of her station, for only upon coming of age did one assume the full responsibilities and privileges of one's rank. Precise

records of kinship were necessary to determine the inheritance of titles and property. What with the many twins in the Edonaris line, mere minutes of life might mean a great deal. Nyctasia could hardly imagine being unaware of, much less indifferent to, her own exact age, or even the ages of her kin.

“So I can’t blame them for selling me, you see,” Corson was saying. “There wasn’t food enough to go around, and I ate more than my share. I don’t know what you’re so vexed at—when children are apprenticed to a trade, no one consults their wishes.”

“Most professions are not so likely to be fatal, however.”

“Nyc, dying in battle’s better than dying of hunger, or being worked to death slowly, year after year! You don’t understand at all—the poor don’t have *choices*. Asye, most don’t even have chances. My people gave me a chance to better myself, and that’s more than they ever had themselves. Oh, they didn’t do it for my sake, I know. They did it for the money, and to have one less mouth to feed. But I’ll tell you this—I had sisters and brothers, and I’d wager what you like that some of them are dead now, and that none of them live so well as I do.”

Nyctasia was silent for a time, pondering Corson’s words. So Corson did not even know whether her closest blood kin were living or dead! This was strangest of all to Nyctasia, daughter of an ancient dynasty that could trace the fate of its every child for centuries past. At last she asked hesitantly, “Don’t you ever wonder what’s become of them, Corson?”

Corson shook her head. “Why? I hardly remember them now. It almost seems as if my life started when I joined the Imperial Army ...”

But if Corson had forgotten much of her life before her enlistment, she remembered the life that followed it all too well. Though years had passed since her training as a footsoldier, yet the lessons in degradation and helplessness she’d been forced to learn then were still too raw and rankling for her to speak of them to Nyctasia. Even Steifann had heard little of those memories.

The new recruits had been marched for weeks through the wasteland of the southern barrens, into the lowest reaches of Liruvath, where the westerners would be less likely to try to desert. Here they had no friends or kinfolk to hide them, and they knew neither the land nor the language. Most had never been outside of their villages before.

But the long march did not discourage many of Corson’s companions. The food was plentiful, and they were used to toil and hardship. It was not until they reached their training camp and were turned over to their commanders and instructors that they discovered the brutality and abuse that have always been a new recruit’s lot. The pick of their villages for strength and prowess with their fists, these proud youths now for the first time found themselves at the mercy of others, driven and chivvied about with kicks and curses, taunted and threatened like the lowest of slaves, yet not daring—if they were wise—to answer a word, much less raise a hand, in their own defense.

When Corson had been whipped for insolence and disobedience, she learned to hold her tongue and do as she was told. When she had spent time locked in a small wooden cage, she gave up all thought of deserting. And when she, along with the rest of the assembled camp, had been forced to witness a man being flogged to death for attacking an officer, she learned to control her quick temper, whatever the provocation. Their comrade’s torn body, hung at the gate to feed the crows, served to remind the cowed recruits of this latest lesson. No matter how Corson was goaded and insulted, no matter if she was spat upon, no matter what she was ordered to do, no matter how hard she was hit, she made herself stand silent, clenching and unclenching her fists instead of using them. But most of all, at such times, she thought of the cage. More than any beating, perhaps more than death, Corson feared the cage. She would do anything, endure anything, to keep out of its nightmare grip, which had left her with a horror of confinement that haunted her still, years afterward.

Like most of her company, Corson was glad when they were finally sent north to Yuvahn to join forces with the imperial legions ever defending—and expanding—the borders of Liruvath. It seemed that she’d spent a lifetime in the training camp, and any change was welcome, even at the risk of her life.

The footsoldiers feared for their lives with good reason, for they were ill-equipped and ill-defended, mere fodder for the beasts of battle. They cared nothing for victory or empire, but ran forward to meet the enemy, when ordered, only because there were archers waiting in the rearguard to fell those who

retreated. Corson's only thought was to somehow survive the fray, but once she found herself in the thick of combat all thought was lost, swept away by the overpowering realization that she was finally, after her many months of training, *free to act*. She felt as if she had suddenly been released from bonds or some long imprisonment. She need no longer hold herself in check—at last she could give rein to her stifled wrath. Fury overcame fear, and she laid about her with her broadsword like one possessed by a murderous demon. No matter that those she slaughtered were not to blame for her torment—the relief of unleashing her pent-up anger was too great to be resisted by reason. Corson's training had been a complete success.

It was not long before her commanders recognized Corson's value to the regiment. She was often commended for her bravery in battle, though her superiors knew as well as she that courage had nothing to do with her prowess. Hers was the true battle-frenzy born of rage and blind hatred, not for the enemy, but for anyone or anything that stood in her way. She was worth a score of common soldiers in the field, and she was soon removed from her company of raw recruits and assigned to a place among a troop of seasoned warriors. She was taught to fight on horseback, and given further training with shield and spear and sword. In time, her skill with weapons grew so marked that she was made an instructor herself, treating those beneath her no better than she had been treated. By the time her term of service was over, Corson had risen in the ranks to become a commander, and led her own troops into battle. But she never forgot how much she was still in the power of her superiors, and though she was offered favorable terms to re-enlist, she was not tempted to accept. The army was a cage.

When she was released, Corson took her honed hatred and her deadly rage into the service of anyone who'd pay well for a skilled soldier-of-fortune. She knew enough to be respectful to her employers, but she flouted the civil authorities as much as she dared, and was soon known to the magistrates of more than one city as a troublemaker and a scofflaw. Each time she was pilloried or thrown into prison, she vowed to herself that she would behave more wisely in the future. The terror of confinement and the humiliation of helplessness would curb her reckless audacity for a time, until too much ale overcame her resolve, and the savage fury within her gathered strength to break free again.

Corson remembered those days very well indeed, but to Nyctasia she said only, "It almost seems as if my life started when I joined the Imperial Army—and a dog's life it was, too, but I've no cause to complain—it taught me how to survive. When I got out, I only had to learn how to live." She suddenly began to laugh. "And 'Malkin had a hand in that, to do him justice. No doubt you think it's uphill work to make a lady of the likes of me, Nyc, but 'Malkin had to make a human being of me first!"

"That must have required some courage. However did he go about it?"

"Talk," said Corson. "Neverending talk, worse even than you, I believe—or perhaps it's just that I'm better used to it nowadays. But 'Malkin was the first book-learned blatherskite I'd ever met, and I was none too pleased to meet him, I can tell you. He was scared out of his wits, so he jabbered like a jay the whole time. He'd never been in prison before, you see—"

"Neither had I, before I met you," Nyctasia pointed out. "It's an experience that seems to befall your companions as a matter of course."

"I had nothing to do with his arrest—not that time, anyway. I'd never laid eyes on him till they threw him into my cell. He'd tried to sneak out of an inn without paying—a student's trick if there ever was one."

"And why were *you* in prison on that occasion?"

"Hlann Asye, Nyc, how should I remember that? For drunken brawling, I suppose." She shrugged. "I *was* sotted, I remember that. My head was aching, and his maddening chatter didn't help. The cell was nothing but a hole in the wall, but at least it was a quiet hole before that one turned up."

"I'm surprised that you didn't just wring his neck."

"I probably would have, but to tell you the truth, I thought at first that he was crazy, and it's bad luck to kill mad people. Finally I seduced him, just to stop his talk—not that it did stop."

"I see! Then it's not bad luck to ... ?"

"Well, he's not ill-favored," Corson admitted. "And I was curious, too. They say students are the best lovers, you know, and I'd never had one before."

“Students have their uses. I trust you weren’t disappointed?”

“Oh, you could do worse, Nyc. He knows what he’s about.” She sipped her wine in silence for a moment. “And he was a change from what I was used to, that’s certain. The only love-talk I knew was the crudest sort, and I thought he was mocking me when he called me ‘Kitten.’ I threatened to tear out his tongue for him, and then—I’ll never forget it—he said, so quietly, so earnestly, ‘Girl, have you had so little affection in your life that you don’t know it when you meet it?’ Gods! I’d *never* heard anyone talk like that—I was *spellbound!* After that, I started to listen to him.”

“Ah, when you listen, you’re liable to learn something. You do listen occasionally, I’ve noticed. Not often, but when you do, you learn.”

“I listen to you when you say anything worth the hearing. Sometimes you do. Not often, but when you do, I listen.”

“Go on with your story, if you please. I find it most instructive. It was his lovemaking, then, that persuaded you of his wisdom?”

“Perhaps it was. But what really beguiled me was a curious story he told me ... I don’t know now why I was so staggered by the thing. It was just some moonshine about a lady who lived in a tower, with a lot of magic creatures, and a treasure ... but then it wasn’t about those things at all. I wish I remembered how it ran.”

“But I believe I know the very tale—wait, I’ll just run to the library.”

Greymantle scrambled to his feet and followed, unwilling, as ever, to let Nyctasia out of his sight. Corson, too, was reluctant to let her go by herself. She disapproved of Nyctasia’s habit of going about unarmed and unguarded. Though her power in Rhostshyl was now fairly secure, she still had enemies at court who could prove dangerous if given a chance. Nyctasia claimed that her seeming vulnerability was in fact a protection, because it made her appear so confident in her power that no one dared attack her. Corson thought this a clever notion, but she was not convinced that it would stand the test. Nyc had the dog with her, of course, but still ...

But Nyctasia was back in a trice, carrying a small, well-worn book inscribed with the title *The Parables of Albrecht the Scrivener*. “Listen,” she said, dropping into a chair, “is this the one?”

“There was once a proud and powerful lady who ruled a fair and flourishing domain, where none held sway but she. Her dwelling was a tall tower, a fortress that had never yet been overthrown, for it was built of the strongest stone, and well provisioned against a siege. To guard her, moreover, the lady had two magic hounds that could defend their mistress against the threat of thief or enemy. When she ventured abroad, two magic horses drew her carriage, and these steeds could carry her to safety too swiftly for any foe to follow. Two magic eagles had she as well, that nested in the heights of the tower and flew every day through her domain to spy out all that passed, lest any danger should take her unawares.

“Now this favored and fortunate lady guarded, in the very peak and pinnacle of her tower, a certain rare crystal, carven like a woman’s head, and this was the greatest treasure of all that she possessed. For this crystal was an infallible oracle that could answer any question and resolve any dilemma. Thus did the mistress of the tower pass her days in safety and security, for none in all the land might overcome her defenses nor challenge her dominion.

“But at last came a foeman more cunning than the rest, for he came in the guise of a friend, with smiles and charm and flattery, and he so won the trust of the lady that she herself unbarred the way and welcomed him within. Many visits did he make her, and ever did the mistress of the tower take greater delight in his company. Though her true friends warned her that he was a dangerous thief and deceiver, yet she heeded them not, but invited this false friend to visit her all the more. Finally she grew to love the dissembler so well that she could hardly bear to be parted from him for a day. And then one evening, when they sat together at dinner and made merry, the treacherous one slyly gave to the unwary lady a potent sleeping-draught that straightway left her senseless as one struck down by a grievous malady. And as she lay thus, all unknowing, he made his way secretly to the crown of the tower and took the treasure, hiding it away beneath his cloak.

“Now when, in his flight, the thief passed the chamber where the lady lay, the crystal head cried out

to her, "Ware thief! Hark, hark, my mistress!" But the lady awoke in such great pain and distress that she had not the strength to stop him. She called upon her hounds to seize the thief, but he had chained them in their kennels, and she found herself too faint and weak to set them free. Thus he made his escape from the tower with the treasure. She then bade her horses give chase to the thief, but he had hobbled them in their stalls, and the lady was too ill and giddy to loose them. And so he fled far from the tower with the treasure. At last she sent her birds to fly aloft and discover whither the thief was bound, but he had clipped their wings, and therefore the treasure was lost forever.

"Without the magic oracle to advise her, the lady knew not what course to take, and her domain was left undefended. Her enemies, lying in wait, showed no mercy but stormed the tower forthwith and took her prisoner. And thus did the mistress of the tower end her days in sorrow and shame, while the thief went free to deceive and despoil others, as we may witness any day we will. Now tell me the name, if you can, of this falsehearted flatterer, for you know him as well as another, and better than some."

"I remember it all now," Corson exclaimed. "And I was taken in by it, too, right to the hilt! 'Malkin said, 'What would you have done, in that lady's place?' And I said, 'She was nothing but a fool. That would never have happened to me!'"

"So he led you right into the trap—how very unkind."

"Unkind, perhaps, but very like a student."

"And then I suppose he said, 'But it has happened to you. If she was a fool, then you are one as well.' No?"

Corson nodded. "I said, 'Who are you calling a fool, you little worm?' but he only answered so ruttng reasonably, 'You have called yourself so, for you are mistress of the tower, and the name of the thief is Drink.'"

"For do you not partake thereof by your own will and desire?" Nyctasia read. "'Does not drink flatter you by causing you to feel clever and strong, and powerfully pleased with yourself withal?'"

"He had me in the net, and no mistake, the smug wretch. I wriggled and writhed but there was no getting out of it—he had explanations for everything. The tower was meant to be my own body, according to him, and the land was my life, I think. 'The hounds are your two hands,' he said, 'that don't do your will when you've had too much ale. And the horses are your legs that can't carry you when you're drunk.'" Corson began to mimic 'Malkin's learned tone. "'And what are the eagles but your own eyes that won't guide you when your senses are addled with drink?'"

"And the oracle," Nyctasia concluded, closing the book, "is Reason, the greatest treasure humankind possesses."

"I was even fool enough to ask why the crystal hadn't warned her of the thief, since it knew everything, and 'Malkin explained that she hadn't asked its advice. 'Had you consulted your reason,' he said, 'you'd not have gotten drunk and been thrown in prison.' Well, I didn't know much in those days, but I knew when I was beaten. If he'd just told me it was my own fault I was in prison, I'd probably have broken his neck, but once he'd tricked me into saying it myself I couldn't deny it. And I thought he'd made up that tale himself, just for my sake. I'd never heard such a thing before, a story that said one thing and meant another—like one of those lying Cymvelan riddles."

"Such a tale is called an allegory."

"That's what 'Malkin said. No doubt you were raised on allegories with your mother's milk, Nyc, But to me it seemed confoundingly clever and deep."

"Yet here you sit swilling down wine," Nyctasia teased. "You can't have taken the moral of the story much to heart."

Corson flushed. "It takes more than a few glasses of wine to get the better of me! I'm not a little twig of a thing like you. And I never get myself arrested for public drunkenness any more—well, hardly ever, that is. But it wasn't 'Malkin and his allegories that cured me of that. It was Steifann."

"And not by talking, I daresay."

Corson chuckled. "He didn't use a lot of big words—just a few well-chosen, loud ones. Very easy they were to understand, too. That prating popinjay 'Malkin used to say, 'Corson, if you can't be less *conspicuous*, I shall be forced to forego your acquaintance.' And then he did," she added, "the bastard."

“For shame,” said Nyctasia. “That proves he was no gentleman.”

“He was a worthless, bootlicking mongrel, and I’d have realized that if I’d had any sense. He was in prison the same as me, and no better off than I was, but to hear him tell it, you’d have thought that was just some trifling inconvenience to him. He always talked as if he was going to be someone powerful and important one day, and I believed him. Eh—I was younger then, and if you only understand one word in three that someone says, of course you think it must all be great wisdom.” Corson brooded over her memories for a few moments, then said slowly, “And I thought ... that maybe if I could learn to read, and to talk like that, perhaps I’d not be poor and powerless all my days, you see. He was so sure of himself. That’s why I took up with him and let him teach me things. But all I learned from him was fancy words and notions—though he did teach me to read, for all the good that’s ever done me.”

Nyctasia, who spent her every spare moment engrossed in her books, said only, “You’re a woman of deeds, to be sure. But learning never goes to waste, they say.”

“Maybe not. After all, Steifann was impressed that I could read.”

“As was I.”

Corson suddenly laughed. “Some learning is wasted, though. You’d agree if you’d ever seen ’Malkin with sword in hand. He wanted me to make a swordsman of him, but he could sooner have made a scholar of me. I learned my letters readily enough, but he didn’t last long at his lessons.”

Nyctasia had suffered through several such lessons herself. “If you dealt with him as you do with me, it’s small wonder he chose to forego your society.”

“Oh, ’Malkin was much worse at it than you are, so he had a harder time of it. You’re not such a bad pupil. You’re learning.”

“That’s high praise from you. Still, anyone who so much as survives an hour’s instruction at your hands is to be congratulated.”

“Huh—I’m *gentle* with you, I’ll have you know. If I handled you the way we trained recruits in the army—”

“If you did, I’d have your head. So your friend never became powerful and important, I take it?”

“Not he. He’s still nothing but grand talk. He came here on foot to look for work, like all the others of his ilk you’ve got swarming over the palace. I told him I could introduce him to you, but he didn’t believe a word of it. He thought I was still the common ruffian who wasn’t good enough for him before, but he knows better now!” Corson grinned triumphantly. “I’ve had a full measure of vengeance on that one at last!”

“Vengeance? What do you mean?”

“You’ll see. Why don’t you send for him, since you take such an interest in the fellow? I said I’d arrange an audience with you, after all.”

’Malkin had eaten very little of his dinner. He had slipped out of the dining hall as soon as he could possibly do so without calling attention to himself, in hopes of reaching his lodgings and gathering his few possessions before his absence was noticed. There was nothing to be gained by staying in the city now, curse the luck! He had not relished the prospect of spending the night in the open, but a night in the pillory was even less inviting. Better to risk the dangers of the road than the wrath of the Rhaicime. If only he’d known who she was, he could have turned that chance meeting to advantage, and instead he’d ruined his prospects for preferment at court and offended the ruler of the city! But it was no use thinking of that now—the only thing to do was to get away from the palace before it was too late, and try to sneak out of Rhostshyl under cover of darkness.

But it was already too late.

As he hurriedly left his quarters, carrying his cloak and satchel, he was stopped just outside the door by one of the palace guard, who demanded, “Desmalkin brenn Cerrogh?” ’Malkin retreated a few paces, but there was another guard at his back, blocking the corridor behind him.

“Er ... no,” said ’Malkin. “He was here, but he’s gone to dinner. Excuse me, if you will.” He tried to edge past, but suddenly a sword was in his way, the point only inches from his stomach.

“And where are you off to in such a rush, eh?”

“Let me pass! I want to get a meal too, and I’m late already,” ’Malkin protested. “You’ve no call to

interfere with me.”

“No need for games,” said the other sentry, sounding amused. “This is the one, Her Ladyship pointed him out to me herself.”

“I assure you this is quite unnecessary,” ’Malkin said, swearing. “It’s all a mistake. I’m a friend of the Lady Corisonde—”

At this, both guards broke into laughter. “A friend of hers, are you?” one of them said. “Who isn’t a friend of hers? Come along, we’ve orders for your arrest, and that’s all we need to know. We don’t care who your friends are, or who your family are either.”

She held ’Malkin at swordpoint while the other pulled his arms behind his back and fastened his wrists with manacles. He was then led to a small cell in the dungeons beneath the palace, where he had been waiting ever since, expecting the worst. All the while that Corson had been relating her reminiscences to Nyctasia, ’Malkin had been pacing his cell in a grim silence broken only by the conversation of the warders outside the barred door.

“What did that one do to land himself in so much trouble?”

“Insulted the Rhaicime, nothing less, the rutting fool. I’ve never seen her in such a rage.” He recounted ’Malkin’s crime, and his cohort gave a whistle of amazement.

“He must be crazed, poor wretch. He’ll lose a hand for that, I shouldn’t wonder.”

By the time Nyctasia sent for him, ’Malkin was in such a state that it was almost a relief to be summoned to his doom.

If Nyctasia thought it strange that Corson’s friend arrived escorted by armed guards, instead of by a page, she found it stranger still when he threw himself at her feet, abjectly imploring her pardon and declaring his innocence of any intention of offending her. No wonder Corson had taken him for a madman at their first meeting—there seemed to be no telling what the man would do next.

Fortunately for her composure, if not for ’Malkin’s, his entreaties were cut short by Greymantle, who naturally assumed that anyone who was on the floor was there to make friends with him. He came over to ’Malkin, wagging his tail, and began to lick his face good-naturedly, interrupting the flow of his eloquence, and leaving him even more disconcerted than before.

Corson was delighted beyond measure at the success of her prank, and she dismissed her comrades from the palace garrison with hearty thanks for their help in carrying out the deception. “Just don’t forget the ale you owe us,” one reminded her in parting.

“A lady always pays her debts,” said Corson, and fell back onto the couch, overcome with laughter. She prodded ’Malkin with one foot, and ordered, “Get up, you sniveling weasel. That’ll teach you not to doubt the word of a Desthene.” She was laughing too hard to go on, and it was left to Nyctasia to assure ’Malkin that he had been arrested without her knowledge, and entirely at Corson’s instigation. But even Nyctasia, despite her good breeding, found it difficult to conceal her amusement at her guest’s discomfiture. ’Malkin rose to his feet unsteadily and looked around in dismay, unable to think of a thing to say. Never had he felt so thoroughly humiliated.

Contrite, Nyctasia tried to put him at his ease. “Do sit down, sir—don’t mind the hound, he means no harm. Pray take some wine, if Corson has left any.”

“I haven’t,” Corson said cheerfully.

“Then send for more, woman. I’m sure our guest could do with some, after the spiteful trick you’ve played him! Really, Corson, such buffoonery is beneath the dignity of a lady.”

Corson was completely unrepentant. “I don’t care,” she said, between gasps of hilarity. “He deserved it. Maybe next time he’ll think twice before he drops someone’s acquaintance.”

Nyctasia shook her head. “It’s quite useless to remonstrate with her, as you no doubt know. She’s perfectly incorrigible.”

“I am not. What does that mean?”

“It means,” ’Malkin said furiously, “that you can’t be taught to behave decently by any means whatsoever!” He would dearly have liked to tell Corson exactly what he thought of her, but he hesitated to use such uncouth language before the Rhaicime.

“Now you mustn’t think yourself too ill-used,” said Nyctasia. “That one is capable of much worse.”

She tried to *sell* me once, at the Harvest Fair in Osela.”

“Yet you made her a Desthene?” demanded ’Malkin, looking from one woman to the other in bewilderment. Both were laughing now.

“It was rash of me, true. Perhaps I should have her executed now and have done with it, if only for her intolerable impertinence. Do you favor hanging or beheading?”

“Flaying and disemboweling,” ’Malkin said promptly, following Nyctasia’s lead like a true courtier. “Boiling in oil. Drawing and quartering. I’d be honored to carry out the sentence myself.”

“Alas, such penalties are forbidden by law in Rhostshyl, however deserving the culprit.”

“But as sole ruler of the Rhaicimate, Your Ladyship could declare an exception in this case,” ’Malkin urged. “Perhaps a pit of vipers ... ?” he suggested.

“You’re a viper,” said Corson. “You should be thanking me, ’Malkin, for bringing you to the attention of the Rhaicime! If not for me, you’d have bided your turn with the rest of that rout of bookworms. You might never have come to Nyc’s notice. But *I’ve* told her what a fine scholar you are.”

“Indeed yes, Corson’s spoken very highly of your abilities,” Nyctasia said smoothly. “I understand that you taught her to read—a heroic task, I should imagine. Surely one who could accomplish that could teach anything to anyone.” Then her manner suddenly grew serious. “I think of establishing a school here, for the youth of the city, and perhaps for those of neighboring municipalities as well. I shall need able teachers for such an undertaking, but in truth that is only a small part of my plans. I require scholars learned in every discipline to carry out the task at hand.” She gestured toward the books she’d been unpacking. “No doubt you’ve heard something of the lore-ward of the Cymvelans, else you’d not be here.”

“I’ve heard a great deal of students’ talk, Rhaicime,” ’Malkin said eagerly. “But I didn’t credit the half of it till I saw some of the books Corson was bringing here—and even then I was hard put to believe my own senses. The *Lost Commentaries* of Lhesandru, Hraestlind’s *Elaborations*.”

“Ah, the fabled *Elaborations*—do you know, I found them something of a disappointment. The expositions are of exceptional clarity, to be sure, but the material itself, in essence, can almost all be found in other sources.”

’Malkin looked shocked. “Why ... I suppose that *was* to be expected. We are told that the text was a ’prentice effort, after all. But surely the book itself is of enormous historical significance, if it’s genuine. Its very existence lends conviction to much that the learned have dismissed as legendary—not only concerning Hraestlind herself, but the history of YuVoes and the Damiellid Dynasty, don’t you agree?”

Nyctasia smiled. ’Malkin had certainly passed the first test. “Oh, assuredly. Scholars of the pre-imperial era will find it most illuminating. And a few of the paradigms are interesting in themselves. But as extraordinary as this discovery may be, I myself was even more gratified to find that all the known treatises of Rosander the Sangreot are in this collection, in full.”

“In full ... ?” said ’Malkin doubtfully. “You can’t mean *The Manifestations of the Fourth Veil!*”

Nyctasia reached for one of the books and passed it to him, without a word. A ribbon had been laid between the leaves to mark the place. “But this ... this is in Tsathonic!” he exclaimed, gazing at the pages in disbelief. “Sweet *vahn*, generations of debate over the glosses—!” He fell silent, intent on studying the dense script.

Corson, exceedingly bored by the conversation, glanced at the book over his shoulder and gave a snort of contempt. “Dead languages!” she said. “We should have left these books in the crypt where we found them.” She finished ’Malkin’s wine and poured herself some more.

“Mind you, the accuracy of the transcription is far from reliable,” Nyctasia warned ’Malkin. “I question whether the scribe understood the nature of the work.” She joined ’Malkin and pointed out a particular phrase.

“*Mar icoji*,” he mused. “Yes, I see. *Marico ji* must have been intended. It’s likely that this copy was made in the north, to judge from the slant of the serifs. I daresay the scribe knew no Tsathonic at all. But however corrupt the text, it’s bound to resolve the major difficulties over the interpretation of the *Fragments*.”

Nyctasia agreed. She was quite satisfied with ’Malkin. Evidently he had not spent all his time



swindling innkeepers and lying in prison with ignorant mercenaries. "I've sent copies of the first few pages to the Imperial University," she said, "and some of the most renowned scholars of Liruvath are on their way here now, to consult the manuscript."

"Asye's eyes! I'd go from here to Liruvath just to hear no more of the thing!" Corson declared.

"Indeed?" said 'Malkin. "If you start now, you could be there before winter."

"I should have known better than to introduce the two of you. Everyone knows when two scholars get to talking you can't put in a word to tell them the house is afire. When those others get here from Liruvath, all of Rhostshyl will be talked to a stupor."

"Pay her no heed," advised Nyctasia, who knew that Corson disliked being ignored much more than being reproached or reviled. "Have you noticed that the word given as 'blind' in the *Fragments* is *vuhrtev*, and not *tsegre*, as has always been assumed?"

"No! Is it?" said 'Malkin, deeply interested. "That will altogether alter the acceptance of several passages. Why, the First Fragment alone ..."

Corson left them to it and went off to find more congenial company, slamming the door behind her.

'Malkin looked after her with dark disapproval. "That one will go too far one day," he predicted grimly.

"She already has, any number of times, but there seems to be a charmed impunity about her. Was she any the less brazen when you first made her acquaintance?"

"Brazen! She was barely human, my lady. I thought myself fortunate to escape with my life on that occasion."

"That would be when you met her in prison, would it not?"

"Er—yes—purely the result of a misunderstanding ... and a magistrate with an unreasonable dislike of students." At Nyctasia's look of polite disbelief, he added, "Well, be that as it may, they'd no right to lock me up with a murderous madwoman. It was like being caged with a wild beast, I tell you. She raged around that cell cursing and howling and pounding the walls with her fists—I tried to stay out of her way, but there wasn't room enough."

"She did remark that it was rather crowded," said Nyctasia, without mentioning that in Corson's account it was 'Malkin who was the mad one. "I've never seen her quite like that. She must have been very drunk indeed."

"She'd certainly been drinking, but that wasn't all that ailed her. She was in a panic terror at being confined, out of her mind with fear—and fury. And she'd no one to take it out on until I came along. So there I was, half her size, defenseless, just a peaceable young scholar, you understand. I thought my last hour had come." If the tale amused the Rhaicime, 'Malkin thought, he might as well make the most of it. "I cowered in a corner and hoped she'd let me be, but she came storming over and kicked me and shouted, 'Talk to me, curse you, or I'll beat you into butter!'"

"And that's when you told her the Parable of the Drunkard?" said Nyctasia, laughing. So Corson had *forced* him to talk, had she?

"So I did—I'd forgotten. It did keep her calm for a bit, working out the meaning. But I was hard put to think up talk enough to satisfy her." He wondered what else Corson had told Lady Nyctasia. Knowing Corson, it was unlikely that she'd been at all discreet. And Her Ladyship didn't seem easily shocked, after all .... "I was so desperate that I even made love to her at last, just to distract her from murdering me," he continued. "And that was no pleasure, I assure you!"

"No?" said Nyctasia, who was thoroughly enjoying the conversation. "Of course, I shouldn't dream of doubting your word, sir, but ..."

"Well, she smelled, for one thing," 'Malkin explained. "And she was utterly inexperienced, and exceedingly suspicious and hostile. The poor girl had never—"

"What, *Corson!* After her years in the army."

"Oh, she'd been used by others, of course, but she'd never had a proper lover who took the trouble to please her, if Your Ladyship takes my meaning. I had to teach her *everything*."

"I see ...! Still, you must have found some charm in her, if you took up with her after prison and taught her to read."

“She did follow me about for a time, but I had to put a stop to that after I found respectable scribe’s work with Lord Dainor of Eilas. Corson was always in trouble with the authorities, and I was liable to lose my livelihood if I was taken for her confederate. I was sorry to part with her, in truth. She was an apt pupil—and not only at learning her letters.” His glance met Nyctasia’s, and both laughed.

“They do say that students make the best lovers,” Nyctasia murmured, as if to herself.

“I don’t wish to boast,” Malkin said demurely, “but Corson was quite devoted to me in those days. But my lord would have dismissed me at once if I’d brought a shadow of disgrace upon his household. Not all the nobility are as tolerant and liberal as Your Ladyship ....”

His meaning was not lost on Nyctasia. “Oh, I daresay I can find work of *some* sort for such an exceptionally able teacher,” she said.

#### 4

“THOSE TWO WILL take to each other like flame to flax,” Corson thought, chuckling to herself. “They might have been meant for one another. He’ll have me to thank if he finds favor at court, that’s all!”

She was greatly looking forward to telling her friends at the Hare the story of her triumph over Malkin. As she rode along the coast road on her way back to Chiastelm, she was already polishing and improving the tale for their benefit. Half the fun of the thing would be in the telling.

Corson had stayed in Rhostshyl for barely a fortnight, yet it seemed to her that she’d been away from Chiastelm for months—She wondered if it seemed that way to Steifann too. At the thought of him, she grinned broadly and broke into a verse of “The Host of the Hare.” Nyctasia had taught her a few new stanzas to plague Steifann with.

*“Serving spirits to others  
Does give one a thirst,  
So he makes it his practice  
To have a few first.*

*But whatever’s left over  
He’s willing to share,  
So I give you the health  
Of the host of the Hare:*

*His brew’s never watered.  
He draws a full measure,  
For ale’s his profession  
But also his pleasure!*

*The boast of the coast  
Is our excellent host.  
In his honor I offer  
The following toast,  
And fortune will favor  
The one who drinks most:*

*Tell me, what can a taverner  
Buy with his gold  
That’s worth half so much  
As the goods he has sold?”*

Corson laughed aloud. It was an old joke, that riddle, but none the worse for wear, in her opinion,

“There’s true wisdom,” she thought, “and worth three of ’Malkin’s lessons or Nyc’s lectures.” Corson knew what Steifann would say to the allegory of the drunkard—she’d heard him say it often enough, “The fault’s with the drinker, not with the drink,” was his philosophy. “Folk who’ve no stomach for drink should let it alone—and let *me* alone, into the bargain.”

One of Steifann’s merits as a tavern-keeper was that he could out-drink any of his customers and not be much the worse for it. But his influence on Corson, as she’d told Nyctasia, had been rather sobering than otherwise. From the first, he’d no more approved of her drunken rampages than ’Malkin had, though he was well accustomed to dealing with her sort, and had no fears for his reputation. An ale-house was bound to attract its share of drunks and troublemakers, but to house one on the premises was bad for business, and Steifann had not gotten where he was by neglecting the good of his business. Corson was too easily bored, too ready to pick a fight with a customer or fly into a murderous rage over some harmless gibe. Steifann had found her well-nigh irresistible, but her company was a luxury he could ill afford.

He had made allowances for her many times, had even posted bond for her when she was brought before the magistrates, and had accepted her often-repeated assurances that it wouldn’t happen again. But when all else failed, finally even Steifann would lose patience with her. He’d turn her out of the Hare and they’d part with a furious argument and curses that could be heard throughout the harbor district. Steifann would assure anyone who’d listen that he was well rid of the she-demon at last, and would then spend days brooding about her, drinking too much, and finding fault with everything and everyone. Corson, for her part, would go her way alone, vowing that she’d stay free and untrammelled in future, that she needed no one—not a misbegotten student nor a bull-headed dramseller, neither of them ever satisfied with her ways, plague take the pair of them!

But during the time she’d spent with ’Malkin, Corson had grown used to having someone to talk to, someone to listen to, and she’d found Steifann an even better companion than ’Malkin had been. From the moment she’d first laid eyes on the brawny, bearded owner of The Jugged Hare, Corson had liked everything about him, from the unruly black hair falling into his face to the long, powerfully-built legs that made him fully as tall as she. He’d seemed the most desirable man Corson had met with in her young life, and she’d no sooner seen him than she started a violent fight with him.

She’d already been disgracefully drunk when she’d come into the Hare that night to get out of the rain. Wet and hungry and penniless, she’d been ripe for trouble, but the appearance of Steifann had done much to raise her spirits. He’d stood scowling down at her, hands on hips, and ordered her to get out, while Corson admired his green eyes and ignored his wrath. His fists were clenched, his sleeves pushed back to the elbow, and Corson thought she’d never seen anything so beautiful as those hard, muscled forearms, dark with wiry black hair. When threats failed, Steifann had tried to put her out by force, but though he was completely in the right, Corson had soon changed his mind, and he’d ended by urging her to stay.

And Corson had meant to stay. The better she’d come to know Steifann, the more she’d found to like about him—his good-natured grin and ready laugh, his passionate, possessive nature, and especially his way of treating her as an accepted, almost necessary member of his household. Whenever she took to the road, swearing that no pompous bastard of a tapster would tell her what to do, she’d find herself missing him sorely before the day was out. After her parting from ’Malkin she had thought of him often, but with bitterness and resentment. She had never longed for him as she did for Steifann each time he sent her packing.

When next her travels took her to the coast, Corson would chance to pass through Chiastelm, and Steifann, against his better judgment, always took her back with hardly a show of reluctance—hardly able, indeed, to disguise his delight. “It’s the bane of my life to be cursed with this savage spitfire,” he’d declare with unmistakable satisfaction. “It’s fate and no use fighting it.” And Corson, once she’d grown accustomed to the constant exchange of insults, threats and boasts that made up friendly conversation at the Hare, had learned to laugh and answer, “You love it, man! Without me to kick a spur into you, you’d perish of boredom in this dull town. You wouldn’t know if you were dead or alive!” Then all would go well until the next time Corson’s ungoverned temper and recklessness got the better of her.

Though she would have denied it in those days, Corson had known even then that she'd have only herself to blame if Steifann one day broke with her in earnest. She had not been ready to face that frightening truth, or to accept the responsibility of deserving his affection. But what had at last turned the tide in their uneasy union was a misadventure that wasn't Corson's fault at all.

She had wisely taken work with the night watch of Chiastelm at that time, to relieve the galling restlessness that too often led to drink and a dangerously quarrelsome mood. The city guard was more like the army than Corson cared for, but at least she was free to give it up if she chose, and the work was not so tedious and dreary as the household chores at the Hare. Steifann grumbled at having her away for the greater part of the night, but still, the job kept her in Chiastelm, and kept her out of trouble.

She usually returned to the Hare just before dawn, when Steifann did the day's marketing, and Walden filled the great oven with newly-risen loaves. When she approached the yard before sunrise one morning and was not met with the smell of freshly-baking bread, she knew at once that something was amiss, and she cloaked her lantern and drew near without a sound. The kitchen was dark and deserted. She crossed it silently to peer through a knothole in the door that led to the taproom, and what she saw set the bloodlust raging through her like a call to battle.

Walden lay on the floor, motionless, while Annin knelt beside him trying to bind his wounds with her blood-soaked apron. Only a few of the young scullions were in sight, cowering against the far wall and staring at the three strangers who stood guard, shortswords drawn. The others, Corson realized, must have gone off to market with Steifann.

The thieves had chosen their time carefully, watching for Steifann to depart before they struck. There should have been time enough for them to overcome Steifann's people, break open his strongbox with an axe, and make their escape in the darkness before he returned from the marketplace. They had laid their plans cleverly and well in advance. Too far in advance, as it happened.

They hadn't known about Corson.

With surprise on her side, she fell upon the unsuspecting thieves like a sudden storm that strikes without warning, leaving uprooted trees and overturned marketstalls in its wake. She felled two of the three at one blow, with a heavy bench, before even drawing her blade, but by the time the third realized what was happening, she was ready for him, sword in hand, immediately on the attack.

Corson had the advantage of strength and skill, and the man could not have held out against her for long, had not the fourth of the intruders come rushing at her out of Steifann's quarters, wielding a heavy axe. Caught between the two, Corson backed away toward the kitchen, hoping that they would draw together and come at her as one, making a single target of themselves. If one of them had the sense to circle around behind her, they might yet give her some trouble, she thought. But before they could make their move, Annin settled the matter for them by attacking the man nearest her, from behind. Experienced at tavern brawls, she handily slammed a stool into the backs of his knees, cutting his legs from under him and throwing him down with some force.

A well-trained swordsman would have thrust his weapon well away from him as he pitched forward, instead of allowing the force of his fall to drive the edge against his own throat. But a common thief is rarely a well-trained swordsman. Annin, who'd been about to bring the stool down across his back, stopped and let it fall, seeing that there'd be no further danger from him. Instead, she gathered the weapons from the fallen thieves and herded her underlings out of harm's way, while Corson kept the man with the axe at bay.

Shooing the scullions out through the kitchen, Annin ordered, "You, straight to Leech Street and fetch someone—you, roust folk out and tell them we've thieves here. Run!"

Corson could hear their yells as they sped off, and so could her opponent. He had no time to lose if he was to get away, but Corson prolonged the fight, refusing to close with him. She pressed in to harry him, drawing his blows, then danced back, easily dodging the unwieldy axe and letting him wear himself out with clumsy swings of his heavy weapon. "You should throw it, fool," she taunted. "It's too big for a weakling like you to wield. It's only pulling you off balance. Soon I'll get past your guard and gut you!" It was sound advice, and Corson offered it in hopes that he wouldn't take her up on it.

"Are you still toying with that one?" Annin demanded, coming in from the kitchen with rags and a

bucket. "Finish him, can't you! Do I have to do everything myself?"

"Leave him to me," Corson ordered. "He can't aim that thing, but he might hit you by chance. Keep out of the way."

"Oh, very well, but get on with it, then. It's almost daylight. There's work to be done." She spilled some of the water over Walden, who snorted and muttered angrily to himself without opening his eyes.

"Ah, you won't let me have my fun, Annin," Corson complained. "I had a dull night. This town's too quiet by half."

("What was so fearful," Annin said later, "was the way she *smiled*.")

The desperate thief felt himself weakening with each swing of the axe, but still he dared not throw it and leave himself armed only with his shortsword and dagger against Corson's longer reach and warrior's broadsword. He knew that he couldn't hold her off any longer on his own, but he took heart for a moment when one of his confederates crawled free from beneath the bench that had struck him down. The other had taken the blow to the back of her head and would be yet some time recovering, but he had only been dazed. Now he staggered to his feet and looked around him frantically for a weapon. As soon as he'd taken stock of the situation, however, he made a dash for the street-door, threw back the bolts and disappeared, ignoring the plight of his fellow robber.

The remaining combatant wisely decided to follow his example, now that the door behind him stood open. He edged toward it, flailing about with the axe, then finally flung it wildly at Corson and turned to flee.

It was a mistake to turn. Had he backed out the door, he could have seen the knife Corson threw, and perhaps avoided it. He ran on for a few paces across the threshold, after it struck him, then collapsed face downward in the street.

"Well done," said Annin, "we've blood enough in here." She wrung out another cloth and applied a fresh one to the side of Walden's head. He groaned and cursed at her weakly.

Corson retrieved her knife and joined them. "How is he?"

"The bleeding's stopped. He'll come 'round—he's just stunned. It wasn't the wounds, it was when they hit him with a log of firewood. Here, help me get him off the floor."

And that was how Steifann found them, just then, as he ran into the taproom, alarmed at finding the house silent and the kitchen empty. "What's happened—where are all of you—" he called, then stopped and stared, faced with the aftermath of bloodshed and mayhem. He saw furniture overturned, blood spilled, the lifeless bodies of strangers on the floor at his feet. He saw Walden lying wounded, supported by Annin, while Corson stood over them, knife in hand, her blade still crimson.

This time, Steifann didn't shout or curse at her. His voice was quite level, deliberate and quiet, almost soft, as he said to Corson, "The blood's on my hands. I should have known you'd never change. Just get out of my place, you mercenary trash, and don't come back here again, I warn you." His face was a mask of fury and contempt.

Corson went white. She understood now that she'd never seen Steifann truly angry before, despite their many quarrels. Not trusting herself to answer him, she turned away and went into his room, without a word.

It was Annin who explained how matters stood, as between them she and Steifann got Walden to his feet. "Corson didn't do this, Steifann, you fool! A pack of armed robbers broke in here after you left—those two are what's left of 'em—oh, and another one out there, Walden went at them with a cleaver, but they were too many for him."

"Rutting cowards," Walden said thickly, and winced.

"If Corson hadn't come along when she did, the bastards would have gotten away. You've her to thank that they didn't make off with every crescent you've saved, and cut all our throats, as like as not!" This was not likely, in fact, since the thieves would surely have murdered them at the outset if they'd planned to do so at all. But Annin, indignant on Corson's behalf, was not above a little exaggeration in the interests of justice.

It took Steifann some moments to get his bearings. "Thieves ...?" he said vaguely, as if he'd never heard the word before. He looked around in confusion, pushing the hair back from his forehead. "Oh ...

but I ... Well, call for the Watch, then.”

Corson stood leaning in the doorway, her pack over her shoulder. “I *am* the Watch,” she said grimly. “Remember?”

“But you don’t have to go,” Steifann had protested. “Why should you? You weren’t to blame—”

“This time,” Corson interrupted, as if supplying words he’d left unsaid. “But what of next time, eh? If I try to stay pent up here forever, I’ll go mad from boredom sooner or later—and I’m dangerous when I’m bored. It’ll be better this way. I’ll come back in a month or two, and I’ll be certain of my welcome.”

Corson had made up her mind, and knew that she was right. She had seen what would happen if one day she became a threat to Steifann’s home and people, and she meant to take no chances on letting it happen. She never wanted to see that look on his face again.

It was the first time they’d parted without anger, and this became the new pattern of Corson’s life. She followed her calling wherever it led, giving free rein to her restlessness and daring, and earning a greater reputation, and larger fees, for her prowess with a sword. But now her aimless adventuring was broken by sojourns at the Hare, visits which had taken on the nature of homecomings, over time, and given her rather random existence a stability and security she had not known before. Her stays had grown longer, now sometimes lasting a season or more, but she still took care always to be on her way before there could be trouble.

*“Seek to the ends  
Of the earth, if you dare—  
You’ll not meet the like  
Of the host of the Hare!”*

Corson sang lustily. When she arrived in Chiastelm, not long afterwards, she greeted Steifann with a fervent embrace hardly warranted by such a brief separation. He received her crushing hug with the deep, warm laugh Corson loved. “Here, what’s that for?” he said, surprised and pleased by her unbridled enthusiasm.

“I missed you, you stupid lout!” said Corson.

## 5

“WORD HAS REACHED me that you are conspiring to raise opposition to certain of my plans,” Nyctasia said quietly. “And I must protest that it would be more seemly for you to come directly to me with your views, instead of leaving me to learn of them from my court spies. You must be aware that I shall find them out in time, but apart from that, I quite frankly want your advice on these matters.”

She paused, but no one replied to her. Lady Elissa merely regarded her silently, while Lord Anselton seemed to look through her without interest. Both were older than Nyctasia by a generation and resented her manner, which, though unfailingly courteous, did not altogether disguise her impatience. The young widow Lhejadis studied her ringed hands uneasily. She had never made a secret of the fact that she blamed Nyctasia for the death of her husband, Mescrisdan. Lord Erikasten, Nyctasia’s younger brother, sat scowling at the floor, refusing to meet her eyes.

“As you know, I intend to issue the remaining pardons as part of the festivities of celebration following the birth of Tiambria’s child,” Nyctasia continued. “As I understand that you object to this proceeding, I have taken the liberty of calling you together, that I may have the benefit of your counsel. It seems to me that we have been feeding and housing the prisoners long enough. We could put our resources to better use.”

Lord Anselton was the first to speak. “There is a simpler way to resolve that difficulty, and husband the resources of the city.”

“That,” Nyctasia said curtly, “is not a subject for debate. You know my views. I’ll have no further butchery in Rhostshyl. We’ve enough to answer for!”

“Commendable sentiments,” said Lady Elissa. “You’ve your reputation to consider, after all. ‘Lady

Merciful' they call you in the streets, is it not? And what need for further bloodshed, now that Mharestri is murdered, and Emeryc's heir removed from the succession?"

With the death of the matriarch Mharestri, the opposition to Nyctasia's rule had lost much of its force, but the matriarch's followers at court were still a power to be reckoned with.

"Mercy for the enemies of our House, but another law for those of your own blood who stand in your way," said Lhejadis suddenly. "Enough to answer for indeed!"

"You do the matriarch an injustice if you suppose that she was that careless," Nyctasia said evenly. "As for Emeryc's family, they are all three safe and unharmed, as I have repeatedly explained." She half smiled. "Though were I guilty of all you say, I could only be accused of upholding family tradition. Because in my place you would have done away with them, do not make the mistake of assuming I have done so. For your own sake, I pray you, consider how foolish you will feel when they return."

"If they live, where are they?" Lord Anselton challenged. "And when may we expect this return which is to make fools of us all?"

Nyctasia shook her head gently. "Forgive me, but surely the fewer who know their whereabouts, the safer they will be. There is nothing to be gained at present by taking unnecessary risks."

"That is to say that you do not trust us. Why, then, do you seek our advice? Consult with Therisain and your other lackeys."

"I know their advice without asking. I can do no wrong in Therisain's eyes, which makes him a good ally, but a bad advisor. Now, *you* think I'm mad—thus you'll see the flaws in my plans, and if you care more for Rhostshyl's welfare than for my downfall, you'll warn me of them. Oh, it's your advice I need to hear, I know that.

"Of course, I may not follow it," she added. "But for all our sakes, and for the sake of the city, let me hear what you have to say."

"Very well," said Lord Anselton coldly. "It's said that you mean to dismiss half the city guard—only madness itself could suggest such folly."

"Nonsense! Nonsense and idle rumor," Nyctasia cried indignantly. "There's no question of half, or even a quarter, of the garrison—only of those who were conscripted from among the laborers on the municipal estates. We've peace in the city now, and there's the harvest to be thought of."

"And how long shall we have peace if the city's defenses are to be weakened?" demanded Lady Elissa. "Rhostshyl has barely recovered from civil war. We should be strengthening her forces now, with mercenary troops if necessary—the more so if you reject the proposal of alliance with Ochram!"

"I have not rejected it!" Nyctasia protested. "I have barely had time to consider the matter."

The Edonaris had recently received overtures from the ruling family of Ochram, concerning the possibility of a marriage-alliance between them, and only Nyctasia was of sufficiently exalted rank to enter into such a union with the High Lord Aithrenn. Her allies and opponents alike had urged her to consider the advantages for Rhostshyl of closer connections with the Maritime city-states. Ochram was a major port and center of shipping; the alliance could go far toward restoring Rhostshyl's prosperity.

The marriage itself would be no more than a diplomatic formality that would hardly interfere with the lives of those concerned, and, having arranged a marriage-alliance for her sister, Nyctasia was in no position to refuse without good reason.

"They have not made a formal proposal, merely a suggestion that we discuss the matter," she continued. "And I have invited His Lordship to come to Rhostshyl at his pleasure, to do so. More than that I cannot do at present. He must see for himself what the city has suffered, and how much remains to be done before she will be again the proud and powerful city she was."

"Exactly so," Lord Anselton agreed. "Hardly the time, one would think, to invite outright rebellion by conferring these senseless pardons of yours and decreasing the city guard!"

Nyctasia appeared to be troubled by these arguments. "I don't believe there will be rebellion," she said slowly. "Folk in this city have had their fill of warfare. The partisans of the Teiryn were crushed once, and those who remain are thankful to have been spared. They'll not be eager to chance a second defeat, against greater odds. After all, we hold the city, we have more dominion over Rhostshyl than ever before. Surely even the most foolhardy of the Teiryn would not be so rash as to attempt to overthrow us

now. And you must admit that most have accepted the terms of the peace.”

“Of course they accepted,” Lady Elissa said bitterly, “We demanded no concessions, and surrendered every advantage! Not even the Teiryn are fools enough to refuse such terms.”

Nyctasia sighed. ““Who can put a price on peace, or weigh clemency in the balance?”” she quoted, then remarked wryly, “By the *vahn*, the older I grow, the more serviceable I find the Principles of the Philosophers.”

It could not be denied that the marriage-alliance of the Edonaris and the Teiryn had brought about an uneasy, but thus far stable, peace between the warring families. The majority of the surviving Teiryn had come to see that they’d been given a chance to temper defeat with dignity. They had been at the mercy of the Edonaris, and a marriage treaty, as between equals, was a more than generous offer from a victorious enemy. Those who still could not be brought to take this view of the matter were among the prisoners in question.

“I imagine we’ll see outbreaks of trouble,” Nyctasia concluded—“And possibly brawls between hotheaded bands of youths. But I do not anticipate a concerted uprising—do you?”

“Perhaps not, but we must be prepared for one, nevertheless. This is no time to take risks with the city’s security—no time to think of reducing the municipal guard, just when they’ll most be needed to keep the peace.”

Nyctasia was in complete agreement, and had been so from the start. She had long since decided that the numbers of Rhostshyl’s warders must be augmented when the final pardons were declared, but she had spoken of this decision to no one. Instead, she had instructed certain of her courtiers to spread rumors to the contrary, so as to allow her opponents to challenge her on grounds where she was prepared to give way. The pardons would be carried out, but it wouldn’t do to have her powerful kin believe that their views held no weight with her at all. Should they conclude that it was useless to try to reason with her, they’d be all the more inclined to try other means to gain their ends.

“There is much in what you say,” she said, as if reluctantly. “Carelessness could accomplish what the Teiryn failed to do.”

“Yes,” said Lady Elissa, with the air of one who has finally succeeded in explaining something to a simpleminded child. “And the Teiryn may have lost much of their following, but they might well seek allies elsewhere. With Rhostshyl weakened by civil strife, it would be no difficult matter to persuade the governors of Heithskor that the time is ripe for conquest. If the Teiryn have learned that they cannot take the city, they’ll stoop to serve another power that will destroy the Edonaris for them—and reward them with a place among Rhostshyl’s new rulers. Can you doubt that Ettasuan ar’n Teiryn would sell Rhostshyl to her enemies, to have revenge on the House of Edonaris?”

Erikasten was startled into speech. “Lord Ettasuan! ’Tasia, you don’t mean to pardon him with the rest?”

This too was a point Nyctasia was willing to concede, but she said only, “I think to do so, yes. A general pardon ought not to admit of exceptions.”

“But he’s tried to kill you—you know he’ll try again if he’s set at liberty!”

“Brother, if I were to condemn everyone in the city who’s tried to murder me, the dungeons would not be adequate to hold them. Of course, if Ettasuan’s fool enough to try it again—and I daresay he is—he’ll be arrested and brought before the magistrates—”

“Have you forgotten that Ianesse ar’n Teiryn is dead?” Lord Anseldon interrupted. “Ettasuan will be head of the House of Teiryn if you release him.”

Nyctasia never forgot details of that sort. “Only until Jehamias comes of age,” she pointed out. “A matter of mere months. And I needn’t restore Ettasuan to his rank, if you think it ill-advised. Yet what harm could he do, even so? He has little enough support now, even among his kin, and his health is not what it was since his imprisonment. I should not be surprised if he succumbed to the hereditary scourge of the Teiryn within the year.”

At this, the others immediately assumed that Nyctasia had employed a slow-working poison to ensure the accuracy of this prediction. No one voiced this suspicion, but Nyctasia replied as if it had been spoken. “No. How often must I explain that it is unnecessary to murder the Teiryn? They will perish of



their own accord, if given the least chance to do so. For that reason alone I would pardon Lord Ettasuan, lest he should die while still in our hands. Such a thing would not be to our honor, though we had no part in his death.”

Nyctasia was aware that the others did not believe her, but she only shrugged, abandoning without regret all attempts to convince them. After all, they would not disapprove of her resorting to poison in such a case; on the contrary, they’d no doubt think the better of her for it. The one point where everyone in the room could agree was the desirability of Lord Ettasuan’s demise.

“But, for all that, his fate must finally rest with the heir of his House,” she observed. “I may pardon our enemies, but his threats against Jehamias are another matter.”

“Jehamias!” Lord Anselton said with scorn. “That one will do whatever you bid him, you know it well.”

To his surprise, Nyctasia smiled. “Yes,” she said unexpectedly, “and very convenient I find it. Come, confess that our interests are better served by Jehamias as a willing ally than as a sacrifice to our victory. Already many of the Teiryns’ supporters acknowledge him, and more will follow when he becomes titular head of the House of Teiryng.”

“As he never will, if Ettasuan has his way. But perhaps the spells that safeguard you now shield young Jehamias as well?”

Nyctasia allowed this to pass unanswered. If people chose to believe that she had such powers, so much the better. Rumors of that sort could be better protection than spells themselves.

“A watch will be kept on His Lordship, should Jehamias consent to his release,” she said firmly, and turned to Lady Elissa. “Yet I fear you wrong him, Madame, if you believe that his hatred of our House would outweigh his loyalty to his city. A fool the man unquestionably is, but not, I think, a traitor. Still, whether Ettasuan prove treasonous or no ...”

She had meant to conclude, “Heithskor would be no threat to Rhostshyl, even with his complicity,” but even as she began to speak, an entirely different idea occurred to her. It was true that she feared no invasion from the inland city-state of Heithskor. Though Rhostshyl’s defenses had been weakened, the city was still well-protected by its sister cities of the Maritime Alliance, whose members were all pledged to mutual defense. Nyctasia had often praised the foresight of her ancestors for bringing Rhostshyl into the Alliance. Since she’d come to power, she had taken pains to confirm and reinforce those ties, and she was confident that the coastal cities would honor their treaties with Rhostshyl. No doubt the rulers of Heithskor would be pleased to annex Rhostshyl and its widespread estates, but they would not take arms against the entire Alliance to do so.

Yet it might be wise, Nyctasia realized, not to insist that the city’s borders were secure. What better way to unite the disparate factions at court, the remaining rivalries in the city, than to offer them a common enemy?

“Whether Ettasuan prove treasonous or no ...” she said, and hesitated, “... Heithskor remains a threat, with or without his complicity. Rhostshyl is vulnerable, as you say, and I have perhaps been inclined to rely too much on the good faith of our allies.”

“You have,” said Lady Elissa. “‘Friends may prove fickle, but foes are faithful.’ The security of the city must depend on no other power.”

Nyctasia seemed to be listening to her and weighing her words with care, but she was already so engrossed in her own plans that she barely heard. She would have her people begin to spread rumors at once, she decided, that spies in Heithskor reported preparations for invasion. She nodded thoughtfully and said aloud, “We are agreed, I believe, that the safety of the city is paramount. But that is why we must strive above all to reconcile the differences that divide our people, to lay old enmities to rest. Unless the city is unified it cannot stand firm against a threat from without.” *Divert your opponent’s eye from your true objective*, she thought.

“And the city guard?” asked Lord Anselton.

“I shall see to it,” Nyctasia promised. If she were to raise a force of mercenaries, it would lend substance to the rumors as well. Perhaps Corson would be willing to undertake the matter. “I was certain,” she said, with every appearance of satisfaction, “that you would know where I had neglected

my duty. Mhairestri always told me that I was too liable to let my visions cloud my sight. I need you—*Rhostshyl* needs you—to warn me when the welfare of the city may suffer from my misjudgment.”

As ever, when Nyctasia most desired to be persuasive, she mingled as much of the truth as she dared with her deceptions. She did indeed need the help of her kin. When she had first returned to her homeland, she had been forced to assert her authority to the fullest, and compel the others to acknowledge her ascendancy, in order to carry out her plans. But she could not continue to govern *Rhostshyl* alone; there were other matters for her to attend to, other ways in which to serve the city. Now that the marriage-alliance had been established, and a measure of stability restored to the city, it was time to propitiate those who had opposed her, and to win their support, if this were possible. To do so, she must relinquish some of her power over them, relegate some of her duties to others. It had worried her to discover how reluctant she was to do this. She had not yet escaped Mhairestri’s influence.

Now she stood, to indicate that the audience was at an end, and thanked the others warmly for their candor. It was the most courteous of dismissals, but a dismissal nonetheless.

## 6

ERIKASTEN WAS NOT surprised when Nyctasia bade him to remain behind when the others took their leave. “I’ve been wondering why I was summoned to this counsel,” he said. “You would hardly consult *my* judgment on matters of state.” Though he agreed with Anselton and his party about certain of Nyctasia’s measures, his views would have little weight until he came of age.

Nyctasia resumed her seat, and motioned for him to do the same. “I’m worried about you, ’Kasten. You haven’t enough to do.”

“I take it you’ve something in mind for me to do?”

“Very good, quite right. There is a commission you could undertake for me, if you would. It will require you to travel into the Midlands, to our kinfolks’ vintnery at Vale.”

“In fine, you want to be rid of me,” Erikasten said with a sneer.

Nyctasia matched his tone. “Indeed I do. You’re like the tom whose littermate has young. I’m afraid you’ll eat the kits.”

Erikasten drew a sharp breath. “It’s the talk of the court, how coarse and common you’ve grown,” he spat.

“Isn’t it a pity? I once had such exquisite manners, alas. Let it be a lesson to you not to keep low company. But if I shock you, I shall at least be certain of your attention. I’m sorry I’ve neglected you of late. I seem to have the least time for those I love the most. But I have been giving a great deal of thought to you, and how you might best serve the city. ’Kasten, you could really be of great help to me in the Valley lands.”

“I suppose I’ll never be seen again, like Emeryc’s heir? Was he one of those you love the most?”

“If you believe that I’ve done away with Leirven, you should thank me,” Nyctasia said sharply. “But you know better.”

When *Rhostshyl*’s civil war had claimed the life of their older brother, his title had come to his son Leirven, still a young child. But should Leirven die without an heir, Erikasten would succeed him.

“The others believe it,” Erikasten said carefully. “Lhejadis says it openly.” He knew he was betraying nothing that had not already been reported to Nyctasia.

Nyctasia shook her head. “Poor Jade, she’d like to believe it, but I don’t think she does. She’d be glad to believe me guilty of any atrocity. She was genuinely fond of Mescrisdan, you know. But it’s more than that. She’s resented me since we were children, before you and Tiambria were born.” She paused. “Do you remember my telling you, long ago—when I was nursing you through some ailment or other—what a very sickly child I was myself?”

Erikasten did not want to be reminded that Nyctasia had once been all but a mother to him and his twin sister. He nodded, frowning. “You said it was the *vahn* that healed you.”

“So it was. Certainly it wasn’t our court physicians. Their judgment was that I’d not live to come of age.”

A true Edonaris, Erikasten was quick to follow this. “Then Lhejadis might well have become Rhaicime—”

“If I had died, yes, She would have stood a very good chance of inheriting either our mother’s title or Lehannie’s. It really was rather hard on her that I recovered.”

“But now Tiambria and Deirdras are the heirs apparent,” Erikasten pointed out. “If Deirdras still lives, as you claim, Lhejadis wouldn’t benefit by your death.”

“It might not be difficult to have Deirdras’s claim set aside, especially now that Emeryc is gone. But even that wouldn’t be necessary if I were not only dead but disgraced utterly—if my name were stricken from the family records.”

Erikasten understood. If that should come about, it would be as if Nyctasia had never inherited the Rhaicimate from their mother, Teselescq. That title would pass to Tiambria, leaving Lhejadis as the successor to Lehannie.

“It would suit Jade very well if I were condemned for any number of monstrous crimes,” Nyctasia was saying. “As for the others, if they believe that I had Rehal and her children murdered, so much the better. They probably respect me for it.”

“Why do you think Lhejadis doesn’t believe it, then?” Erikasten asked, curious in spite of himself.

“Because if she were convinced that I was that bloodthirsty, she’d not dare to say such things about me! Why, the most powerful contradiction of these accusations is that my enemies are alive to make them. It must be a sore puzzle to them that I haven’t tried to have them silenced.”

“Why haven’t you?” Erikasten found himself enjoying the sense of being in Nyctasia’s confidence. But he remained wary.

“The truth is that it would be against my principles. Not very convincing, is it?”

“Not at all.”

“The truth so seldom is. That’s why I prefer to lie, as a rule. And folk prefer to hear lies, for the most part. But my invention has so far failed me, in this matter. I simply cannot contrive a credible reason to spare Anselton and those of his faction. Can you?”

Erikasten was silent, suspecting a trap.

“And yet they live, and are at liberty to scheme against me, though I’ve the power to prevent it,” Nyctasia continued. “Quite unaccountable, unless one accepts the unbelievable—that I refuse to resort to bloodshed. Think on that, brother. And if you can devise a more plausible explanation for my behavior, I’d be grateful to hear it. I’ve seldom been at such a loss for lies. Well, let them wonder for the nonce. Let them believe that I’ve some plan in mind so demonically clever that no one can guess at it. Perhaps I’ll think of one.” She laughed at Erikasten’s look of angry uncertainty. “Oh, ’Kasten, nothing is so mysterious and misleading as the truth.”

“Then why are you afraid to tell me what you’ve done with Emeryc’s children? I’m surely not wise enough to believe you! If I’m to accept your word that the others wrong you, prove it—where are Leirven and Deirdras?”

“Why, in Vale of course, ’Kasten. Why else would I wish to send you there? Here, if you must have proof, read this. It’s from Rehal,” Nyctasia took a letter from between the pages of a book and handed it to him with a smile. “Raven and Derry are quite alive, growing fast, and turning brown in the sun.”

With each shipment of wine and books from the Midlands, letters arrived for Nyctasia from the family of vintners. This last had announced, among other news, the betrothal of her brother’s widow, Rehal, to Raphistain ar’n Edonaris, one of the heads of the vintnery.

Erikasten read it quickly and looked up, frowning. “Rehal’s to marry one of these winemakers?”

“I couldn’t be more pleased. It will be an excellent match for both. Rehal was never at her ease at court, but our cousins in Vale aren’t too proud to welcome a farm woman among them. Raphe needs just such a wife, as well, who can be of help to him at the grape-growing and the harvest. And if I know that one, he’ll not mind having a *Hlaven* to wife. Rehal will seem quite the lady to her new family.”

But Erikasten wasn’t listening. “So you’ve sent Emeryc’s children to be raised by peasants! Is that your game? You’d not have them killed—not you!—you’ll only see to it that they’re made unfit for their position!”

“Silence! You know nothing of my plans, or of these people.” Mastering her anger, Nyctasia forced herself to speak calmly. “The Edonaris of Vale are not peasants. They are country gentry, and nearer kin to us than you suppose. You will know that as soon as you see them—they’re our mirror image ... or we theirs. You’ll see much of Emeryc in Raphistain, and not only in the resemblance. He must have seemed to Rehal like her husband’s ghost at first. And his twin sister Frondescine—oh yes, they’re as prone to twins as we—is so very like me that Raphe himself took me for her when we met. We are one family, ’Kasten, or ought to be.”

She paused, choosing her words, and said earnestly, “I have sometimes thought that they, not we, are the true Edonaris. They’ve preserved something that we’ve lost, something of what the Edonaris once were, a quality that made us capable of building this city. I don’t know whether to call it the vital essence of the spirit, or whether to give it simply the name of honesty. I only know that we’ve become capable, instead, of destroying the city—you have seen that for yourself. And if Rhostshyl is to live, we must learn again to serve the furtherance of life, not the furtherance of our own power.”

“A most moving speech,” said Erikasten, in unwitting imitation of Lord Anseldon. “But I fail to see how the heirs to the Rhaicimate can serve the city if they’re to be hidden away in the Midlands.”

“Of course they must return when they’re old enough, but not yet, ’Kasten. That’s one reason I want to have you there, as my emissary, to see that they receive an education fitting for future rulers of Rhostshyl. Naturally you suspect me of other intentions. You suspect everyone, and rightly so. Look at the life you’ve led! You’re still a youth, in years, but already you’ve been through war, lost a brother to your enemies, taken part in schemes and conspiracies—of course you trust no one. How could you? *But that’s not the youth I want for Leirven and Deirdras!*”

There was a silence between them, then Erikasten, speaking each word deliberately and with unmistakable resolve, said, “Tasia, if you’re lying to me now, I warn you, you really had better have me killed before I discover the truth. Because if you don’t, I’ll kill you myself. I swear it, on the honor of an Edonaris.”

“I’d expect no less of you, brother. You learned much from the war, I know. You made me proud. But I want the next generation of the Edonaris to learn from peace.” For the first time, she spoke simply, easily, seeming to be neither on the defense nor the attack. “I agree with you, however, that they must not be allowed to forget who they are and what duty they owe the city. It is necessary that Rehal and Raphe understand this. I would send you to them because you understand it.”

“You said that was one reason you wanted me there,” Erikasten reminded her. “Tell me the rest.”

“It is my hope that when you return, some of our Midland cousins may be allowed to come with you, and perhaps settle among us here. This House needs new blood, and theirs is Edonaris blood. We are not a prolific family, you know. But they are. We need them far more than they need us, but some of our young cousins at Vale long for Rhostshyl above all else, I know. When I was there, they were all afire to join battle with the Teiryn and defend their ancestral home. Their elders forbade it, as well they might, but now ... now that we have peace in the city, now that they carry on trade with the coast, and we’re soon to have marriage-ties with them as well, they may be willing to permit their young folk to visit Rhostshyl, perhaps to receive an education here. You’re of an age to befriend them, ’Kasten, and whet their curiosity about the coast and the court. You’ll seem a hero to them because you’ve fought for your House, and because you’re a lord of Rhostshyl who lives in the palace of the Edonaris.” And it would do ’Kasten good to be admired and made much of, Nyctasia thought, Tiambria’s celebrated marriage had put him too much in the shade. “They’ll need your help to learn court etiquette and deportment,” she continued. “But take care not to condescend to them, or let them feel that you think them ill-bred and unmannered. They’re proud people, and they’ll not stand for that. If you show them proper respect, they’ll be more than glad to learn what you have to teach them. Indeed, they’ll demand to be taught, as I can assure you from my own experience. But you’ll learn from them as well, if you’re wise.”

She spoke as if his journey to Vale were a settled matter, and Erikasten knew that it was. He would have to go there, if only to see for himself whether Emeryc’s children really were safe. If it was all a trick of Nyctasia’s, so be it. He was accomplishing nothing worthwhile at court, and he admitted to himself, though not to Nyctasia, that any change would have been welcome.

“Do you know,” he said suddenly, “I’ve never been farther than a day’s ride away from Rhostshyl?”

Nyctasia smiled, half sadly. “I know very well, And it’s time you saw something of the world. But, ’Kasten ... you’re not being sent into exile. I’ll not deny that I want you away from Anselton’s influence, but it’s equally true that you’re the one person best suited for this mission. As the uncle of Emeryc’s children, you’ve a right to concern yourself with their welfare, and you’re old enough now to do so. But you’re young enough still to be a companion to those of our kin who I hope will join us—and young enough, I trust, to learn from their way of life.” Nyctasia studied her brother’s countenance for a long moment. “And then, there is one other reason for you to go,” she said, faltering somewhat. “I hadn’t meant to tell you, but I believe I’ll chance it after all.”

Erikasten looked up sharply. “The true reason?”

“What I’ve told you *is* true, but it isn’t the whole of the truth. You see, there’s one of our Midland cousins, Tepicacia by name, whom I’d particularly like you to bring back to Rhostshyl—as a bride.”

Erikasten was on his feet in an instant, shouting, “Isn’t it enough that you’ve married my sister to a Teiryne? If you think you can make me take a common rustic to wife—and be the laughingstock of the court—”

“You call Emeryc a laughingstock?” Nyctasia asked coldly. “A common rustic was good enough for him to marry, but not for you?”

Erikasten was taken aback. “That—that was altogether different! Rehal had borne him an heir, and ... and he *chose* to make her his wife—everyone knew that—”

“Of course this affair is different. Tepicacia ar’n Edonaris is neither a hired laborer nor a nobleman’s mistress. Her blood is as good as your own, and I’ll not hear her insulted by an insolent puppy like you!”

Furious as he was, Erikasten was too well-bred to turn and go, without Nyctasia’s permission. She was his elder, and a Rhaicime. He bowed and said, “If there was nothing else you wished to tell me, Madame, have I your leave to withdraw?”

“Oh, sit down, ’Kasten, and hold your tongue if you can’t talk sense. I begin to regret that I’ve placed my faith in you. There’s no question of my making you marry. You may be my ward, by law, but Tepicacia isn’t, and she’s far too proud to accept a bridegroom who disdains her family. She may not take to you, for that matter—I daresay you’ll have to woo her if you want her.”

Nyctasia knew very well that ’Cacia was besotted with dreams of Rhostshyl and her noble kin. Erikasten would seem to her the embodiment of that romantic, distant city, but it would be as well to let him think that the girl wouldn’t be so easily won. Perhaps it had been a mistake to reveal her hopes for the betrothal, but Nyctasia thought not, on the whole. *He’ll be half in love with her by the time he reaches Vale*, she thought, *just from wondering about her all the way*. And when he found that she bore a certain family likeness to Tiambria, not in her features merely, but even more in her bold spirit and will ... well, let him discover that for himself.

“Her kin would approve the match. I think,” she said aloud, smiling, “but they’re not tyrants like me—they’d no more marry ’Cacia against her will than sell her into slavery. And I’ve not suggested a word to them or to her about a betrothal, I assure you. It will rest entirely with you whether or not the matter goes any further. I ask you only to meet the girl and then decide for yourself. That, I’m sure you will agree, is not an unreasonable request, so will you please *sit down*, ’Kasten?”

This time Erikasten obeyed, but muttered defiantly, “I still think you bewitched Tiambria to obtain her consent to the match. You gave her a love-philtre, or a charm—”

Nyctasia broke into a peal of laughter. “And the Teiryne think I did the same to Jehamias—as if either of the pair weren’t desirable enough to inspire love, without the aid of witchery! I grant you that I would have spellcast them both, if I’d had the means, but fortunately it wasn’t necessary. You see, in my experience, the directions for such potions invariably call for ingredients I couldn’t possibly obtain. In fact, they don’t exist.

“There are charms that arouse lust, yes,” she added, grinning, “but love can no more be mastered by magic than by reason. As ever, all of you credit me with powers far beyond my poor abilities. But after all, you’ve nothing to fear, ’Kasten, even if you believe such nonsense. I can hardly give you a love-philtre while you’re in the Midlands and I’m on the coast.”

“You needn’t mock at me,” Erikasten said, between his teeth.

“True. It’s an odious habit, but hard to break. Please forgive me.” She sounded disgusted with herself, and genuinely contrite.

Erikasten wondered, not for the first time, whether his older sister really was mad. But, as always, he gave up trying to make sense of her. Tiambria had told him, “She’s crazy, to be sure, but that doesn’t mean that she’s wrong.”

“All the Edonaris are crazy,” he said resignedly. “When am I to leave for the Midlands, then?”

“At once. If you delay, you might be stranded in Osela till the spring thaw, if the snows come as early as they did last winter.” Nyctasia did not need to ask what had prompted his remark about the Edonaris. “So look to your preparations. But mind you don’t run to Anselton and the rest with word of Rehal’s whereabouts, ’Kasten. If you do, any harm that befalls the children will be on your hands.”

“Why should they harm Emeryc’s children? They were his allies! They want Leirven to take his place—”

“And Deirdras to take mine? Yes, but do they want my undoing even more? Is it beyond belief that they’d make an attempt on the children’s lives in order to fix the blame on me?”

Erikasten hesitated. “Surely you—” he began, and stopped abruptly. “I don’t believe they’d resort to that,” he said finally.

“No? Well, neither do I, in truth. But I’m not so sure of it that I would give them the opportunity. Are you?”

“I won’t tell them,” sighed Erikasten. “But I mean to tell Briar where I’m bound.” He meant to tell a few others as well. If no one knew his destination, it would be a simple matter for Nyctasia to see that he disappeared without a trace. Why should he make it easy for her?

But Nyctasia responded at once, “By all means, tell everyone where you’re bound. I’ll not have it said that I’ve done away with you as well as Emeryc’s heir. A certain reputation for ruthlessness may be advantageous in my position, but only in moderation. Tell them ... tell them that I think to arrange a marriage-alliance with the Edonaris of Vale, but that nothing has been settled, and that you’re being sent to see how the land lies. *That* will give them something to think about! It’s not *your* whereabouts I would keep from them, you understand, but that of Emeryc’s family—at least for the time being.”

“What I don’t understand,” Erikasten said, after a silence, “is why you would trust me to know their hiding-place.” He did not so much doubt Nyctasia as feel that he ought to doubt her.

“Ah, I wondered when you’d ask me that. It does seem unlikely that I’d trust you with the truth, I admit, but I can explain. I don’t trust your judgment, brother, but I do trust your honor. I know you’d die to defend Emeryc’s heir, even though he stands between you and the Rhaicimate.”

“He stands between me and you as well, sister. I’d as soon throw away my shield in battle as wish Leirven out of the succession. While he lives, I’m no threat to your ambition.”

Nyctasia covered her face with her hands. “Spoken like an Edonaris,” she said.

## 7

STEIFANN HAD MUCH enjoyed Corson’s account of her vengeance on ’Malkin. He’d heard more than he liked about ’Malkin over the years, and he’d been none too pleased, at first, to learn that Corson had encountered him again. But now he felt quite satisfied that this scholar would want nothing more to do with Corson, after the nasty game she’d played him. Steifann could almost feel sorry for the fellow. “Well, I’d not turn my back on that one, if I were you,” he advised Corson. “If you used me that way, I wouldn’t rest till I’d made you regret it.”

“He brought it on himself! I told him that Nyc was the Rhaicime. He should have believed me.”

“You know very well no one would take Nyc for a Rhaicime—not unless she took the trouble to play the part. I thought she was some feckless vagabond student when I first laid eyes on her. I all but swatted her myself.”

Corson shook her head. “The first time you saw her, you thought she was Destiver’s cabin boy,” she reminded him.

Destiver laughed. "I thought she was an imperial spy, or an assassin. I threatened to keelhaul her if she didn't keep herself out of my way! If I'd known she was a runaway Rhaicime, I could have held her for ransom."

"And you'd have been hung for a smuggler," Annin said tartly, rapping her on the head with a large ladle. "You're lucky that our Lady Nyc doesn't hold a grudge."

When the *Windhover* was in port, Destiver spent far too much time at the Hare, in Corson's opinion. True, she'd spent the night with Annin, not with Steifann, but what happened when Corson wasn't in town, and Destiver was? "Nyc has a forgiving nature," said Corson. "But I don't."

"Neither do I," Destiver put in. She kissed Annin's hand and went off to the docks.

"She says that mercy is the mark of true nobility," Corson continued, ignoring Destiver. "But I'm not of noble blood. Now that I'm quits with 'Malkin, I'll forgive the bastard. Besides, Nyc made me promise not to do that sort of thing at court again. That's all right, though—I don't know anyone else like 'Malkin."

"Good," said Steifann, and added wryly, "Very forgiving our noble Nyc is—until she starts singing her little songs about you."

Trask snickered—"Ho, you *like* that song. You've been singing it yourself, I heard you."

"You hear too much that doesn't concern you. Go open the taproom, we'll have folk here soon enough. And fetch in that wheel of cheese from the cart! If I have to tell you again—"

"It's too heavy for me," Trask complained. "Now Corson's back, let her do it. Or has milady grown too grand for that?"

Corson stood and stretched, grinning down at him. "Nyc says no honest work's beneath the dignity of a lady, but I have yet to see her carrying cheeses about—eh, not that she could."

"*You* could," Steifann pointed out. "I've been to market and back this morning, *and* chopped the wood, while Your Ladyship was still abed."

"I could sleep *all* morning, at court, and have my breakfast in bed if I liked, waited on by maids and minions. I don't have to toil like a scullion."

"You do if you want to stay under my roof! Asye! Not here a week, and already longing to run back to Rhostshyl again. I wonder you give yourself the bother to visit us lowly commoners at all."

"I don't blame you," Trask said wistfully. "*I'd* stay at court if I could."

Steifann glared at him. "Well you can't, so *go open the taproom.*"

Trask, who knew exactly how far he could safely provoke Steifann, obeyed at once this time, and Steifann turned on Corson again. "As for you, *Desthene*, if idleness and luxury are what you want, you know where to find them! No one's keeping you here."

Corson shrugged and made for the door, without a word.

"Corson!" Alarmed, Steifann started after her. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To fetch in the cheese, where else?" Corson said, laughing.

The house was full of customers by midday, and everyone was kept busy drawing the ale, turning the spits, carving the meat, cleaning the platters, serving and carrying, and keeping order. Corson, for all her chaff about her exalted station, did her share of the work, only occasionally reminding the others what an honor she did them by her presence alone.

No one paid her any heed except Trask, who honestly couldn't understand why anyone who could live the life of a courtier would choose to spend her time—much less earn her keep—in a common ale-house. The Jugged Hare had been Trask's home for years, and it was as good a home as he could ever have expected to have. A castoff beggar's brat, scrambling to survive on the streets and wharves of Chiastelm, he'd been lucky to find a place with Steifann, as he well knew, yet he dreamed of somehow becoming something more than potboy of a tavern—something finer, grander .... Ever since he'd been to the palace of the Edonaris in Rhostshyl to see Corson receive her title, he'd been under the spell of the splendor and glamour of the court. He longed to cut a figure among the noble lords and ladies he'd encountered there, eagerly observing their every gesture and expression. He had persuaded Corson to take him along with her to Rhostshyl now and then, but such tastes of court life, far from satisfying his hunger, had only made him more discontented with his lot. He was more sure than ever that he could

master their elegant manners and turns of speech, if given a chance. He could already mimic Nyctasia's aristocratic accent with considerable accuracy—and often did so, much to the amusement of the others and the annoyance of Nyctasia. She assured him that there was more to the life of a courtier than looking and acting the part, but Trask was not put off by that. He was even willing to learn to read, if need be, but Steifann was too busy, and Corson too impatient, to teach him. If he only had the right clothes, Trask thought, with a little practice he could surely pass for a youth of good family. Even Corson could assume an acceptable demeanor at court when she chose, and Corson was common as dirt, as ill-bred and vulgar as any soldier. He could hear her cursing like a peasant as she hauled a heavy cask of ale up the stairs from the cellar.

“To think I could be dining in state now, off silver plates, instead of serving a lot of rutting drunken louts and tosspots,” she remarked, setting down her burden and wiping her face with her sleeve.

“Our little starveling Rhaicime says the food's better here than in her own palace,” said Walden, who repeated this often and with considerable pleasure.

Corson knew better than to argue the point with him. “So it is,” she said, “but at least I can find time to sit down and eat a proper meal there, and let others make it ready and serve it to me.”

Steifann was not likely to let that pass, however busy he was. “You find time to eat enough for three whenever you're here! And what's more—”

“Do they really eat off silver plates there?” Trask interrupted, ever interested in details of the life of the nobility.

“Well, not anymore,” Corson admitted, “They did, but Nyc had most of them melted down to feed the City Treasury. She told her steward she'd concern herself with cutlery when the poor of Rhostshyl had enough to eat. Her kin were furious, but of course they couldn't disagree. All the same, silver or no, it's still a far cry from trenchers of wood and bowls of earthenware.”

“Why don't you stay there, then?” Trask demanded. “You must be crazy to give that up for this.” He gestured scornfully at the pile of onions he was supposed to be peeling.

“Ah, but she doesn't have *me* there, you see,” Steifann explained, pinching Corson in passing. “What's the use of a bed as big as a barn if I'm not at hand to share it? Better straw with your sweetheart, they say, than silk sheets without.”

“I have admirers aplenty at court, I'll have you know—”

“But none that measures up to me, I'll wager. Admit it, woman.”

He would have won that wager, but Corson had no intention of admitting it. Ignoring him, she told Trask, “The truth of it is, I get bored at court after a while. There's not much for me to do there, now that Nyc has matters in hand. No one's tried to assassinate her for months.”

“Well, here's something for you to do, take this,” said Annin, handing her a platter piled with roast beef. She took up a pitcher of ale in each hand and pushed open the door to the taproom with her hip, waiting for Corson to follow.

Corson caught the door with her foot and started after her, but suddenly backed into the kitchen again, letting the door swing shut after the surprised Annin. “Corson!” she heard, “bring that meat here! What ails you?”

Corson cursed softly. Now he'd heard her name called out, even if he hadn't seen her! But he had seen her, she was certain, though he'd given no sign of it. Their eyes had met for only a moment, but that had been long enough for Corson to recognize Erystalben ar'n Shiastred, and so for him to know her as well ....

She thrust the platter of meat at one of the serving-girls and grabbed Trask, dragging him to the door to look through the knothole at the taproom. “The dark one,” she said, “sitting apart from the rest, near the window.”

“Mmm, the beauty with the blue eyes?”

Corson nodded. “Find out who he is and what he wants here.”

“It'll be a pleasure. You're nowhere to be found, I suppose?”

He was gone without waiting for an answer. For some things, Trask could be relied upon. Corson watched him moving from table to table, mopping up spills with a wet cloth, and joking with the other



customers before he approached Lord Erystalben's place.

"Trouble?" Steifann asked, joining her. He'd seen her reach instinctively for her sword—the sword he had insisted she not wear in his house. It was hanging high on the wall among copper pans and iron skillets.

"I don't know," said Corson, "maybe." Trask had reached his quarry now. He was pretending to scrub at the table near Shiasfred, and addressing him in his most flirtatious manner. Corson couldn't hear him, but knew he was saying, "You're not from these parts? A traveler?" Shiasfred shook his head, smiling, and said something that seemed to surprise Trask, then laughed at his reply.

Corson straightened up, frowning. Could she have been mistaken? He looked like Erystalben ar'n Shiasfred, and yet ... this man was haggard and unkempt, his clothing drab and worn, commoner's garb that the man Corson remembered would never have worn. And that was not the only difference—it was his expression that was unfamiliar, Corson decided, not his features. Lord Erystalben wouldn't bandy words with the likes of Trask in that open, friendly way. He was the sort who gave orders to his inferiors and, apart from that, didn't notice them at all. As soon as Trask came through the door she pulled him aside and demanded, "Well? What did he say to you all that time?"

"Ow! Corson, would you stop hauling me about!" he complained, straightening his sleeve. He was clearly enjoying himself not a little.

"I'll tear you into shreds if you don't stop preening yourself and answer me!"

"All right, all right, I'm trying to—no need to get into a lather. Well ..." he paused, drawing out the drama, "that one's a strange lot, and no mistake. He calls himself Veron, for want of anything better, but he claims he doesn't know who he is, that he's lost his memory and his name! Did you ever hear a tale the like of that?"

Corson shook her head. "If that's true, then why is he here?"

"He says he's been told that he has the accent of a Maritimer—and he does, too—so he's been working his way along the coast looking for someone who knows him. He didn't ask for you."

"He must be after me, to come right into the Hare!"

"He's been to a few other places in town already," Trask explained, "but he says folk told him to try his luck here."

That was not unlikely, Corson realized. Anyone who was searching the coast would try Chiastelm, and anyone who was searching Chiastelm would sooner or later try the Hare. People of all stations frequented Steifann's tavern, even the gentry, of late. It was the advice anyone in the city might give a stranger. "What did you tell him, then?" she asked Trask.

"What else?" Trask grinned, "I said if I'd ever seen him before I'd surely have remembered him."

"Corson, who is he?" Steifann asked impatiently.

"Asye, I'm not sure—I think he's a lord of Rhostshyl, of Jhaice rank. A magician. And an arrogant, vicious cur," she added with feeling.

"He could be a Jhaice, I suppose," Trask said doubtfully. "He's well-spoken, like a nobleman, but any cozener can manage that. And he doesn't look to have much money about him; his shirt's worn to a thread."

"He's not the Jhaice who gave you that whorish silk dress?" Steifann said, suspicious.

"*He* wasn't a Jhaice, I told you, his sister was. This one is Nyc's paramour, none of mine. If he's the same one."

"Oh, well, if he's a friend of Nyc's, where's the worry? Let her see to him."

Corson didn't want to explain the deadly struggle for power—and for Nyctasia—that had taken place between Lord Erystalben and a rival mage. In that battle she'd sided against him, perhaps unwisely, and she doubted that he would forget it. But suppose he had really forgotten everything, what then? In answer to Steifann's question, she said only, "I don't trust him."

"Do you think he's really lost his memory?"

Corson didn't know what to think. "It could be so," she admitted. "I know he did some dangerous spell or other, and Nyc said it would take its toll of him—that he'd lose something by it—but there was no telling what it would be ...."

The more Corson thought about it, the more likely it seemed that Shiasfred—if indeed it were he—had truly come there by chance. If he knew who he was, why wouldn't he have gone directly to Rhostshyl? Finding Nyctasia would surely be more important to him than hunting down a mere hireling like Corson. The proud Lord Erystalben would probably consider it beneath him to seek vengeance on an inferior; even as an enemy he'd think her of no importance.

"If he keeps on along the coast, he won't come to Rhostshyl," she said uneasily, Rhostshyl was at least a day's ride inland, a Maritime city only by alliance. "He'll not find his people that way."

Steifann shrugged. "What do you care, if you think so little of him?"

"I don't care! He could stay lost forever, for all of me—but Nyc cares, the little fool. She still grieves over that bastard." *And she'd never forgive me, if she lost him again because I let him go off none the wiser.* Corson sighed. "I'd better try to see if it's really him. I'll warrant it is, too. That would be just like my luck."

She might as well know the worst. If she didn't find out what his game was, she'd have no peace, wondering if he'd come to cast some foul spell on her. Corson took down her sword-belt and buckled it on. Weapons would be of no use against Shiasfred's sorcery, she knew, but she felt the better for it all the same. And she took heart as she remembered Nyctasia explaining that the source of Shiasfred's power was the mage-land where he'd established his stronghold. If Corson had understood her aright, he ought not to be so dangerous now that he was far from that spell-haunted place. Unfortunately, Corson also remembered that she hadn't paid very close attention to Nyctasia's explanation. She usually didn't.

From near at hand, the stranger looked more than ever like Erystalben ar'n Shiasfred. Corson was not likely to forget those vivid blue eyes, all the more striking because of his dark skin, but blazing with murderous wrath and inhuman power when she'd seen them last.

He was still beautiful, Corson thought, for all that he looked wayworn and weary now, and older than she would have expected after only two years' time. His long black hair was shaggy and disheveled, carelessly tied back with a leather thong, and Corson was surprised to see streaks of grey at his temples.

He had only glanced in her direction when she entered the taproom, with no more than the casual interest commonly inspired by Corson's unusual height and pulchritude. He paid no further attention to her at all until she sat down across from him, leaned over the table and said, "If you're looking for me, here I am. What do you want?"

He stared at her in seeming bewilderment for a time before he gasped, "You know me?"

"We've met," Corson said drily. She studied him rather than listened as he hastily explained what she'd already learned from Trask, but she could read nothing in his features or manner except intense eagerness and excitement. It was a relief to her that he maintained the story—if he were still a powerful magician, he'd have no need to invent such a tale. He was either really as he claimed to be, or he was desperate enough to resort to deception, and either way he could not be much of a threat, Corson assured herself. Still, she had no intention of revealing anything to him before she'd warned Nyctasia of his return. Whatever she might tell him would lead him to Nyctasia, and Corson didn't mean to let her be taken unawares.

When he asked her for his name, she said, "If you're the one I think you are, I've a friend who used to call you 'Ben. But that was short of some fancy long name with a string of titles to it. I only heard the whole of it once, and I didn't trouble myself to remember it."

Her tone was mocking, meant to provoke, but he said hoarsely, "Don't toy with me, for pity's sake. If you know who I am, tell me!"

"Why should I?" Corson spat. "When I saw you last, you tried your best to kill me."

He looked startled, then, recovering his self-possession, he said coolly, "I'm not in a position to deny it. But how am I supposed to have done that, pray? One thing I've learned about myself is that I'm no fighter."

If he didn't remember his sorcerous powers, Corson was certainly not about to remind him. Let Nyctasia decide what to tell him and what to keep from him—she understood the ways of witchery. "You were a lord and I a lackey, in those days. But now I'm a Desthene, and you'll remember that if you expect any help from me."

He spread his hands helplessly. "Very well. But am I to expect any help from you? You've told me nothing."

Corson scowled. "I know little enough about you myself—and what I do know I don't like. But I can arrange for you to meet with someone who knows you all too well, if she wishes it."

"And if she doesn't, what am I to do?"

"For my part, you can go drown yourself! I'm doing this for her sake, not for yours. But you needn't worry," Corson said reluctantly, "I expect she'll meet you. If I know that one, she'll not rest till she's seen you. All the same, maybe she's come to her senses, who knows? You'll wait till I know for certain whether she wants any part of you. You'll abide by my terms or you'll never see so much as her shadow, I promise you."

"Why then, I accept your terms, Desthene," he said with an ironic smile, "since you leave me no choice."

Corson stood. "Then we understand each other," she said. "Wait here." Turning her back on him, Corson strode across the taproom to the kitchen, shoving aside anyone who got in her way. "Something like this always happens to me," she muttered. "It's not fair." There was some satisfaction in making Lord Erystalben bear with her arrant effrontery, but she was not looking forward to telling Steifann that she had to go back to Rhostshyl again so soon, And with Destiver still in port, too.

## 8

THE MOON WAS FULL, and Nyctasia stepped in and out of pale pools of moonlight as she paced her bedchamber, weary yet restless, unable to dismiss the cares that kept her from sleep. What more could she do to placate her kin, without jeopardizing the stability of the city? How much of her responsibility did she dare to turn over to others? Which was the greater risk, to act or to wait? And what of Lord Aithrenn's proposal of alliance with Ochram ...?

At least Erikasten was out of harm's way, though—that was something gained. She need no longer fear that he would be drawn into a plot against her, that she would be forced to deal with him as with an enemy. The thought chilled her. The greatest danger was not from the conspirators, but from the woman she herself might become if she were to sacrifice her principles to safeguard her position. It would be easy—all too easy—to persuade herself that she had no choice. She must be strong, for Rhostshyl's sake, yes, but sometimes it showed strength to yield, rather than to conquer at the cost of one's own spirit. If she was not to be mistress of her own actions, how could she be fit to rule over others?

Nyctasia sighed. Corson would tell her that she thought too much, no doubt. Corson would tease her out of this mood somehow. But there was no one at court now whom she felt free to confide in. For a moment she toyed with the idea of sending for 'Malkin, who would be glad enough of the summons, as she well knew. But though she found him amusing, it was not his companionship she wished for tonight.

If only she could have gone to the Midlands with 'Kasten! It seemed the height of luxury to her now, to be free to travel aimlessly from place to place, with nothing to worry her except where she would spend the night. If 'Kasten met with no delays, he might reach Osela in time for the Harvest Fair, she thought wistfully. And no doubt, instead of enjoying his luck, he felt himself ill-used to be sent away from Rhostshyl. But soon enough it would be his turn to share in the burden of governing the city, and only then, when it was too late, would he learn to appreciate the freedom he'd lost. But 'Kasten, surely, would not be alone with his duty ....

"Is it too late, in truth?" Nyctasia asked herself, ashamed of her self-pity. She had much to be thankful for—the city was at peace, her plans were bearing fruit. "Regret deceives the spirit," she reminded herself sternly, "and mourning denies the Discipline." Perhaps she *should* leave the city for a time. Might she not serve Rhostshyl best by preserving her own peace of mind? Suppose she were to visit Maegor the herbalist, who always spoke sense to her, or Corson's mad friends at The Jugged Hare, who treated her as one of themselves ...? Her hold on the city was not so weak that a few days' absence would break it. And it might serve her purposes, as well, to let the others see that she was not afraid to let them out of her sight. She could all but hear Corson commanding her, "Come along! It'll do you good

to get away from here.”

She paused before the tall mirror, examining herself critically. Her nightdress of silver-grey watered silk caught the moonlight and shimmered with a rich luster, but her shoulders sagged, her head drooped like a wilting lily, and her face was wan and careworn.

Nyctasia straightened her back. Really, this would not do. She could not go about looking weak and worried—However she might feel, she must appear strong and confident before others. She must not go without sleep.

She glanced at the table by her bedside, where a goblet waited, half-full of a powerful sleeping-draught of her own preparation. It would give her the rest she needed, but she had resorted to its aid all too often of late. She must try to do without it.

She threw herself across the bed and lay gazing about the moonlit room, looking everywhere but at the silver goblet so close at hand. Moonlight streamed through the tall windows to strike the mirror and splash against the walls and ceiling in soft, rippling waves. “Neither sea nor sky,” Nyctasia murmured, trying to recapture a fleeting memory hidden among those dancing lights and shadows. She was as wakeful as ever. Even when she closed her eyes she was aware of the bright glow flooding the chamber, but she did not think to draw the curtains about the bed. Instead, she turned toward the mirror again, watching it from where she lay as if it could answer her questions—just as she had done as a child, when she had so often been confined to this very bed by wasting illness and frailty.

The mirror had been hers for as long as she could remember, a legacy from the remote ancestress whose name she bore. The warped old glass gave an unclear, shadowy reflection which had fascinated her from the first. She had mirrors of better quality, but none that knew her, she thought, so well as this one. It was as tall as she, and had always seemed to her like a door, with the twin pillars that supported it serving as uprights flanking the lintel and threshold formed by the frame. As a child, she had imagined that this door would one day open to receive her, that it was the portal to another place where she would not be always sickly and aching and bedridden. She had kept the mirror drawn near to her bedside, that she might talk to the reflection she had pretended was her twin, the sister who shared her longings and her loneliness.

She had first attempted to cast spells with the aid of the mirror, long ago, when she’d had only the faintest notion of what such spells meant, and had achieved little enough to show for her efforts. Yet ... hadn’t she once, while still a young girl, succeeded in weaving a spell of Reflection—or believed that she had done so? How could she have commanded such power before she had mastered even a fraction of the necessary Discipline? Was it this teasing memory that eluded her? Had it ever really happened?

She had been ill at the time, she seemed to remember, but when had she not been ill, as a child? No—she had been more gravely ill than usual, and had, moreover, overheard her elders discussing the court physicians’ view that she was not likely to live out the year. She had determined to attempt a Reflection of the Future, to learn for herself the truth of their prediction.

Perhaps the fever itself had given her the detachment that allowed her to enter into a trance of spellcasting, but more probably the experience had been only one of the febrile dreams, half-remembered, half-invented, that had haunted her nights and days. That dream had left her with only the dim memory of a ghostly figure robed in shining silver, a woman—or perhaps a boy—who bore the familiar Edonaris features, resembling many of her kinsfolk without seeming to be any one of them. Had the reflection of that long-ago Nyctasia, the mirror’s first mistress, returned to the glass at her summons? Standing in the mirror as if framed by an open doorway, the vision had answered her unspoken questions before she herself had known quite what they were, or how to give them voice. She had awakened with the conviction that faith in the *vahn* would save her, that she would not only live but grow well and strong. Her fever had broken at last. It was after that night that she had begun to apply herself to the Discipline in earnest, immersing herself in study of the Influences, Balances and Consolations, the Manifestations and Reflections. Had she not been given up for dead, her family would have sought to turn her from such impractical pursuits—respectable enough, but hardly appropriate for an Edonaris who must one day devote herself to the duties of the Rhaicimate. But it could be of no consequence how a dying child passed her remaining days, and she was allowed to indulge her fancies in peace, until it

became apparent that she might very well live to come of age after all. And by then it was too late to shake her deeply-rooted faith. She remained firm in her belief that she owed her newfound health—indeed her life—to the *vahn*'s magic and its messenger, though she had never been able to remember just what the presence in the mirror had said to her, and as time passed she had all but forgotten the appearance of that half-seen visitant as well.

But now as she tossed restlessly in the great bed, it seemed to her that the memory, whole and unfaded, was almost within her grasp, like a familiar tune that one could recall in full if one heard just the first few notes. If only she could remember it at last, she thought, perhaps she could sleep ....

A moment later, she stood before the mirror again, gazing steadily into its brightly-veiled depths as she bade it to show her the past, just as she had bidden it, so long ago, to show her the future.

*“Seek in this enchanted mirror  
Images reversed but clearer.  
Patterns of shattered shadow yield  
Their mysteries, in silverglass revealed,”*

Nyctasia whispered, her eyes closed, her fingertips lightly pressed to the cold glass.

*“Read if you will the gleaming’s meaning.  
Pierce if you please the dreaming’s seeming.  
Let far be near, and first be last.  
Let time return that hath gone past,  
Let old be new, and last be first,  
Their mysteries in silverglass reversed.”*

The words meant little. The words of spells served only to focus the mind of the magician on the task at hand, to point the way the spirit must follow. Nyctasia knew that true masters of magic needed no chanted rhymes to work their will, but it had been a long while since she had aspired to such mastery herself. She requested, rather than commanded, the vision she sought, expecting little, yet she was not surprised, when she opened her eyes again, to find that she no longer cast a reflection in the glass.

Instead, a wan, frail girl-child looked up at her in wonder, her eyes bright with fever, her small hands held out unsteadily to meet Nyctasia's. And then, after so many years, standing in the same place, in the same way, and faced with the ghost of the child she had been when she heard them, Nyctasia at last remembered the words she was seeking, and spoke them softly.

*“Though thou seekest far and wide,  
Yet within thee lies the guide.”*

It was but an old nursery-verse, a first lesson in the way of the Indwelling Spirit. Nyctasia had known it long before the stranger in the mirror had spoken to her. But hearing the familiar words thus, in a mysterious glow of enchantment, she had known that they held a new meaning for her, not a precept but a promise. She had replied, she remembered, with just such another couplet, the one which evoked the landscape of death in traditional Vahnite imagery—the black waves, the dark shore—the rhyme the child sadly recited to her now.

*“Where the headland meets the tide  
There the heart and spirit bide.”*

She seemed almost to make a question of it, and Nyctasia knew well enough what she was asking. She was seized with pity for the pale, fragile little girl, shadowed by a mortality she barely understood, and ready to seek among ghosts for the comfort she had not received from the living.

“But you shan't die, little one,” Nyctasia said. “You will learn to heal yourself through the grace of the *vahn*, and so learn to heal others as well, I promise you.” She longed to warn her young self of so many mistakes yet to come, but there was no time—already she could sense the spell beginning to fade, and the reflected moonlight seemed to shine through the still, solemn figure in the glass.

And even if there were time to tell her, she would forget! “Only remember that you are a healer,” Nyctasia cried. “Let nothing persuade you to forget that!” She thought the child smiled at her for the first time then, a curiously reassuring smile.

Sunshine filled the windows and spilled over Nyctasia's pillows, waking her suddenly. She lay still for

a time, eyes closed against the light, remembering everything but uncertain whether or not she had really left her bed during the night. It would have been utter folly to summon a Reflection for such a trifling reason—indeed for no reason at all—yet even if she had only dreamed the spell, it need not have been the less real for that ....

Nyctasia yawned and stretched luxuriously. It was useless to ponder the matter further; she was not likely ever to discover the truth of it. But she had the satisfaction of knowing that she had passed the night without the aid of the sleeping-draught. And she knew, now, where to find the peace she sought.

## 9

THE MAN WHO CALLED himself Veron wondered if he were perhaps a criminal. He had considered many possible answers to the riddle of his past, but that particular one had never occurred to him. He'd gone so far as to consult fortunetellers, but the false ones had told him transparent lies, and the honest ones had admitted that their arts could reveal nothing of his history. It was one of the latter who'd searched his palms for a clue, without success, then told him, "You're no laborer, that much is certain—look at your fingers, smooth and uncalloused, like a gentleman's. You look like a gypsy, but you belong to the gentry—it doesn't take the second sight to see that."

His hands were harder now. He'd been working on trading ships to earn his way from city to city along the coast, and that was as humbling an experience as life has to offer, but he suspected that the seer had been right about his origins. He remembered nothing about himself, but he knew enough about many other subjects to be sure that he was well educated. He could read and write, he was familiar with a good deal of history, philosophy, poetry—no, it had not seemed at all likely that he was a criminal.

But the tall swordswoman, the lout who called herself a Desthene, certainly seemed to think that he'd done something reprehensible, and he'd not be the first of the gentry to commit crimes. Unless she was lying, unless she'd taken him for someone else, it would appear that he'd led a far from blameless life. But was she to be believed? He'd been duped before, by others who'd claimed to know him, who'd offered to lead him to his people, and led him instead into the clutches of outlaw slavers. A nameless, kinless man was their perfect prey. The supposed Desthene was far more likely to be a criminal than he.

But her reluctance to have anything to do with him had made him feel inclined to trust her. The others had always been all too willing to accost him, to engage him in amiable conversation. He'd learned to be wary of anyone who was eager to be of help. And her claim to be a noblewoman—it was hardly the sort of lie she'd expect a stranger to believe. Why invent something so unlikely, then? He doubted that she was subtle enough to feign hostility, to deliberately offer an unbelievable lie, in order to convince him.

Indeed, the very insolence of his guide was reassuring. When she'd found that he had no horse, she'd sent the potboy to hire one for him, and asked sneeringly, "You've not forgotten how to ride too, have you?" It was not only that she knew—or guessed—that he could ride, but that her whole manner suggested that she suspected *him* of some deception. Perhaps these were poor reasons to put faith in her, but he wanted desperately to believe that this time he'd found someone who knew him—even if she hated him.

But when they'd started out, and she'd taken an isolated route along the shore, he'd been sure it must be a trap. Even though slavery was forbidden by law in the city-states of the Maritime region, it was not unheard of for solitary travelers to be waylaid and smuggled south in the holds of bandit ships. There, riverways led inland from the coast to the Midlands, where the slave-trade flourished. No doubt the woman's confederates waited somewhere on this dark stretch of beach to seize him and row him out to the ship lying at anchor offshore, unlighted and invisible.

More disheartened than afraid, he'd reined in his horse and said, "Far enough. Your friends will have to wait. What a disappointment you are, after all. I'd almost come to believe that you were something more than a rogue slaver."

He watched closely to see how she would respond to the accusation, expecting either a denial or an outright attack, but he was not prepared for the sudden storm of rage she turned upon him. "You miserable hound!" she shouted. "You dare to call me—?" Wheeling her horse around, she pressed close

enough for him to see her shaking with fury. "I've killed better than you for lesser insults!" she hissed, and spat full in his face. She looked half mad and very dangerous, but he only wiped his sleeve across his face and continued to watch her narrowly. When he made no answer, she said more calmly, with bitter scorn, "I've wanted to do that for a long time. Now go your way if you like! I could stop you—and I wouldn't need any help to do it—but that's the last thing I want to do. You can even keep the horse—I'll pay for it. I'm going on this way, and I don't care where you go. You can follow me or not, as you choose—but if you do, you'll take care what you say to me."

And he'd followed. It was impossible to doubt the sincerity with which she'd said, "I've wanted to do that for a long time." She knew him.

It was too late for doubts now, at all events, no matter what befell. He was as good as a prisoner here, though the noble residence where his guide had brought him, with its well-kept grounds and liveried guards, was clearly not the den of outlaws. The sentries had obeyed her orders readily enough, treating her as a person of some authority. He was under guard, not precisely in a cell, but in cramped, windowless servants' quarters that looked to be a converted storeroom—chosen, no doubt, because there was only the one way out to watch. He supposed he should be grateful that she hadn't locked him in the cellars instead.

She'd taken undisguised satisfaction in leaving him there, apologizing with mock servility that she was unable to offer him accommodations more befitting to his rank.

"And what rank is that?" he'd asked evenly. "If you won't tell me who I am, will you tell me what I am?"

"You're trouble, that's what you are!" she snapped. She turned her back and strode from the room in two steps.

Her continued rancor had come as a great relief. If it had been merely pretense, she'd surely have dropped her mask now that she had him safely secured. "If I've wronged you, I've paid for it, believe me," he said quietly, to her back.

At the door, she hesitated and turned back reluctantly. "If you're not the one I take you for, then I—I'm sorry," she said uncomfortably. "But if you are, then I'll be the judge of when you're quits with me. And I don't have a forgiving nature."

He merely bowed in reply. Clearly it was useless to reason with the creature. But, straightening up again, he saw her looking at him with a puzzled frown. At last she said, "I think you're a Jhaice. With 'ancillary distinctions,' whatever those are. But maybe you're not—we'll know soon enough." She gave him another long, uncertain look, then shrugged and left him there to wait, to study his unfamiliar hands and wonder what kind of man he was.

\* \* \*

"Curse her! Why does she always have to do something unaccountable?" Corson complained, though in truth that was one of the things that drew her to Nyctasia. She had arrived in Rhostshyl only to learn that the Rhaicime was nowhere to be found. "Didn't that scatterwit tell anyone where she was going?"

"She didn't so much as tell anyone *that* she was going," Lady Tiambria explained, sounding rather amused. A year ago, she'd have been offended by Corson's offhand manner, but she'd grown accustomed to the ways of her sister's favorite. Nyctasia oughtn't to have ennobled such a person, of course, but there was nothing to be done about that now. Corson was one of the few people Nyctasia trusted, and though many at court looked down at her lowly origins, there were not many who dared refuse her an audience. The Lady Tiambria dared, but did not choose, to turn her away. "She only left a note to say that she expected to return within a few days' time. I thought *you'd* be able to tell *me* where she was."

Lady Tiambria reminded Corson of Nyctasia, when she'd first known her. This one still had a lot to learn, of course, but she showed promise. "Nyc's probably sneaked off to practice more of her mooncalf magic," Corson said disgustedly. "Whenever she disappears, you can be sure she's up to some crazy spell or other, and usually it's a harebrained business anyone with a grain of sense would let alone!"

Tiambria looked anxious. “Do you think she’s in danger, then?”

“I’ve never known her when she wasn’t, have you?” But then, remembering that Nyctasia’s sister was with child, she added, “But don’t fret yourself over that one—she’s proof against a horde of demons or a nest of vipers. If a viper bit her, it would die. And as long as she’s got that hound with her, nothing that’s human will attack her and live.”

But despite her assurances to Lady Tiambria, Corson was worried. How dare Nyc run off like this, without asking her to come along, without even letting her know where she was bound? If something happened to her. Corson wouldn’t even know! How could she protect her? For the first time, Corson understood Steifann’s complaints about her own wanderings. No wonder he always insisted that she write and tell him where she was, she realized, remembering guiltily that she very rarely did so. But at least she could take care of herself—she wasn’t a delicate, sheltered little hand-reared songbird like Nyc!

Corson was at a loss. It was no use scouring the countryside for Nyctasia. She could be anywhere. Well, if she didn’t see fit to tell Corson what she was about, she could just go ahead and get herself killed, and serve her right, the silly, sly, secretive minx. But what was to be done about Lord Erystalben?

Ought she to wait here for Nyctasia’s return, or could she safely entrust the secret to someone at court? Nyc’s kin had come between her and Shiasfred before, but they wouldn’t dare interfere in her affairs now—would they? Tempting as it was to leave the responsibility to someone else, Corson couldn’t be sure that they’d not find a way to use Nyctasia’s lover as a weapon against her. She knew who Nyctasia’s allies were, but they too favored the marriage-alliance with Ochram. They might well think it best to keep Nyctasia and Lord Erystalben apart. Corson thought as much herself, though for different reasons, but she would not take it upon herself to make such a decision for Nyctasia. She believed in letting people make their own choices, and their own mistakes.

Could she turn Lord Erystalben over to his own family, then? They’d be able to affirm his identity, after all, and if he really was their kinsman, they had a right to know of his return. But Corson knew nothing of the Shiasfred. Could they be trusted? And how could she make inquiries about them without arousing suspicion? It would be assumed that there was a reason behind anything she asked. She’d never been given to idle court gossip.

How fortunate, then, that she’d let Trask wheedle her into bringing him along, this time ....

“They’ve been supporters of the Edonaris for years, since before the war,” Trask reported.

He had carried on a number of fruitful conversations and flirtations with pages and maids of the palace, leaving them with the impression that he was merely curious about Nyctasia’s past. Since he was, in fact, curious about Nyctasia’s past, this had not been a great challenge.

“But there have been different factions among them, it seems, since the heir to the Jhaicery left Rhostshyl.” He grinned knowingly. “So that’s the mysterious Jhaice you carried off from the Hare, eh?”

“Never you mind about him. If you’ve told anyone—”

“What do you take me for, a milktooth babe?” Trask said indignantly. “I know a secret when I meet one. If you don’t trust me, get someone else to do your spying!”

“Just remember, if you so much as hint that you know anything about this, I’ll tear out your tongue and make you eat it! Now what’s this about divisions among the Shiasfred?”

“Well, listen then—there are all sorts of stories about, but most agree that the Jhaice Erystalben made trouble for his family with the Edonaris, because his affair with Nyc was interfering with their plans to marry her to her cousin, Lord Thierran. They wanted it broken off—”

“I know all that,” said Corson, who had killed Thierran and the Edonaris. “What about the Shiasfred?”

“They ordered him to stay away from Nyc, but he refused, so finally they sent him away—disowned him, some say.”

“His own blood-kin turned him out? I thought it was Nyc’s family that drove him from Rhostshyl.”

Trask shrugged. “I heard that too, but the Shiasfred couldn’t afford to anger the Edonaris. Some say that they made him go for fear that the Edonaris would have him killed, but it’s also said that most of them weren’t so very sorry to see the last of him.”

“I can believe that,” Corson said glumly. “And they probably wouldn’t be glad to have him back,



either.”

“There’s those that might. A few of them said openly that Nyc was to blame for the whole business, that she’d ’witched Lord Erystalben, and they turned against the Edonaris in the war. Much good *that* did them. Nyc pardoned them, of course, but they don’t pretend to be grateful. The rest of them remained loyal to the House of Edonaris, though, and they claim that when Nyc’s swain left the city he forswore his title and inheritance. Fancy doing that for love of Nyc! His cousin Lord Jhasteine has taken his place, and *he’s* about to be married to a lady of the House of Lesevern, and it’s said that *her* family—”

“That’ll do,” said Corson, discouraged. She had heard more than enough to convince her that she’d be ill-advised to leave her prisoner with the Shiasfred. Half of them hostile to Nyc, the rest unlikely to welcome a rival Jhaice. “There’s no help for it, we’ll just have to stay here till Nyc gets back.”

Trask didn’t mind in the least.

## 10

“WHERE THE HEADLAND meets the tide ...” mused Nyctasia, watching in quiet amusement as Greymantle frisked in the spray, chasing waves and barking excitedly.

As always the sight of the limitless expanse of the sea calmed and comforted her. The moon was waning now, but full enough still to send its bright path from the far horizon to her feet, and show her the dark glow of the waters between. The hushed murmur of the waves welcomed her, reassuring her that all would yet be well.

Perhaps it had been foolish to read a message in the child’s words, a meaning she herself had never intended when she’d spoken them, years before. But as she gazed out over the breaking waves, she was sure she’d been right to come to the oceanside to find respite from the demands and dangers of Rhostshyl. Even on her way here, she had received a sign that had seemed to affirm her decision.

She had almost crossed Rhostshyl Wood when she’d met with a group of students and scholars on their way to the city, and passed the night in their camp. She had let them believe she was a court scribe, and had answered their many questions with assurances that Rhostshyl was all they’d heard, that nothing but dire necessity could ever make her leave its walls. When they asked about the Rhaicime, she boasted that she knew her well, that Her Ladyship was wont to dictate secrets to her that she’d entrust to no other scribe, but naturally, as Nyctasia intended, they hadn’t believed much of that.

“But have you seen her?” one of the students persisted. “The truth now—is she as beautiful as folk say?”

“Oh, not half so pretty as you,” said Nyctasia gallantly. “The truth, if you must have it, is that she’s as plain as I am myself. And she looks like an unkempt kennels-hand more often than not. Her own courtiers scold her for her unseemly appearance.”

“I’ve heard something of the sort about her,” one of the older men said seriously. “They say there’s a good deal less finery to be seen at court, since the Rhaicime set the fashion for simplicity. It seems she thinks it ill becomes the nobility to wear a fortune on their backs while folk suffer want in the city. She’s set them an example, and the others are shamed into following her lead.”

“And how do *you* know so much about it, Wren?” the youth next to him jeered. “Since when are you a follower of fashion?”

The first man swatted him. “Show some respect for your elders, brat! I’ve not seen it for myself, but I believe what I’ve heard. You know folk always want to emulate their betters. And if it’s true, I think it’s much to the credit of the Rhaicime.”

The firelight concealed Nyctasia’s blushes. “There’s some truth to it,” she said, “but My Lady can be as vain as anyone betimes, and that much I can swear to. Perhaps I may not know her quite as well as I claimed, but I do know her ways and those of the court. You’ll see me there when I return, I promise you.”

“And will you ask the Rhaicime to receive us?” someone teased.

Nyctasia laughed. “Remind me to do that when we meet next,” she said. “I have always so many

affairs of state on my mind that I might forget.”

That night she had dreamt that she continued her journey alone, with only Greymantle trotting at her side, easily keeping pace with her horse. But as she rode on toward the coast, she chanced to look back over her shoulder, and she had seen all of Rhostshyl following behind her in a long, lively procession that stretched for miles through the woods, all the way back to the gates of the city. Yet, instead of dismay, she'd felt great satisfaction to find that she hadn't after all left the city behind her. She had called out to her people to make haste, to join her on the way to the sea. She had awakened with a feeling of deep peace and contentment.

As she shared a morning meal with the travelers, one of the students told her that she had cried out in her sleep, and she answered, smiling, “I was dreaming that all of Rhostshyl was on the way to the sea, not just my dog and I.”

As students will, they at once sought to interpret her dream, but Nyctasia was sure that she already understood its meaning. Without doubt, the *vahn* had revealed to her that she was not deserting her duty by making this journey, but rather acting for the good of the city, as she had hoped. To the students she said only, “I suppose it means that I'm such a true Rhostshylid that Rhostshyl is with me wherever I go, in my heart. It's as I told you before—there's no other city to compare with her.”

But the man called Wren cast a different light upon the vision. “It may be as you say, scrivener,” he said politely, “but I take it to mean that Rhostshyl herself will widen her borders, and one day reach toward the sea.”

For a moment, Nyctasia could only contemplate his words in spellbound silence. It was exactly what she wished for her city—that the forest that stood between Rhostshyl and the coast should be cleared, and new roads built; that the walls bounding the city should be broken down and Rhostshyl grow to double her size, till she reached all the way to the coast, a true Maritime city. Could it be that this stranger had read the significance of her dream more truly than she?

“No riddle has only one answer,” she said pensively. “I believe you possess the gift of prophecy, sir.”

He bowed. “Not I, but you, Madame, are the dreamer.”

But it was not to dwell upon such dreams that she had come here, she reminded herself. Time enough for such matters when she returned to Rhostshyl. She must make the most of her stolen moments alone at the edge of the land, where the boundless sea began. There were lessons to be learned here that would help her to realize her dreams one day.

She had always meant to practice the sequence of Consolations known as The Legacy of the Heirs of Ocean, but she had never found the time and the chance together to devote herself fully to the Discipline, the contemplation of the manifold qualities of the sea, its timelessness, its illimitable power, its unimaginable vastness, its unchanging rhythms that revealed the order and harmony of nature. And above all, its ceaseless work of transformation upon everything it touched.

From her first sight of the sea, Nyctasia had felt that she could look upon its waters forever, and never tire of a view in which no walls stood as barriers to the eye or the spirit. In the presence of the ocean, one understood how transitory and insignificant one's own affairs were—a lesson particularly valuable, Nyctasia thought, for those in positions of power over others. The sea humbled one, yes, but it thereby set one free ....

She had been pacing the shore as she meditated, gathering bits of stone and bone, driftwood and shell, but now she chose one smooth, white fragment from among them, and let the rest fall through her fingers, back into the sand. Settling herself among the boulders at the foot of the cliffs, she studied the small featureless object she held, as if it were a priceless treasure. Here was the entire secret, the essential unity of all things, revealed.

It was over a year ago, she realized, that she'd last walked on the strand here, with Corson, and shown her just such a piece of polished rubble, picked up from the beach. She had wanted to come alone, to pursue the Discipline in solitude, but Corson had insisted—and quite rightly—that it was too dangerous. Her enemies could well have set a watch for her here. But now no one, not even Corson, knew where she was. She smiled, remembering Corson's impertinent questions and indignant dismissals of the answers. Nyctasia had not achieved much of her purpose that day; instead, she had found herself

trying to explain to her increasingly impatient bodyguard something of the Principles of Unity and Transformation, endlessly manifested by the working of the waves.

“The sea takes a shell, a stone, a branch, or a bone, and wears away its form, washes away its color, breaks and blanches and burnishes it, cuts and carves it, smooths and shapes it, till the stone is hollowed to a shell, the wood is tempered to a stone, the bone whittled to a twig, the shell fluted to a splinter of bone. The sea incessantly transforms all things.”

“Well, what if it does?” Corson said. “Why fret yourself about it?”

“Because in doing so it reveals to us the indwelling nature of those things, and shows us that form is mere mask, disguising the truth that all things are one and the same. That is what we must always remember—”

“Why?”

“So as not to be deceived by mere appearance. So as to understand that we ourselves are made up of the same substance as all other things. We are no different in essence from the stones, the trees, the shells. That which divides us is superficial and will not endure.”

“Now I see what you’re at,” said Corson, exasperated. “It’s just more of your fancy lies. Magic’s all lies, and this philosophy of yours is nothing but more lies. You say that night is day, and shells are stones, and hens are hats, and you’re so daft you believe it yourself. Asye, you say it so prettily I could almost believe it! But a stone’s a stone and a shell’s a shell—*that’s* the truth of it, whatever you say.”

“What’s this, then?” Nyctasia had asked, laughing, and handed her the smooth shape, so worn by the sands that it was impossible to say whether it had originally been driftwood, shell, stone, or bone.

Corson turned it in her hands, examining it. “I don’t know,” she said in annoyance. “What difference does it make?”

“That’s it exactly. It makes no difference. It’s true that a stone’s not a shell, as you say, but it’s also true that they are one, and these truths do not contradict one another. Their opposition is apparent, not actual.”

Corson had only snorted in contempt. “If you like to think that you’re really a lot of rocks and rotting bones and sea-slugs, you can,” she said. “And much good may it do you!”

Alone on the dark shore, Nyctasia smiled and clutched the unknown fragment tightly in her hand. *Much good*, she thought, *may it do me indeed*. She remained looking out over the water, and recited quietly:

*“There is power,*

*There is peace.*

*There is refuge.*

*There, release.”*

Then for a long while, she sat listening to the steady, regular splashing and sighing of the waves, letting the sound and smell and sight of the sea wash over her, wear away her cares and concerns, soothe and caress her and slowly shape her anew, until she became the smooth, hard stone, the hollow shell, the polished branch or bone. All of these and none of them in one. And over time this too, in its turn, was further purified, refined to identical grains of sand, mingling with all that had gone before. Each still ceaselessly burnished the others and was burnished by them, to be worn away at last to invisible motes of dust that dissolved in the waves, and so became again one with the water, from which, it was said in the earliest legends, all life had arisen at the beginning of the world ....

Nyctasia did not know how long she had been resting there among the great rocks before Greymantle bounded up to her, barking and shaking a shower of spray from his coat into her face. He dashed away, along the path up the cliffside, then turned around to see if she was following, and pranced back to her, barking insistently, Nyctasia rose to her feet unsteadily and patted him. “Good lad,” she said. “Very well, let’s go then.” Further meditations would have to wait for the morrow. The tide was coming in.

"I MUCH REGRET THAT you've been detained here, sir," the woman said briskly as she entered, followed by the guard and an immense dog. "I assure you—"

And then she looked at him and suddenly fell silent, staring in astonishment. A lady from the look of her, Veron thought, despite her plain attire and the scribe's pen-case at her belt. He saw the color ebb from her face completely, leaving her as starkly white as sun-blanching bone, and she made a gesture he recognized as a sign of Unveiling, to ward off sorcerous illusions—though he had no idea how he knew such things.

"I'm real," he said hoarsely, taking a few steps toward her. "That is, I think I am." His heart raced, pounding in his throat, and he felt that he could barely breathe. In her eyes he saw what he had been vainly seeking in every face for two years' time. Recognition. And something more.

So softly he barely heard her, she whispered. "There the heart and spirit bide," and swayed giddily as if about to fall.

Without thought he reached out quickly to catch her, realizing only too late that the dog would take this action for an attack upon its mistress. The guard too started forward, but the dog had sprung at him even before his hand could close upon her shoulder to steady her. The beast's great weight threw him to the floor as it seized his wrist in its jaws, growling savagely, but it released him at once, on the lady's command, and sat back on its haunches, panting and looking pleased with itself. Blood soaked his shirt and seeped between his fingers as he clutched the wound, but he scarcely thought about his torn arm as he struggled to sit up. This woman knew him—he was certain of it—and nothing in the world mattered except that.

She was kneeling beside him now, laughing and crying at once, while she gripped his upper arm, squeezing at it desperately with both hands. "Lie still, love, don't try to rise. Hold your arm up now, to slow the bleeding. Oh, 'Ben, you should know better than to move like that before a strange guard dog!"

"You know me!" he gasped. "Tell me!"

But she only kissed him quickly and said, "Hush! We'll talk later—let me see to this wound now, I don't mean to lose you again the very moment I've found you!" Turning to the guard, she ordered, "Press hard—right here—and don't leave off till I bid you."

There were so many questions he must ask her! But when he tried again he found that he was too weak and dizzy to make the effort. And why was he suddenly so cold? He let his head fall back again and closed his eyes, the better to occupy himself with the task of breathing, which seemed to require all of his attention.

In a moment the woman had slit the length of his sleeve with her quill-knife and bound the cloth firmly about his biceps. "Good," he heard her say. "Give me that blanket, then *run* to Teissa and tell her to fetch me hot water and clean cloth as quick as she can."

He felt her lay the blanket over him and put something beneath his feet, then she sat beside him and gently raised his arm again, holding his hand against her face. With her free hand she unlaced his shirt at the collar and lightly felt for the throb of blood in his throat. It must have satisfied her, for she sat back with a sigh and said only, "You've still the most beautiful collarbone in all creation. My poor 'Ben, what a welcome for you, after all this time. First you're locked up like a common thief by Corson, then all but murdered by my watchful hound, and the both of them only trying to protect me. You know I've always been fortunate in finding loyal servants."

*She doesn't know*, he thought, and opened his eyes to look anxiously up at her. But before he could speak he had already forgotten what it was he had to tell her. She stroked his cheek and brushed her fingers across his lips. "Don't try to talk yet, my dear. Rest. Words will wait, cares can keep. I shan't leave you. Rest, love. Sleep."

He slept fitfully for a time, drifting in and out of dreams, dimly aware that the pale, delicate lady—she who had called him by name—was still tending to him, watching over him. The others came and went, following her orders. She seemed to be mistress of the household, and a healer. She had washed and

bandaged his wound with her own hands, then had him lifted carefully onto the cot. He was warm now, swathed in quilts and coverlets. She'd said, "You lost a good deal of blood, but you'll soon be well, I promise you." But what was the name she had called him?

"A dogbite wound never mortifies or brings on disease," she'd said, "unless the beast itself is ailing. And yet the bite of a healthy human being may be deadly, so I've read. It's a thing I've never understood." But she was no longer speaking to him. Someone else answered her, and both had spoken in low, hushed tones, so as not to waken him. He turned to them and said quite clearly, "I'm not asleep."

"No?" she said, smiling. "Then have a little more broth, if you will." She took up a copper mug from a small brazier and tasted it, then tempered its heat with liquid from a pitcher and blew on it to mix it. She was alone.

More broth? He hadn't had anything to eat. And what had become of the other woman, the servant who'd said, "There are many things the leeches don't know, my lady, for all their grand airs"?

And what was the name she'd called him?

But when she raised his head and held the cup to his lips, he recognized the rich, salt, wine-spiced taste of the broth at once, and remembered that she had indeed given him sips of it from time to time during the night. The fragments of talk he'd heard must have been spoken some time ago. She had been sitting at his bedside for hours, he realized. Each time he'd opened his eyes to see if she was still there, she'd smiled at him and caressed his hair or his brow, sometimes just touching the pulse at his temple. Her hands were like a child's.

She'd fed him the warm, savory broth a few drops at a time, and when he'd tried weakly to question her, she'd put him off, murmuring soothing endearments and promises. "Later, my dear. Don't worry." Had she called him by name?

It occurred to him fleetingly that she might be his wife. Or his sister? But that was not likely—she was so fair-skinned, nothing at all like him. Perhaps now she would tell him who she was—who *he* was. He turned his head toward her again, but she was no longer beside him, and he saw to his confusion that he was in a different room altogether. This was a large bedchamber with fine furnishings, tapestries, carpets, and a glowing hearthfire. Broad windows in the far wall let in a faint grey light and the sound of waves breaking on the rocks below. She was standing at a window, looking out to sea, motionless, a statue silhouetted against the half-light of early dawn. She had changed her roadworn tunic and breeches for a long white robe that looked soft and silken where the firelight touched it. She was barefoot. Her silence was like a shell about her, pearl-like, perfect, inviolable.

Somehow reassured, as if his questions had been answered, he slept again, deeply, lulled by the sound of the sea.

She had come to the sea to put the troubles of the city behind her for a time, Nyctasia thought wryly, and she had succeeded—*vahn* knows!—far beyond her expectations. Since she'd set foot in the Smugglers' House, she'd not had a thought to spare for Rhostshyl or anything else save 'Ben alone. When she'd arrived without warning, and unescorted, her people had assumed that she'd come on his account, and when she'd called for only a bath and a cold supper, her steward had naturally inquired if she had any orders concerning the Lady Corson's prisoner.

Nyctasia had been outraged. Another of Corson's childish pranks! It was inexcusable! After the affair of 'Malkin's arrest, she'd made Corson promise not to misuse her authority in such a way again, yet here she was up to the same game at Nyctasia's Chiestelm residence. This sort of irresponsible behavior could not be permitted to continue. It would reflect badly on Nyctasia if one whom she had chosen to distinguish with a title should prove herself unworthy of the honor.

Nyctasia decided that she would first see to this prisoner of Corson's, then go directly to the Hare and demand an explanation—or rather, she would send someone to fetch Corson to her, later, after she'd bathed and eaten. As a citizen of the Alliance, Corson was not obliged to obey such a summons, but as a Desthene of Rhostshyl she was very much obliged to do so, and if Nyctasia's messenger had to roust her out of bed, so much the better!

She was already planning the exact terms in which to express her displeasure to Corson as she hurried after the guard to attend to the unfortunate victim of Corson's malicious humor. The barbarian

virago must be made to understand, once and for all, that she could not carry on in this way! Nyctasia had hardly looked up when she'd walked into 'Ben's room, uttering apologies, but still intent on the recriminations she meant to make to Corson.

When she'd seen him standing before her, she'd felt her lips grow cold with shock, and her first thought had been of the demonic spirit that had appeared to her in his guise, amidst the ruins of the Cymvelan temple. He might be a ghost, a revenant—it would not be the first time the dead had communed with the living at the haunted Smugglers' House, She'd stood stunned, as if thunderstruck, and for a moment the floor had seemed to shift beneath her feet. How desperately anxious 'Ben had looked, uncertain of his welcome, uncertain of her love.

But Greymantle's attack had left little enough doubt as to his mortality, and there had been no moment, from then to this, to think of anything but keeping him alive. Precious minutes had passed while she'd frantically tried to remember—and apply—what she knew of stemming the flow of blood. She'd learned from books that one should force the flesh of the upper arm against the bone, but her books had not told her how to go about it while 'Ben's—'Ben's—lifeblood was flooding from him before her eyes, when she had not yet recovered from the shock of seeing him! She had thought she would never find the right part of his arm to press, that he would be dead in another moment, that it was already too late.

Then had come the long vigil beside him, waiting for the Balance to tip toward life or death. She had been ready to take up arms against death at any cost, ready, if need be, to throw herself into a healing trance from which both of them might emerge, or neither.

But in time the vital heat had rekindled in his flesh, and the beat of his blood had begun to quicken, little by little, and grow stronger. Only when she was certain he was out of danger had she dared to have him moved to her own quarters—orders which had aroused much speculation among her guards and attendants. They'd had no idea who it was Corson had left in their custody. Some of Nyctasia's people in Rhostshyl would have recognized him, but her retinue at the Smugglers' House were mostly folk of Chiastelm, hired by her steward, and they had not even seen Nyctasia herself very often. She had rarely made use of the place since her return to Rhostshyl, though she'd seen to it that it was kept in readiness for her, in hopes that she would find time to visit the oceanside.

She'd bought the house years ago, when she'd first come of age, and even then she had thought of it as a haven from the burdensome duties of the Rhaicimate, as well as an ideal place to try her hand at sea-spells and the Discipline of the Legacy of the Heirs of Ocean. Even its reputation as a haunted house had appealed to her, since such places were often sources of Immaterial Influences. But there had been another reason she had wanted the property, then, and she remembered it now as she looked from her window out to the steep cliff with its sheer drop to the rocks and the surging tide. It had seemed such an easy escape, if she should need it, as swift and free as flight .... She had taken comfort, at times, from the knowledge that the waters waited, and would always wait, to receive her. But what she saw now, when she gazed out to sea, was a Manifestation not of a Consolation Toward Death, but of an Influence Toward Life.

She turned from the window to look at 'Ben again, to reassure herself that he was still resting quietly—that he was still *there*, indeed, truly returned to her, and not some passing dream. Noiselessly, she crossed to the bed to watch him sleep, as she had been doing without pause all through the night. Yet she had hardly satisfied her need to look at him, She could never have her fill of studying the dark, sharp planes of his face, the sweep of his black, hawk's-wing eyebrows, his curving lashes and chiseled lips. She longed to touch him, but would not risk waking him, for she saw that he was sleeping soundly at last. There was no need to hover over him any longer; she would do better to get some sleep herself.

Very cautiously, she laid herself beside him on the wide bed, taking care to make no jarring motion or noise. If she slept here, she reasoned, she would wake if 'Ben should stir or speak.

He gave no sign of doing either, however, even when she reached across him and drew the bedcurtains, to protect him from the morning light. Nyctasia settled beside him again, confident that he would sleep undisturbed for some hours yet. She too had always slept well in this room, within sound of the ocean.

HE DREAMED OF THE spell-haunted Yth Forest again, though he did not know if he had ever really been there, or if the Yth was in any way like his dreams of it. He was wandering through the Forest, listening to a distant singing, and though he knew he should turn back before he lost his way, the singing drew him on irresistibly. In a grassy glade, he stopped to rest beside a deep, clear pool, and at once he felt parched with unbearable thirst. It would be folly to drink the waters or eat the fruits of the Yth, yet he leaned over the pool, tempted, driven by the maddening thirst.

The sight of his reflection troubled him, for he had forgotten what he looked like, and he was reluctant to recognize himself, to be reminded that he belonged with his own people, not among the Yth-kind. He broke the image with his hand, then made a cup of his palm and tasted a few drops of the bright, cold water, but it only seemed to increase his thirst. Then, abandoning his misgivings, he bent down to the pool and drank freely and for a long while, yet when he rose his thirst was still unsatisfied.

But he could hear the singing more clearly now, near at hand, and he set off again in pursuit of it, forgetting all else, and unaware that his reflection still remained in the forest pond. It rose from the water, laughing without a sound, and followed, unseen and unheard, not running but crawling through the tall grass like a serpent, as swiftly as water flowing downstream, as silently as a drifting fog.

At a branch in the path he stopped, uncertain which way to take, and he thought someone called to him, but try as he might, he could not make out the name. And as he stood listening, his reflection came from behind and fell upon him like a savage animal, bearing him to the ground in a grip of iron and tearing at him with teeth as sharp as knives. He fought to escape, but it was like struggling against a raging torrent that carries off all in its path. The inhuman strength of the creature overpowered him easily, snapping his bones like brittle twigs and slowly crushing the life from his chest. Yet, dying, defenseless, he was somehow unafraid at the last, and even content to surrender to the deadly embrace of the reflection.

It devoured him, flesh, blood and bone, leaving nothing, not a shred of sinew, splinter of bone or drop of blood on the path to show that he had ever existed. And when its feast was finished it stood upright, graceful and unhurried, and went its way on foot, choosing a path without hesitation.

He woke in a panic terror, his heart racing, his mouth dry with fright. The dream was always different, but each time it left him with the same mad fear—that he remembered no past because he had no past, that he was no one, a creature in man's form, somehow called into being two years before, for a purpose he could not even guess at ....

But with wakefulness came clarity as he remembered where he was and how he'd come there. The curtains had been drawn about the bed, but sunlight filtered through them and pierced between them, and he recognized his surroundings in triumph. Of course he was someone, for the lovely, grey-eyed woman knew him; she had told him, "I don't mean to lose you *again*." His memory of the past night was confused and cloudy, mingled with dreams, but surely she had said that? She *had* recognized him ...? Had he not woken once, for a moment, and seen her lying beside him, or had that been only another dream? No—for the other pillow showed the hollow where her head had lain. He touched it gratefully, and his heart grew calm, his breathing steady. He would go find her at once, and put an end to this torment of uncertainty.

He sat up slowly, supporting himself with his left arm, and leaned back against the headboard to rest. The dizziness brought on by this effort passed quickly, however. He was still weak, but no longer felt helpless and enfeebled. Determined to go on, he drew back the bedcurtains—but she was there, perched on a high inner window-ledge, waiting for him to wake.

Today she had dressed with some care, he noticed. Black knee-breeches with silver buckles, and a close-fitting sleeveless tunic of the same finespun wool, trimmed in silver, covered a silvery, silken shirt with trailing sleeves, and matching hose. Her close-cropped hair was damp, shining in the sun, and a silver earring caught the light with a burning gleam as she turned to face him. She had been eating a pear, and feeding the peel to a greedy gull, but now she tossed the rest out to the bird and dropped down from the windowsill, landing lightly on the balls of her feet, with her knees bent and her arms held out for

balance.

“A rope-dancer taught me that,” she said, laughing. “How do you feel now?”

His mouth was still so dry that he answered, half-choking, “Thirsty!”

She nodded. “I should think you would be, indeed. You’re to drink a dozen cups today, of water or broth or what you please. And I hope you’re hungry as well, because I want you to eat a good deal of meat.” As she spoke, she took a silver pitcher and mug from a cupboard in the stone wall and poured out a measure of a pale golden liquid. “Still chilled from the cold-cellar,” she said, watching as he took it, to see if his hand was steady.

It was only barley-water, with a scent of mint about it, but it seemed the most refreshing drink he had ever tasted. He eagerly drank the second mugful she gave him and sighed with relief. “I was dreaming of spell-waters that never slake the thirst,” he said, dismissing the rest of the nightmare.

She frowned slightly, but said only, “It means nothing. The flesh has its dreams as well as the spirit, especially in illness. But you’ll soon be whole.” She arranged the pillows behind his back and took the empty mug from him. He could smell the fresh-crushed mint on her fingertips.

“Whole ...” he breathed. “Yes, tell me now, in the *vahn*’s name, tell me everything! Who are you, what do you know of me—?”

The mug slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor. He saw horror dawn in her eyes, and he thought in dismay, *she doesn’t know*.

Nyctasia fought to keep her composure, not to give way to alarm. She had thought nothing of his bewildered questions of the night before, taking them for mere delirium, but he should have recovered his senses by now! “Ben, what are you saying?” she whispered. “Don’t you know me?”

“I don’t know *myself*—didn’t she *tell* you that?” he exclaimed, outraged. “Didn’t she warn you that I’d no memory?”

“She—? I—I don’t understand.”

“The southerner! A Desthene, by her account of herself. She left me here and went to fetch a friend of hers, she said, who knew me. Didn’t she send you?”

“Corson ... no, she must have come too late to find me. I ... received another message to come here.” She sat on the edge of the bed, looking as weak and shaken as he. “She really is a Desthene now,” she said dazedly, still trying to sort out where matters stood. *The spell of Perilous Threshold ...*

“Very well, she is a Desthene, but what am I? That one told me nothing. You called me Ben just now, but—”

“Not even your own name?” cried Nyctasia. “Oh, no—!” *I can’t bear any more of this!* she thought. But she must be calm, for his sake. He was so racked with anticipation already, such feverish excitement could do him harm, in his weakened state. Calling upon the *vahn* to help her master herself, she said gently, “Yes, now I understand. I shall tell you all. You are Erystalben, son of Descador, of the House of Shiasfred, in Rhostshyl.”

She watched him anxiously. “Erystalben?” he murmured. “Rhostshyl ....?”

The names meant nothing to him. He’d heard of Rhostshyl, of course, but did not remember ever having been there. And who was Erystalben? “I took the name of Veron when I found myself without a name,” he said dispiritedly. “But such a name is anyone’s for the taking. The name you offer me is not to be had so easily, it seems.” He looked defeated, hopeless. “How can I be Erystalben when I know myself only as Veron?”

Unlike Trask, Nyctasia recognized the name. Veron was the hero of an ancient legend, a man who had lost his name through dealings with demons. For *veron* was not a name, but the Old Eswraine word for “lacking,” for “bereft.”

“You must not call yourself that any longer,” she said firmly. “Name and place are yours. You are the Lord Erystalben Cadador Jhaice brenn Rhostshyl ar’n Shiasfred.”

He shook his head wearily and sank back against the pillows, stricken by disappointment so keen it seemed to gnaw at his heart like the specter of his dream. “I’ve believed, all this time, that if I once learned who I was, all the rest would somehow come back to me. But you might be speaking of a stranger!”



“Despair destroys the spirit,” Nyctasia said softly. *And despair could kill him now*, she thought. “It will take time, ’Ben, I daresay, but when you see the city again, your home and your kinfolk, then you’ll begin to remember. You’ll soon be strong enough to travel, and we’ll go back to Rhostshyl together. That’s sure to make a difference.” She did not believe it herself. A spell of Perilous Threshold would not be undone so easily as that. But she was a very convincing liar.

And Erystalben longed to be convinced, above all else. “It may be so,” he said thoughtfully. “Perhaps names are not enough. But even when I saw you I remembered nothing.”

“Have you not looked in the glass? If you don’t know yourself from your own face, how should you know me from mine? A name, a face—these are nothing, but to return to your birthplace is another matter. There every stone, every nail, will speak to you of your past. Rhostshyl holds your memories, ’Ben, as it does mine, and that is where you must seek for them.” This argument almost persuaded her that she was right. But even if she were proved wrong, he would be strong enough in body, by then, to bear the blow to his spirit.

Erystalben sat up straighter and fixed his flame-blue eyes upon her. “Tell me the rest,” he said.

“The Shiasred are a respected family,” she began, “and you’re the principal heir to the House. Your—”

He waved this aside. “No, wait. First, who are you—you’ve not yet told me that! And who are you to me? Not kin, I think.”

Nyctasia flushed. “More than kin.”

“Forgive me, it’s a galling thing to have to ask, but are we—?”

“We’re not bound by law, you and I,” Nyctasia said evasively, but her look was answer enough. “But how very discourteous of me, sir, not to have introduced myself.” She rose and bowed. “Nyctasia Selescq Rhaicime brenn Rhostshyl ar’n Edonaris, and at your service. You generally called me ’Tasia.”

He stared at her as if for the first time. “Rhaicime!” he gasped. “But I—But you—Do you mean to say that *you’re* the Witch of Rhostshyl?”

“It’s not a title to which I lay formal claim,” said Nyctasia, smiling, “but, yes, I’m called that. I’m called ‘The Mad Lass’ in some quarters, so I’m told, but it seems no disrespect is meant, since folk in those trades often call themselves worse. You yourself used sometimes to call me ‘Mistress of Ambiguities,’ which perhaps means much the same thing. I’ve a taste for paradox and masquerade, you see.”

He suddenly remembered that he’d first seen her in scribe’s guise. A woman of good family but little means, he’d thought her, following a scribe’s calling from inclination or necessity. He’d met many such on his travels through the coastal cities, all of them bound for Rhostshyl in hopes of finding service with the Rhaicime. Ignoring her attempts to distract him with her chatter, he persisted, “I’ve heard talk of you in Cerrogh, in Ochram—they say you saved the city by your spells, that you’re the most powerful sorceress in the west of the world!”

“So my spies tell me, but surely you don’t credit such wild tales? I encourage them, of course, in order to daunt my enemies, and the enemies of Rhostshyl, but most of what folk say is merely moonshine. I’ve some skill at healing, as you’ve seen, but what mastery of magic I ever had was weak, because I hadn’t the time to devote to the Art. And now I’ve hardly any time at all. You were always a better magician than I.”

He started. “I?” The idea struck him with the force of a revelation. It was the first thing he’d been told about himself that seemed somehow in keeping with his nature. It was as if she had confirmed something he’d suspected from the first. “I myself am a magician?” he asked, looking into the distance, lost in thought.

“You were, ’Ben. I don’t know whether you are now.” She had almost said, *I don’t know what you are now*. He seemed suddenly far from her, as if an unseen barrier divided them. “Ben ...” she said, frightened, “you ought to be resting. I shouldn’t tire you with so much talk, not yet. No, be still for a moment.” She came nearer and brushed back his hair to touch the pulse at his temple. “Ah, your heartbeat’s even stronger, that’s well, but all the same you must have a day’s rest and another night’s sleep before I shall feel easy about you.” She ached to take his face between her hands, to lean still

closer to him, but she reminded herself that she was a stranger to him. She had no right to treat him as if he were still her own. She stepped back.

But he seized her hand, saying, "Don't go—you mustn't. Please—"

She pressed his hand. "Let me fetch you some soup. You need food, to renew your strength."

"Presently, whatever you will. Only tell me this first. That other one ... Corson? It's plain that she thinks me a villain. Have I wronged you too?"

"Not me, but yourself. It is you who paid the price."

"For what, then? Why did I leave you?"

"Why do we do anything in this life?" Nyctasia sighed. "For power."

"And did I find it?"

"You did. And this was the result."

He looked away, then, and said slowly, "I never thought I was a fool, whatever else I might be."

"But you weren't to blame, love. You'd no choice but to leave the city. My kin were after your blood."

"Because a Jhaice from a respected family has no business to court a Rhaicime?"

"A Rhaicime of the Edonaris, and she betrothed to her cousin. And they believed that with you out of the way, I'd give up my studies of magic and settle down to more responsible pursuits—protecting the power of our House and plotting the downfall of our rivals. You encouraged me to neglect my duties, you see." She had been speaking with a bitter humor, but suddenly a sob caught at her throat as she said, "Oh, 'Ben, I should have gone with you! But—but—war was brewing in the city, and some of us thought it could still be stopped. They needed my support, I was the only one among them who belonged to the Rhaicimate. I hadn't the right to go, do you understand?"

He was not altogether sure that he did. Why did she ask this, what did she expect him to say? "And so you were caught up in the war?" he hazarded.

"No, I did follow you before then. I always meant to keep my word! I did! But I waited too long, and all to no purpose. I failed to prevent the bloodshed, and I let you fall prey to the Yth—"

"The Yth!" His grasp of her hand tightened. "Have I been to Yth Wood? Tell me!"

"I think so, 'Ben, I don't know the whole of it. But I have been there, in search of you, and it was so much more dangerous than we thought—nothing we had learned prepared me to resist its power. If I'd been with you, then none of this might have happened. You were waiting for me, but I didn't know—" She was crying openly now, shaking helplessly. "I didn't know what the Yth was like! 'Ben, I swear, if I'd known, I'd not have let you go there alone! Please believe me!"

She had seemed so in command that her abandoned weeping was all the more shocking. If she needed his forgiveness, she must have it. His questions could wait. He pulled her to him, circling her waist with his good arm, and clumsily drew her down beside him. "I believe you," he said, and kissed her, tasting the tears on her lips and eyes, the legacy of the salt sea. "Of course I believe you, my Mad Lass. Don't cry." He stroked the soft down at the nape of her neck, which her cropped hair left so bare and inviting.

Nyctasia shivered and pressed herself against him, allowing the sweet, familiar desire for him to envelop her like the rising tide, for the space of a few heartbeats, before she tore herself away, saying, "This is exceedingly unwise, of all things that sap the strength, the most dangerous."

"But what better way to die, answer me that," he teased, pulling her back for a moment to kiss her throat, before he let her go.

"You've not forgotten some things, I see." She stood and straightened her clothes, smiling, then leaned over him, took his face in her hands and gave him a lingering kiss. "Some food for you now, and then nothing but rest—you're not so strong as you think, not yet."

He had to admit that she was right. When she'd gone out, he fell back, exhausted and lightheaded, and lay with his eyes closed, listening to the sea. Perhaps, he thought drowsily, perhaps he was really lying asleep on the deck of some coastal trading vessel, dreaming that he'd found his home and his people ... that he was a lord, the heir of a noble house, loved by a desirable and powerful lady—a Rhaicime, ruler of a city .... What else should a nameless man dream for himself, after all?

When Nyctasia returned, she found him fast asleep. "I'm sorry to wake you, but you should eat this soup now. Then you may sleep all the afternoon, if you like." As soon as he smelled the savory meat soup, thick with shreds of beef and venison, he realized that he was not only thirsty again but ravenously hungry as well. She gave him bread and wine with it, and he managed awkwardly to make a good meal, relying on his left hand and occasional help from Nyctasia. When he had downed a second bowlful, she was well satisfied, declaring that a good appetite was the surest sign of healing. "Now you may sleep till suppertime," she said, but the meal had wakened him.

"I've had enough of sleeping. I was dreaming just now that you were only a dream, and I want to keep you in sight for a bit, so as to be sure you're real."

"We are both real," Nyctasia said seriously. "Do you remember—*vahn*, was it only last night?—the first thing you said to me was, 'I'm real. Or I think I am.' I didn't know what you meant by that, and I hadn't much time to think about it—and yet I should have known, for I dreamed once that I'd found you, but I couldn't make you hear when I called your name, and you walked past me like a stranger.

"I'd done spells of seeking, but all in vain, and because your spirit remained hidden from me, I was certain that I'd never see you again. Of course, if you were lost to yourself, I could not find you, but I never thought of that. And so when I saw you here ..." She shuddered. "But no illusion ever bled like that!"

"You, however, may yet prove a dream," he said. "The more I consider the matter, the less likely it seems that I could have such extraordinary good fortune. No, if I fall asleep again, I'll only wake in some filthy dockside inn and laugh at myself for dreaming that a beautiful Rhaicime was feeding soup to a nameless vagabond like me."

Nyctasia shook her head, as if at a willful child. "You needn't sleep, then, so long as you rest."

"But I feel quite fit now, not at all dizzy or weak. Why shouldn't we walk to the shore? It can't be far."

"Certainly not," Nyctasia said firmly. "Tomorrow, perhaps, if you rest today, and sleep tonight. You don't—"

But he was laughing at her. "I was only baiting you, 'Tasia, for the pleasure of hearing you scold me. I promise to rest as quiet as an unfledged chick, if you'll stay here and talk to me."

Pleased that he had at last called her by name, Nyctasia said with a smile, "You could always win your way with me."

"That's good to know. Sit here by me."

"But what shall I say, where shall I begin? Would you hear of your family? Your parents are living, and you have a younger sister."

He found that he didn't care to hear more unfamiliar names, names that suggested no faces, no feelings. He wanted to ask about the Yth, yet he was half afraid to hear the answers. And such a question might distress her anew. They both needed time to recover themselves, he thought. "Tell me more about the past—our past," he suggested. "How long have I known you? How did we meet?"

"That's a tale indeed!" Nyctasia laughed. "I was only fifteen or sixteen years of age, and you not much older. And from the moment I first heard your name, until the time we met, I loathed you absolutely."

"Why?" he asked, dismayed. "What had I done to offend you?"

"Nothing at all, but you existed, and your existence happened to interfere with my plans. You see, I was very taken with astromancy at that time, and I'd learned that an extremely rare alignment of variable stars was to take place one summer night—"

"Now how could I interfere with that?"

"Patience. I'll come to that in good time. There was to be a banquet and ball that same night, at the palace of the Edonaris, but I didn't concern myself with that. I rarely attended such affairs, and didn't suppose I'd be missed on this occasion. But that morning my great-aunt, the Lady Mhairestri, summoned me to say that I most certainly would be expected to make an appearance, and that I was not to absent myself for any reason whatsoever. And that was on your account. I was to make your acquaintance, engage you in conversation, and the like."

“But you said your kin disapproved of me.”

“To be sure they did, later, when you proved such an undesirable influence on me, and threatened to come between me and the duties of an Edonaris. But at this time, the Edonaris were courting the support of the Shiasfred, and you were to be head of the House of Shiasfred one day. Our feud with the Teirynd was becoming serious, and your family had not yet declared themselves for one side or the other. Because I was close to you in age, my task was to charm you with my attentions, discover where the sympathies of your House lay, perhaps to sway you to our cause.

“Mhairesstri was one of the heads of the family, very respected and influential. It would never have entered my mind to disobey her outright, and it took all the temerity I could muster even to question her orders. I explained, with all due courtesy, about the stars and the powerful Influences created by such a rare confluence of elements, but Mhairesstri gave it as her opinion that this celestial event could very well come about without my assistance. She said, ‘It’s time you gave less thought to witchcraft, and more to statecraft!’ Then she pointed out that my duty to my House, my estate, and my city all required me to set aside my own interests, that responsibility and rank entailed sacrifices, and that the family asked little enough of me as a rule. But she had no doubt, she assured me, that I, being an Edonaris, would willingly put the performance of my duty before all else, when duty so plainly presented itself as in this instance.”

“Poor girl!”

“She could always get the better of me by appealing to duty. Or nearly always. I ventured to observe that my cousins, Thierran, Mescrisdan and Lhejadis, were also Edonaris, also young, and indeed better suited than I to win your regard, being more accustomed to society and more at their ease in company.”

“Why was that?”

“Oh, I was a sickly child, and a scholarly youth, who’d never mixed much with others, aside from my kin. I’d been allowed to go rather my own way. But Mhairesstri had made up her mind that I could be useful in this matter, and it was a waste of breath to argue. My manners, she insisted, were perfectly satisfactory when I chose to use them, and quite good enough for a young lordling like you. The others would do their part, of course, but there could be no question of their taking my place, because I was of Rhaicime rank. My notice would be more flattering to a boy of the lower nobility.”

“The insolent haridan!” Erystralben exclaimed with real anger. “A curse on her for a brazen procuress! How dare she?”

He had not lost his pride along with his memory, Nyctasia realized. “She’s dead now,” she said. “By her own hand, rather than see the Edonaris united to their enemies, and the city under my rule. She never could reconcile herself to the idea that I would one day have a voice on the council of the Rhaicimate.” She seemed to be speaking more to herself than to Erystralben, now, as if she were trying to understand her own history. “It was of no consequence while my mother lived, since I was to have the title from her, and the women of our family are long-lived. No one expected me to inherit until I was well into my middle years, and had outgrown my youthful notions. Mhairesstri’s position looked to be secure. She wasn’t of Rhaicime rank herself, but she wielded a good deal of authority in the city nevertheless. The Edonaris dominated the Rhaicimate, and Mhairesstri exercised considerable influence over them, especially my mother and elder brother, both of them on the council. But then my mother died unexpectedly, at a young age, and Mhairesstri was faced with the prospect of seeing me take possession of my title and my powers as soon as I came of age. That’s when she set out in earnest to make a proper Edonaris of me. I think she hardly knew me by sight before then. But perhaps it was already too late.”

Nyctasia gave a little shake of her shoulders, recalling herself to her tale. “And so I was to occupy myself with young Shiasfred, like a dutiful daughter of the Edonaris, and I detested you in consequence.”

“I regret that my existence was an inconvenience to you, dear ’Tasia, but I think it would have been more just of you to detest your great-aunt.”

“I couldn’t very well do that, it would have been disrespectful. No, you were to blame that my plans were upset—and that wasn’t the worst of your offenses. Not only would I be prevented from witnessing the Critical Alignment, but I was expected to dress in an elegant new gown of ivory silk, trimmed with rare black pearls.”

He laughed. “Was that a hardship?”

"It had tight lacings," Nyctasia explained, "and stiff brocade drapings down the sides of the skirt, and delicate little slippers stitched with seed pearls. I never gave myself the trouble to wear anything but breeches and blouses and boots, at that age—and I still don't, if I can help it," she admitted. "If a garment wasn't suitable for hunting, it didn't interest me."

"You weren't always studying or stargazing, then. But I'd not have taken you for a huntress."

"You used to tease me about my passion for the chase. You found hunting a bore and a waste of time. But my dislike of long skirts was due as much to considerations of vanity as of comfort. I thought they drew attention to my short stature. I complained to Mhairesstri, 'I'll look like a dwarf in such a gown!' but she said, 'Not if your hair is properly dressed, as it shall be.' I had hair down to my hips in those days—it had never been cut—and it took hours to arrange it about a cornet. I simply bound it with ribbons or plaited it, when it hampered me. I was willing to tolerate an elaborate weave of braids, at worst, when formality was called for, but I hated a headdress above all things."

"And that was my fault too, I suppose?"

"Naturally. There seemed no end to the amount of bother you were prepared to cause me."

"I'd not have thought myself capable of such infamy. However did I appease your wrath?"

"You didn't care a straw for my wrath! You were as sullen as I. Your people were no fools, 'Ben; they saw which way the victory would fall, if it came to open warfare, and they didn't mean to find themselves among the defeated. They'd come to offer their support to our House, and you'd been brought along—much against your will—to cultivate the goodwill of the younger generation of the Edonaris."

"Especially that of the Rhaicime-to-be?" he guessed.

Nyctasia chuckled, remembering the scene. "We *were* a pair—a brace of wild geese. When you were presented to me, you bowed and kissed my hand in an accomplished manner, then said, 'I've been ordered to make myself agreeable to you, my lady, but I must confess that I hardly expected to find my duty such a pleasure.'"

"What impertinence—I trust you slapped me soundly for it."

"I should have, but I was so smitten by your beauty that I forgave you everything, even your disruption of the destinies of the stars. If Mhairesstri had but taken the trouble to describe you to me, she'd have had no difficulty with me. Still, I had pride enough to inform you that I had been charged with the same obligation, lest you should think I had any desire to make your acquaintance. Then I suggested, quite coldly, that we both might best accomplish what was expected of us by treading a dance together. 'Perhaps it will satisfy our elders to see us so engaged,' I said, but the truth was that I wanted an excuse to touch you."

"You'll make me forget my promise to rest quiet, if you say things like that," he warned.

Nyctasia grinned wickedly. "You didn't seem averse to touching me either, and we began to get on better before long. The situation amused us, we were both fine dancers, and we soon discovered that we had more in common than scheming relations. We both professed to be students of Vahnite philosophy, both our families thought we took insufficient interest in the affairs of our Houses and our city, we both aspired to be scholar-magicians, though your studies of the Art were more advanced than mine. We both wanted to attend the Imperial University, and neither of our families would hear of it. I was enthralled. I'd never met anyone remotely like you—except myself. You seemed nearly perfect to me."

"Why 'nearly'?" he demanded, enjoying himself.

"You didn't care for hunting. Still, despite that flaw in your character, I was growing more enamored of you by the moment, and when you proposed that we withdraw to someplace more private to continue our interesting conversation, I agreed with most immodest haste. You said, 'I've heard that the palace gardens here are exquisite,' and I assured you that they were—especially by moonlight. It must have pleased our families no end when we slipped out of the hall hand-in-hand.

"What a perfect summer night that was ... the trees were in blossom, the leaves sighing in the sweet-scented evening breezes, the fountains chiming and shining in the starlight .... It was a night meant for young lovers to stroll through the terraces and trellised walks, to cross the arched bridges and tarry on the parapet together listening to the music of the stream murmuring and purling in the darkness below,

to linger in the lilac-bowers, hidden by the sheltering branches and clustering flowers .... And indeed, we weren't the only couple enjoying the spiced night air in the arbors and under the willows on the banks of the pools. I'd known those gardens since my childhood, every path and corner, but they'd never seemed so lovely to me before. I was in an enchantment of bliss. It's not like me to live in the pleasure of the moment, but I felt that I could have wandered the gardens forever with you by my side. Even though you were a stranger to me, I didn't doubt that I understood your thoughts, that your feelings at that moment were the same as mine.

"I had a small, enclosed garden of my own, where I grew healing herbs and other useful plants. It was perfectly private, surrounded by a high wall to which I had the only key, and I led you there almost without thinking, as if it had all been foreordained, and we had only to carry out fate's decree. The door was always locked, for some of my plants were highly poisonous, and I kept the key in a secret niche in the wall, covered by ivy. I'd never revealed that hiding-place to anyone, yet I didn't try to keep it from you, when I offered to show you the garden. 'Here no one will observe or overhear us,' I said. 'We may be quite alone and undisturbed. If it please my lord, shall we enter?' And I held out the key to you."

Nyctasia paused coyly. "Shall I tell you what you did next, or can you guess?" she asked, giving him a mischievous look.

"If I didn't unlock that door and carry you through it, I must have been a madman or an imbecile."

"I confess I was expecting something of the sort," said Nyctasia. "I thought you might at the least hand me in with a bow, or offer me your arm. The one thing I didn't anticipate was that you'd say, 'There is nothing that would please me more, my lady, but the night is yet young. Could we, I wonder, climb the tower yonder? A most interesting conjunction of stars will shortly take place tonight, and the view from up there would be excellent.'"

"I deny it!" moaned Erystalben, hiding his face in his arms. "You've made the whole tale up, to torment me. I *can't* have been such a booby, I refuse to believe it."

Nyctasia rocked with laughter. "I swear it, on my honor, by the *vahn*. I remember your every word." (She stopped herself in time from adding, "And I never let you forget them either." For she had let him forget everything, had she not?)

"You'd enticed me out of doors," she continued, "not for the purposes of romantic, moonlit dalliance, but so as to be able to keep the skies in sight!"

"I tremble to ask, what did you do next?"

"Well, my first impulse was to call the guards at once and have you disemboweled, but then I'd have had to face Mhairesstri's wrath. Besides, I was never one to give myself away. The only possible thing to do was to act as if I weren't at all disappointed or surprised. And then, once you'd reminded me of it, I realized that I did still want to see the alignment myself. So I said, 'Of course, the Periodic Conjunction! I was so enjoying our talk that I'd quite forgotten it for the moment. Come, the stars won't wait. I've been looking forward to it all the year—' and more nonsense of that sort, which had the advantage of being true. Only the way I said it was a lie.

"So we climbed the tower—no easy matter for me in that cursed skirt—and you explained to me a great many things I already knew about the rare and significant event we were to witness."

"Mercy," Erystalben said faintly.

"Never mind, your zeal for the spectacle quite rekindled my own. We were intent on observing the exact configuration, whether it would appear as bow or lyre, which would determine any number of possible interpretations of matters both material and immaterial. You made involved calculations, which impressed me as favorably as the Shiasred could have wished, since I did such things so poorly myself."

"And which pattern was revealed?"

"At first I saw the lyre, but when you declared it the bow, I became unsure. It was no common bow—as you'd have known if you took a proper interest in hunting. Yet it was not like any lyre I knew of either. I had a fit of inspiration and told you exultantly that archery was a true Discipline, as well as a Manifestation of the Principles of Elemental Balance and Harmony, just like the art of harping. I said, 'It is clear to me that these are but two guises of one Discipline!' I wanted nothing so much at that moment as to sit down with my commonplace book and record these momentous discoveries."

“No wonder I called you Mistress of Ambiguities.”

“You too were excited by the possibilities of such an interpretation. You said that it would make the Influences twice as powerful. Then you told me the Ahzid legend of Asye’s bow, which was weapon and harp in one, and I was simply staggered at its aptness.”

“You hadn’t heard of it before?” Erystalben asked, surprised.

“Most Mainlanders of noble family aren’t schooled in the lore of the Hlann. I only knew of Asye as a name to curse by when I stabbed my thumb, cutting a quill. You’d been told the tale only because there’s Ahzid blood in your family, on your father’s side.”

“Ah, *Descador*, of course. An Ahzid name. I thought I must have native Ahzid ancestry, what with my coloring. In Celys, folk sometimes took me for Lieposi, but none of that tribe has eyes like mine.”

“So you’ve been to Celys! We so wanted to go there in our youth.”

He dismissed the Imperial City with a shrug. “I knew I was well educated, so I hoped to find someone at the University who knew me. But I had no luck in that cursed city—” He broke off abruptly, making a Vahnite gesture of repudiation awkwardly, with his left hand. “But what of our adventure in the gardens? What followed these revelations of mystical talismanic Principles? Did I come to my senses finally, and throw myself at your dainty, pearl-shod feet?”

“You might put it that way,” Nyctasia said playfully. “We were neither of us much in our senses by then. We were wild to run to the library and consult some tome of ancient astronomical philosophy. I was impatiently gathering up my skirts, to descend the steps of the tower, and perhaps the sight of my delicate, silk-clad ankles affected you, for you bowed and said, ‘Permit me, Rhaicime,’ then picked me up and carried me down the stairs.”

“Thank the *vahn!* I was beginning to despair of myself.”

“There were indeed powerful Influences at work that night,” Nyctasia said dreamily. “By the time we reached the foot of the stairs, I’d discovered how very well my face fit against your collarbone, and you too seemed to have forgotten our urgent scholarly researches. Instead of setting me on my feet, you whispered in my ear that you still had the key to my garden about you, and I—I said nothing, but only kissed the hollow of your throat, as I’d been longing to do since I’d first seen you.” She sighed. “How you contrived to unlock the garden door and shut it after us without putting me down, I can’t tell you, but you somehow managed it.”

“You can’t have weighed more than thistledown. But don’t leave off now, pray. What happened next?”

“Oh, it was all so long ago,” Nyctasia said with a grin. “How should I remember every last thing?”

But of course, Nyctasia remembered that night in the garden as if it had happened mere days, not years, before. Erystalben had been so different from those she knew, from herself and her kin, all of them pale and colorless and cold, with their ice-grey eyes and dull black hair. Erystalben’s burnished, dark skin and piercingly blue eyes had made him seem more intensely alive, more vivid and vital, than other people. Even his hair was a different black from hers, a gleaming raven’s-wing black that the sunlight kindled to purple and blue. And when she was with him she felt that she too was more alive, powerful, imbued with possibilities.

She and Thierran had made love from time to time, without secrecy or impropriety. They were betrothed, they could visit one another’s chambers unchaperoned at any hour. It was perfectly proper, almost expected of them, and Nyctasia had never known the glamour of the forbidden and unknown, the thrill of a stranger’s embrace. She remembered every detail of that first tryst with Erystalben, the delight of lying with him under the stars in the fresh night air, the scent of the flowering herbs, the feel of the tender, yielding grass beneath her. She remembered picking mint leaves and crushing them against her throat, between her breasts, leaving their keen, intoxicating fragrance for him to savor on her skin. Never before had it occurred to her to do such a thing.

He had laid her down carefully and knelt over her, a shadow in the darkness, whispering, “Your beautiful gown will be spoilt, my lady.”

“I don’t care, I hate it,” she’d said, pulling him down beside her and kissing him greedily. “Let it be spoilt.”

“Oh, you’d best take it off, don’t you think?” he teased, opening his own shirt. “Think of the scolding you’ll get, careless girl.”

“I *can’t* take the wretched thing off without a lady’s maid. That’s why I hate it!”

Erystalben gathered her into his arms and began deftly to unlace the back of the tight dress. “Why then I’ll help you,” he murmured into her hair. “You shall see what a good lady’s maid I’d make you. You’ll never have a better.”

She kissed his jaw, his neck, his throat, as her hands explored the ridges and hollows of his back and shoulders. “I think I’d like you for groom as well as maid,” she said with a contented sigh. There was some point to such bothersome garments after all, she found. It was worth the trouble of wearing them to enjoy having Erystalben remove them. When he undid the ribbons of her bodice and bent to kiss her small, soft breasts, she felt weak and helpless with pleasure. She could only cling to him with one arm while with the other hand she clutched at the long grass and dug her fingers into the earth.

Then he was gently loosing the clasps and bands from her hair, freeing it from the hated cornet and letting it flow over both of them in caressing waves. How could she have failed to notice before how wonderful her own hair felt against her bare skin? She showed him how to detach the dove’s-wing draperies that sheathed her hips, and watched in amusement as he laid them ceremoniously over a juniper bush, to be followed by her sash and silken skirts.

At last he knelt at her feet and drew off the narrow kidskin slippers, then slid his hands beneath her last underskirt to unfasten her gossamer hose. Nyctasia closed her eyes and shivered, reaching out without thought in the darkness, to pluck a sprig of mint.

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“You told me,” Nyctasia concluded, “that students of Vahnite philosophy were the most desirable lovers, because mastery of the Discipline gives one such remarkable self-control.”

“No! I must protest, this isn’t fair—I can’t defend myself. I didn’t really say that?”

“Well, we were very young,” Nyctasia said leniently. “And after all, it was perfectly true.”

## 13

“I MUST HAVE BEEN sotted,” ’Malkin thought drowsily. “How could I have been so rutting careless ...?”

It was not at all like ’Malkin to allow mere fleshly attraction to interfere with his aims and purposes. As a rule he was thoroughly circumspect, as a courtier must be who hopes for advancement, but to have spent the night in Corson’s bed like this had not been in the least discreet. He knew very well how malicious gossip could be at court—any court. True, the Rhaicime was away, but he did not doubt that she would hear of anything that went on in her absence. He was aware that he already had enemies in the palace, other scholars, jealous of the ease with which he’d gained the favor of the Rhaicime, while they’d been here longer and failed to come to her notice. (And he had Corson to thank for that, he grudgingly admitted to himself.) They’d be all too glad to see to it that Her Ladyship heard of this affair.

Not that the episode was very likely to damage his standing with the Rhaicime, even if it did get about. It was not as if he’d trifled with a palace scullion, or bedded a stableboy. After all, it was the Rhaicime herself who had brought Corson and her base-born friends to court, and allowed them the freedom of the palace. Still, one could not be too careful. The Lady Nyctasia—not even in his thoughts did he call her “Nyc,” as his ill-bred bedmate did—the Lady Nyctasia might take a broad view of these matters, but it was one thing for her to be on familiar terms with such people herself, and quite another thing for her followers to carry on with them. Different behavior was expected, ’Malkin knew, from those of different stations. The Rhaicime was above the rules. She could afford to flout convention. A mere court clerk and scholar could not. It had probably been unwise to permit himself to be seduced in this way. Enjoyable though it had been, he must keep his wits about him and not let it happen again.

Well, it was not yet dawn, he’d plenty of time to be on his way before he could be discovered here. But he made no move to bestir himself yet. If only he weren’t so comfortable .... He looked around



Corson's lavish bedchamber with resentment. It was exasperating to think of a coarse ruffian like Corson enjoying this great feather bed, these spacious quarters, while he shared a narrow room with half a dozen other students and scribes. He could probably get himself better accommodations if he complained to the Rhaicime, but it was not yet time to ask favors of Her Ladyship. First, he intended to make himself indispensable to her, and then the shows of favoritism would come without the asking. This, however, was hardly the way to go about it, he thought, glancing at his still slumbering companion.

Or, was it ...? he pondered. Galling as it was, this common, ignorant creature knew things about the Rhaicime that he didn't—things that no one else at court seemed to know either, as far as he'd been able to determine. It should be possible to turn that fact to his advantage.

And—plague take it!—there was no denying that the baggage was attractive. Against his better judgment, he reached over to stroke Trask's tousled hair.

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Trask was well satisfied with his night's work. He'd laid plans to ingratiate himself with 'Malkin as soon as Corson had told the tale of her revenge and its consequences. This was someone who knew the things he wanted to learn—the manners, the courtly customs—but who wasn't a nobleman himself. If he was so well known to Corson, he wasn't too grand for Trask to approach, surely. And Corson had said he was a handsome fellow, too, though she might have meant that just to bait Steifann.

He'd lost no time in marking and stalking his quarry, once he had the chance, and had soon run him to ground in Nyctasia's great library, where her chosen scholars and scribes spent their time recording, studying and copying the works assembled by the learned Cymvelans—and where Trask, unfortunately, could not pursue him. Many of these volumes were rare and valuable, and no one could gain access to the guarded library without Nyctasia's sanction. But Trask was not one to let prohibitions stand in his way. Corson's authority was recognized throughout the palace garrison, and he demanded a warrant from her to enter the library, in return for the information he'd so painstakingly gathered about the Shiastrad at her behest.

"What do you want in there?" Corson asked suspiciously. "You can't even read. Nyc will have you flayed and gutted if you get into any mischief with her precious books, don't think she won't."

"It's not the books that interest me," Trask explained, "it's one of the readers."

"Oho, that was quick work. Which one? It might be someone I know."

Trask could have lied, but he suspected that Corson might prove an ally in this matter, so he chanced the truth. "It is," he said. "It's your friend 'Malkin, if you must know."

Corson was delighted. She not only arranged an authorization for him to visit the library, but wished him luck, and even provided him with some useful hints, of an intimate nature, about 'Malkin's tastes and predilections. The only condition she set was that he tell her all about it later.

"A gentleman wouldn't agree to that," Trask pointed out.

"A gentleman wouldn't need my help to lay siege to the likes of 'Malkin. Look here, Trask, call him 'sir.' He'll take to that like a hog to muck, you'll see."

"Would you be Desmalkin brenn Cerrogh, sir? Lady Corson sent me. She wants to see you at once."

Corson hadn't been lying about his looks, Trask noted. He wished he knew how to bow properly.

"You may tell Lady Corson to go hang herself, with my compliments," 'Malkin said, without raising his voice. It was very quiet in the library, apart from the constant scratching of quills. "Now get out of my sight."

Trask was taken aback. Though he knew 'Malkin had good grounds for a grudge against Corson, he hadn't been expecting a flat refusal of the fictitious summons. Corson *was* a Desthene, after all. "She said it was important, sir," he said earnestly. "I'm not to come back without you."

'Malkin quietly cursed Corson, her messenger, and the misguided moment in which the Rhaicime had seen fit to confer a title on her. But, like Trask, he was mindful of that title. It was infuriating to be at Corson's beck and call, but the bitch was a Desthene, and he was a commoner. And then, she just might have a legitimate reason for sending for him. He knew that Lady Nyctasia had forbidden her to play any

more of her tricks at court, and he thought that even Corson would know better than to defy her orders outright. It might well be that this matter somehow concerned Her Ladyship, he reflected. The rumors in the palace said that Corson was the one person likely to know where the Rhaicime had disappeared to ...

“Very well,” he said to Trask, “but Hlann help Corson if this is just more of her foolery!”

“Yes, sir,” said Trask meekly. He led ’Malkin directly to Corson’s quarters, where he had already lit the candles and set out the wine. Corson, of course, was nowhere to be seen.

“Well, where is she?” ’Malkin demanded.

“I’m sure she’ll be here straightway, sir. May I serve you some wine?”

Trask knew very well that Corson had gone off to The Lame Fox to get drunk with some of her disreputable friends, and that she was not at all likely to be back before dawn. He also knew where Corson kept her wine. As ’Malkin paced impatiently about the chamber, Trask refilled his goblet several times. He didn’t mean to take any further steps until the good Edonaris wine had had time to mellow ’Malkin’s temper.

But ’Malkin only grew more vexed as time passed and Corson failed to appear. “How dare she keep me waiting like this! Go find her at once, boy. Tell her, if she wants to see me—”

“She doesn’t,” Trask said, looking down at the floor, as if afraid to meet ’Malkin’s eyes. “I do.”

“*You* do? Who are you?”

“Nobody much,” Trask admitted. “But, you see, I don’t find that satisfactory.” He spoke with the air of one appalled by his own presumption, but bravely determined to persevere. “I’m Trask brenn Chiastelm, I’m only potboy at the Hare. Corson brings me along sometimes to run her errands, that’s all. But I’ve dared hope that you might help me make something of myself, sir.”

’Malkin was at first more astonished than angry at Trask’s confession, and then more relieved than astonished, as he realized that this affair did not, after all, concern Corson. He was not at all confident that he knew how to deal with Corson, but this young lackey of hers—or whoever he was—was another matter. Raw, hungry ambition was something ’Malkin understood thoroughly. Feeling in control of the situation, now, he seated himself again and gestured imperiously for Trask to serve him more wine. “You have, have you?” he said. “Come, explain yourself! Why do you come to me, why not to Corson?”

“Corson’s a lout, and content to remain so,” Trask said contemptuously, certain that this would please ’Malkin. “And I’m a lout,” he added, with a convincing show of desperate humility, “but I know I could learn better ways, sir, if you’d teach me. I thought, since you taught Corson to read, you might be willing to give me some lessons too....” He faltered and let his voice trail off uncertainly. Now to resort to flattery. “Corson says there’s nothing you don’t know, and Nyc thinks so highly of you—”

“How do you know that?” ’Malkin asked, before he could stop himself.

*I’ve got him*, thought Trask, who of course had no idea what Nyctasia thought of ’Malkin. “Oh, she tells Corson everything, and Corson tells us,” he said, thinking fast. “But I usually know Nyc’s mind about most things. She hasn’t much time for the likes of me when she’s at court, of course, but I see a good deal of her at the Hare.” Straying even further from the truth, he said offhandedly, “And then, I have the run of the Smugglers’ House, whenever she’s in residence there.”

’Malkin naturally was not taken in by such a web of half-truth, imposture and fabrication. If this mongrel’s whelp was an intimate confidant of the Rhaicime, then he, Desmalkin brenn Cerrogh, was King of Tierelon. But clearly Trask enjoyed *some* familiarity with Lady Nyctasia, and that was enough to interest ’Malkin. What was the Hare, what the Smugglers’ House, and why should Her Ladyship frequent them? Trask knew these things, and he also seemed to know their value to someone in ’Malkin’s position. Really, the little guttersnipe showed some sense. He might prove useful if properly handled ....

Dismissing Trask’s pretensions with the scorn they deserved, ’Malkin said, “If you were at all in the Rhaicime’s confidence, my downy chick, you’d know better than to say so. The first thing you’d better learn is to master your own tongue.”

“Yes, sir,” said Trask, in an abashed tone, hanging his head again. But his eyes shone in secret triumph. ’Malkin was going to be *very* useful to him ....

“Now what exactly is it you want from me?”

“I want to learn how—how to conduct myself at court,” Trask said eagerly. “How to read, how to talk, how to dress—everything! Nyc said she’d find a place for me if I learned those things.” Well, she had said something of the sort, though in jest. “I know she’d be pleased if you took me in hand, sir,” he went on, half believing it himself. Why shouldn’t she be pleased? “She wants me to learn, and she wants you to teach, doesn’t she? Corson told us that,” he added hastily, and with perfect truth. “I learn quickly, sir, and I’ll do whatever you say,” Trask promised, availing himself of his most appealing manner.

And Trask could be very appealing when he chose. He’d taken a great deal of trouble over his appearance before making his approach to ’Malkin. He’d ordered a hot bath for Corson, as soon as she was safely out of the way, and washed himself thoroughly, paying particular attention to his shaggy hair, and even remembering to clean his fingernails. He’d dressed in his best, the brown velvet doublet and the fine hose and shoes that he’d been given when he’d attended Corson’s investiture. They were the only clothes he’d ever had cut to his measure, and he’d taken very good care of them.

Then, borrowing Corson’s good silver hairbrush, he’d brushed and brushed his golden-brown hair till it glowed like dark honey in the candlelight.

“And I’d be so very grateful to you, sir ...” he told ’Malkin warmly.

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’Malkin was all Corson had said, and more, Trask thought with satisfaction. He was quite looking forward to his lessons. Nyctasia had warned him that the skills he desired would take a great deal of hard work, study, and practice to acquire, and since Trask was known for avoiding work as much as possible, she had confidently expected this to discourage his foolish aspirations. But she had underestimated the strength of his ambition. He’d been resigned to the necessity of a long, wearisome apprenticeship of sorts, and was prepared to endure any amount of drudgery to achieve his goal. But now he suspected that his tutelage at ’Malkin’s hands might prove to be anything but dull. One might even get to like ’Malkin, he thought, rather surprised at the idea.

He stretched contentedly, without opening his eyes, and nestled closer to ’Malkin, rubbing his cheek affectionately against ’Malkin’s shoulder like a cat. When he felt ’Malkin caress his hair, he smiled sleepily and mumbled, “Will you teach me how to make a bow, sir, please, before Nyc gets back? I want to show her I can do it right.”

’Malkin took hold of his ear and tweaked it hard. “First of all, *never* refer to Her Ladyship as ‘Nyc’! It’s simply not done. Such a thing is in the worst possible taste for anyone except her close kin.”

“But there’s no one here but us!” Trask protested, sitting up and rubbing his ear ruefully. “Where’s the harm?”

“That’s of no consequence,” ’Malkin said sternly. “It’s a question of breaking yourself of bad habits. If you allow yourself to speak carelessly in private, you’ll make mistakes in public.” He crooked his elbow around Trask’s neck and pulled him down to lie with his head on ’Malkin’s chest. “And don’t argue with me, puppy,” he added. “Why should I take the trouble to instruct you, if you don’t listen?”

“Yes, sir, I’ll remember,” said Trask, with a chuckle. “It’s just that everybody calls Her Ladyship ‘Nyc’ at the Hare. If I used court manners there, they’d stick my head in a bucket of slops.”

“Always remember where you are, and behave accordingly.”

Trask nodded against ’Malkin’s chest. “That’s what Nyc—I mean Lady Nyctasia—says. When she’s at the Hare, you’d never guess for a moment that she’s a lady, much less a Rhaicime.” He yawned, then turned his head and nuzzled the inside of ’Malkin’s elbow.

’Malkin pensively ran his knuckle along Trask’s jaw, thinking, *I’ll grow fond of this brat if I don’t take care.* “Now tell me about this Hare of yours,” he ordered.

## 14

“THAT’S ALL I CAN tell you about it, ’Ben,” Nyctasia said wearily. “Kastenid may still be in possession, or some other mage may have wrested the land and its power away from him. Perhaps he

can hold it without succumbing to the Yth's Influence, but I believe that it will finally destroy all who try to make it their own. You were spellcast by the Yth, as I nearly was myself, and I thought that if I stayed I might be able to reclaim your spirit, but I see now that I was deceiving myself. If I'd stayed, we would both have been lost. Even as I determined to win you from the Yth, I was already in its power. I told myself that I didn't want to leave without you, but the truth was that I didn't want to leave .... And I had been there for only a few days—you were subject to its Influence for so much longer," She sighed. "That was the last I saw of you, till last night."

"You saw me vanish," Erystalben brooded, "and I found myself alone on that same hillside, with no idea how I'd come to be there." He gazed within, at what was now his earliest memory. "Perhaps no time had passed at all, and I was there all the while, hidden from your sight by the spell."

"And I from yours?" The idea was somehow more chilling than his disappearance had been. "Surely I'd have known, if you were so near to me." Yet how could she have been aware of his presence, when the man she knew had ceased to exist at that moment?

Echoing her thought, he said, "Not I but Veron was near to you."

"It may be so, who can say? I performed a spell of Reflection while I was yet there and might draw upon the Yth's power, and it told me that you lived, but no more."

He nodded thoughtfully. "What did you do then?"

"I didn't know what to do. I was utterly at a loss. Corson took me south from Hlasven to Osela." She smiled, glad enough to turn the talk. "And before I knew quite what was happening, I was thrown in prison."

"Prison! Why, in the *vahn*'s name? I've thought I might be a criminal, but hardly you."

Nyctasia laughed. "That's a tale for another day. It's growing late, I'm tired, even if you aren't."

"I am," he admitted. "Though I've done nothing but rest the whole day."

"A night's sleep will set you right." She kissed him and said, "I'll leave you to your repose, then. Good night, love."

"But aren't you going to stay here? You slept by me last night."

She was surprised that he knew she'd been there. "Last night I was afraid to leave you alone, lest you take a turn for the worse before dawn. Tonight you don't need watching."

"Stay anyway," he urged, pulling her back to him. "Why not?"

"Because I want you to *sleep* tonight."

"You know very well there's nothing else I can do, with my arm too sore to be touched. And I'm half-asleep already from all the wine you've made me drink. Am I not to be trusted, even crippled and drunken?"

"No," said Nyctasia. "And perhaps I trust myself even less. But 'Ben, it's your arm I'm thinking of. I might jar it. You'd be more comfortable with the bed to yourself, no?"

"You don't take up much room, little one. You didn't disturb me last night." He touched the tip of her nose lightly, "You don't even snore."

Nyctasia suddenly giggled. "Greymantle does, though. But I'll make him sleep on the hearth tonight, where he belongs."

"Greymantle? Do you mean—?"

But before he could object, Nyctasia had already crossed the room and admitted the huge hound, who had been pacing the corridor for most of the day, gazing mournfully at the door. He bounded into the room and greeted Nyctasia as if she'd been missing for weeks, his wildly wagging tail and reproachful whines clearly expressing his delight at seeing her and his indignation at having been banished from his rightful place, on the night before.

"Poor fellow!" laughed Nyctasia, tugging his ears fondly. "I shut him out last night when you were restive and feverish. I didn't want you to wake and see him. Yes, poor Grey, then. Poor lad!"

"I'm not best pleased to see him now either," Erystalben pointed out. "Poor Grey indeed! That man-eating creature half-killed me, and you've more sympathy for him than for me."

Sitting on the edge of the bed again, Nyctasia put her arm around Erystalben and kissed him, "There, now he'll see that you're a friend. Come here to me, Grey. Give him your hand, 'Ben, so he'll know your

scent.”

“I’ve already given the brute one of my hands! I’ve only the one left!”

“Idiot!” said Nyctasia, kissing him again. She effected the introduction, despite the mutual suspicions of the two, and ordered, “Now lie down and be still, Grey.” Turning to Erystalben, she said, “And you’re to do the same. Shall I really stay here tonight, ’Ben?”

“Stay,” he said. “I want to see you there when I wake.” (*I want you to keep me from dreaming of the Yth!*)

Though he smiled, Nyctasia thought she saw fear shadowing his eyes. Perhaps he still needed watching after all.

\* \* \*

This time the reflection seized him by the throat as he leaned over the water. It drew him under, drowned him, then climbed from the pool and stood at the edge, looking down at him with a smile. Staring up through the clear water, he could see it laughing, but no sound penetrated to the depths where he drifted helplessly, as cold and lifeless as an empty shell. Then it merely turned and walked off, out of his sight, leaving him there to take its place forever. Above the pool there was nothing to be seen but the colorless leaden sky.

“Ben? ’Ben, what is it? You cried out—”

He lay shivering and gasping for breath, unable to answer, while she drew back the bedcurtains to let in the early morning light. When he could see her, he grew calmer and managed to say, “It’s—it’s only dreams ... sometimes, I ...” He shuddered again, and Nyctasia folded the blanket more tightly about him and lay close beside him, with her arm across his chest. Her breath was warm and comforting against his throat. “I’m all right now,” he told her shakily. “Tasia, you’ve been to Yth Wood—is it always twilight there, never day or night?” He used the old word *lirihran*, that means “half-darkness,” rather than “half-light.”

“Yes. It’s always the same there. There’s no change to mark the hours. Have you remembered something about it?”

He heard the anxiety in her voice and answered only, “I don’t know. I was dreaming of it, but dreams aren’t memories.” There was no need to burden her with his dread nightmares. “Let’s leave for Rhostshyl today,” he said. “I’m well enough to travel now.” If he could recover his past there, surely the maddening dreams would cease.

“Today?” Nyctasia said doubtfully. “That wouldn’t be wise, I’m afraid. You’ve not even been on your feet yet. I meant to send a messenger ahead, first, to arrange for our lodgings on the way. We can skirt Rhostshyl Wood and stay one night in Fenshelm, then the next in Salten. It will take us longer, but the road’s an easier ride than the woods, and you’d find it hard to sleep on the ground with that arm still so painful.”

And she had hoped to spend a few peaceful days alone with him here by the healing sea, before returning to her duties in Rhostshyl, and returning Erystalben to his family. But he sounded so distraught that she offered, “We could ride along the coast road this morning, if you like, and see how you fare. If that tires you, we’ll come back here, and if not, we could go on to Fenshelm.”

He wanted to set out at once, without waiting to make preparations. He wanted to ride straight through Rhostshyl Wood by the shortest route, and travel all night without making camp, without stopping for rest or sleep until they reached the gates of Rhostshyl. But he knew that was nonsense, of course. She was clearly right. “Yes, very well, let’s do that,” he said, and tried to smile at her.

“We’ll ride for Rhostshyl soon, if not today,” Nyctasia promised.

But as Nyctasia had anticipated, he found it no easy matter to ride a strange horse while his right arm was bound in a sling. He soon tired and was willing enough to turn back before the morning was out. By daylight, the memory of his sinister dreams was not as racking, and the Smugglers’ House was a welcome sight. Its tall stone walls seemed part of the surrounding cliffs, as if it had always stood there and would stand there forever. It was good to return to a familiar place. “A handsome house,” he said.

“I’ve always thought so,” Nyctasia agreed. “From the first time I saw it, I wanted to live there. When

I heard that the property was abandoned, I determined at once to have it. As soon as I came of age, I sent agents to purchase it from the City Governors. I told my elders that our court physicians had recommended me to take the sea air—as indeed they had—but my reasons for buying the house were quite different. Not the least of them,” she added, almost shyly, “was that you and I might have a place to be together, without interference from our kin.”

“Then I’ve been here before?” he asked, dismayed. If a place he’d known in the past was to spur his memory, why had this place not done so?

“Not often,” Nyctasia assured him. “We hoped to spend a good deal of time here, but there was always something to prevent us. We did explore it together when I first bought it, and we found the smugglers’ tunnel beneath the cellars.” She laughed. “We rather hoped for a few chests of forgotten booty, but all we got for our trouble were some nasty cuts and bruises. It was glorious fun!”

“Show it to me,” he suggested, hoping that the sight would bring back some trace of remembrance, but Nyctasia shook her head.

“You’d need two hands to clamber about down there, for climbing and hanging on and feeling your way. I’ll show you over the rest of the house, if you like, but there’s not much to see.”

Nevertheless, after a midday meal, she led him through the house, beginning with the trapdoor beneath the cellar stairs. Raising a flagstone, she leaned it against the wall and lowered her lantern into the opening, to show him the passageway below. “We left that ladder there, you and I. When we first discovered this hole—it was you, actually, who found it—there was no way down save to jump. You dropped down first, then caught me, which was all very well, but when it came time to get ourselves back up, you could lift me through the opening, but I wasn’t strong enough to pull you back up. You were trapped down there for some time before I could find a rope to throw you. I tied it to that sconce.”

Erystalben looked from the wall to the trapdoor, then down into the underground chamber. He could envision himself and Nyctasia climbing over the edge, laughing and scrambling and scolding each other, but the scene was the fruit of his imagination, not of his memory. Nothing he saw recalled the adventure to his mind. “That’s your notion of glorious fun, is it?” he said finally, trying to sound amused. “Leaving me stranded in a pit! I hope we didn’t have too much fun of that sort.”

Nyctasia was not deceived by his tone. “Oh, very well,” she said, “I won’t do it again. Let’s go on now, it’s cold down here.”

From the cellars they made their way up from floor to floor, stopping in this room or that as Nyctasia related something that the two of them had done or found there. None of it was in the least familiar to him. By the time they reached the topmost story, he was deeply discouraged and growing tired as well. But he had never known this place well, after all, he told himself. It might be different in Rhostshyl, where he’d spent most of his life .... “What secrets are in there?” he asked idly, as Nyctasia passed by a door without opening it.

To his surprise, she colored and looked uneasy. “Nothing now,” she said, with a slight hesitation. “It’s only another empty room, but it’s locked. I don’t like anyone to use it, because my cousin Thierran died there.”

“But didn’t you say that you never brought anyone here but me?”

Nyctasia led the way down the stairs, and he couldn’t see her face as she replied, but her voice was level, betraying no emotion. “I didn’t bring Thierran, he brought me—against my will. He tried to keep me from running away from Rhostshyl to follow you. I was betrothed to him, you see.”

Erystalben felt an unreasoning stab of jealousy. “Small wonder he objected to your leaving, then. But how did he die?”

“Corson killed him,” she said flatly. “She cut his throat.”

“I might have guessed as much. I only wonder that she hasn’t yet cut mine.”

“Ben, she was my bodyguard. She thought he meant to kill me.”

“Are you sure it’s not just that she takes a murderous dislike to any man who comes near you?”

“Quite sure.”

“I’m not so sure. If this cousin of yours was so anxious to keep you, why should he want to kill you?”

“He didn’t want to ... but he might have, in the end. He was truly mad by then. You may as well

know that the Edonaris are famed for their lunacy.”

“Of course, if he’d been in his right mind, he’d have tried to kill me, not you.”

“Oh, but he did try to kill you. That’s when I repudiated the betrothal.” They had reached the landing, and she turned to face him, with a sad smile. “Poor Thorn—he and I were inseparable until I met you. When we were children, and I was always so ill, he was my only companion, aside from my nurses and attendants. My mother didn’t want to remember that she’d produced such a sickly weakling child—and I don’t think my father *did* remember. My brother was kind, but he was older than I and hadn’t much time for me. I could rarely leave my bedchamber, you see, but Thorn used to visit me often and bring me things from outside. Flowers and feathers and stones ... an antler shed by a young buck ... I thought that was the loveliest thing I’d ever seen. I have it still. I had plenty of jewels, and trinkets of silver and gold, but I treasured most the things Thierran brought me. Sometimes I’d sing for him, or read him stories. He liked tales of heroes and adventures best, ... He was always my champion. When I grew well, he taught me to ride, to hunt—and later, when the others called me traitor, he defended me. Oh, ’Ben, he even fought a duel for me once, because someone said I practiced black magic. I was furious with him when I heard of that, but I was proud too.”

“You did love him, then,” he said gently.

Nyctasia nodded, fighting tears. “We weren’t well suited, in truth, but we were too young to realize that. And I’d never met anyone better suited to me—”

“Until I took you to look at the stars.” He put his left arm around her, and they sat on a windowseat on the landing, with the sea at their backs. “But you weren’t to blame for that, ’Tasia.”

“No one was to blame,” she sighed. “He simply couldn’t accept that *I* might prefer anyone else to him. How could he? He would never have done that to me.”

Thierran had been brought to see her, when they were children, because it was fitting for them to know one another. They were to be married if Nyctasia, contrary to all expectations, should live to come of age. One could not begin too early to teach the young their duty.

He’d come reluctantly at first, rather scared of the white, frail child with her thin, peaked face and fever-bright eyes. She was said to be dying, too, though he was not supposed to know that. But Nyctasia had been so glad of his company, so eager to please him, that he had soon fallen under her spell. She listened with flattering attention to his doings and his opinions, much impressed that he should learn to ride or to fly a hawk, since she could not do such things herself. It was pleasant to be admired, even by his pitiable little cousin, and she charmed him with her secrets and fancies as well, making him her confidant and cavalier. She could do little but read, and she told him the stories and legends she found in her books—and the still-stranger tales from her fevered dreams of a far-off land beyond the mirror. There she met her twin, she grew strong and climbed mountains, she braved the sun and the snow to do heroic deeds. There, demon-haunted passages beneath the earth led her to enchanted treasures and mortal perils. Thorn, who had a twin himself, agreed that ’Tasia too should have one. He liked nothing better than fetching her volumes from the library and listening to her read spells and stories, and the chronicles of the Edonaris of old, their forebears, defenders of Rhostshyl, warriors, enchanters, lawgivers. Among them were other Thierrans and Nyctasias, and many pairs of twins.

When she felt strong enough, she would play her small lap-harp for him and sing the old ballads she’d read, to any tune that fit them. Or they might play at casting spells from the worn, worm-eaten books with strange scripts and unfamiliar words. Thierran would willingly scour the fields and hillsides for hours, seeking the particular plant whose picture Nyctasia showed him in an old herbal. She meant to brew a potion, she said, to make her well, or to make him invincible in battle, or to make them both understand the languages of birds and beasts. And though it was a game, both felt that it might just work, someday ...

When Nyctasia’s health began to improve, they were together more than ever, indoors and out, and as she grew stronger he was eager to share with her the world she knew so little. It was delightful to be able to show off for her, and to help teach her to ride, to hunt, to fence, to dance—for she had always been the teacher before. Even when her skill with a bow surpassed his own, he did not mind overmuch. She was his pupil, his betrothed, and her success did him credit. He was proud of her.

Their elders viewed these developments with satisfaction. It had seemed for a time that Nyctasia might make Thierran as dreamy as herself, but if he took her in hand and made an Edonaris of her, all would be well. The pair did get into mischief, betimes, but high spirits were to be expected in youth, and were to be preferred to too much meditation and melancholy. Perhaps an early marriage would be best for them, in a few years' time.

Nyctasia was responsible for their transgressions. Released from her years of confinement, she was afire to go everywhere, to experience everything she had only been able to imagine for so long. She persuaded Thierran to take her to other parts of the city, places they were strictly forbidden to visit.

"They lecture us on our responsibilities as future rulers of Rhostshyl," she complained, "but they don't let us learn what our people's lives are like. We must know the whole city, not just our own corner of it."

Disguised as beggar-children, they explored the back streets and markets, the poor cookshops and taverns of the city, fascinated by the different districts, each a city in itself, within the walls of Rhostshyl. Sometimes Nyctasia took along her harp and posed as a minstrel-lass, earning pennies or perhaps a meal of cheap sausages, which they thought delicious, and which generally made them ill.

When they were caught, Nyctasia was quick to admit that she had been the instigator, but Thierran was the one blamed, the one who should have known better. Yet despite reproaches and the risk of punishment, he could never refuse Nyctasia when she next proposed some forbidden venture. Suppose she should think him less daring than herself? He could bear to lose his elders' approval, but not Nyctasia's admiration.

Their family was indulgent of their escapades for the most part, however. They were reprimanded, not so much for disobedience as for repeating the vulgar oaths they'd heard in the streets, or for pronouncing Rhostshyl "Rozchiil" as the common people did. But they would outgrow such childish behavior in time. The boy understood his duty. He was a good influence on Nyctasia, drawing her away from the library and her Vahnite notions. There was no need to keep them on too short a rein.

But Nyctasia did not by any means abandon her studies. She enjoyed her new doings, and took pride in mastering the fitting accomplishments for a lady—though lessons in deportment and etiquette bored her—but the Discipline claimed her as well. She was fully convinced that it had saved her life, and her studies had remained serious and demanding since then, no longer an amusement for her or an entertainment for Thierran. He listened patiently enough to her excited explanations of Vahnite philosophy, but she soon saw that her discoveries did not interest him. But to his relief, she did not think the less of him for that. She only said solemnly, "It is written, 'What is right for one is not so for another.'" And for his part, Thierran, though he could not share her passion for such dull labors, nevertheless took pleasure in defending her to the others—even taking her part against his own twin brother—and receiving her gratitude for his loyalty. "Tasia was different, special, clever, he insisted. If she was to be a scholar, a healer, that was to her credit.

And she was always glad to see him, still. She'd lay aside her books to listen to him, to sympathize with his concerns, to join him for hawking or riding. She sought him out whenever she was lonely. They grew more devoted to one another than ever, even as they were growing ever further apart.

"And so he persuaded himself that you had cast an enchantment over me. He knew that you were a student of magic, and he preferred to believe that I was under a love-spell than to believe that I would betray him. If I were bewitched, it would be his duty to rescue me from your evil influence at any cost." Nyctasia rested her head on Erystalben's shoulder and said wearily, "People will not believe that there's no such thing as a love-philtre, no matter what one says."

Erystalben kissed her temple. "I am astounded by the depths of my jealousy," he said. "I don't remember this first love of yours, but I despise him nevertheless. If he weren't dead, I'd take pleasure in killing him myself."

"I never could make you understand my feelings for Thierran, any more than I could make him understand about you."

"That's because I understood his feelings for you, and he mine. I've known you only since yesterday, 'Tasia, but I want you to think of no one but me. And I know just how to accomplish that, without the aid of spells."



Nyctasia sat up and regarded him with a challenging air, one eyebrow lifted. “And how is that, pray?” He grinned. “Simply by confessing that I’m thoroughly exhausted.”

Nyctasia was on her feet at once. “For someone who only met me yesterday, you know me remarkably well,” she admitted. “Come along—back to bed with you straightway.”

“I don’t need more sleep, I’ve had sleep enough for a legion. I just want a bit of rest.”

“No matter. It’s time I had another look at your arm, so you’ll have to lie down, like it or not as you choose.”

“My arm feels fine, so long as I don’t disturb it.”

“That’s well, but I’m going to change the dressing anyway, so you may as well save your breath.”

“And to think I’ve been wondering how such a mild, sweet maid could be ruler of a city!” Erystalben complained, well pleased with his success at making her forget her lost love. Seeing that it pained her to speak of him, he had determined to distract her. Not only was he grieved at her distress, but it grieved him all the more to see how much she still cared for Lord Thierran. A dead rival could sometimes be the most difficult to defeat.

He hissed with pain as Nyctasia carefully removed the bandages and examined his torn flesh. Satisfied that it was healing cleanly, she spread a grayish ointment on a clean piece of soft cloth and laid it over the wound, then bound fresh bandages around his arm. “Sorry, love. I tried to be quick.”

“You do it well,” he said reassuringly. And it was true, she had a deft, expert touch with the materials. “You could be a physician.”

“I don’t believe I could, not truly, though I’d like to learn. From the first, I studied texts of healing above all else, but I was seeking a way to cure myself, not others—and perhaps I still am. A true healer ought to be selfless.”

“And have you known many who were so?”

“Well, no, not many,” laughed Nyctasia. “There’s something in that.” She leaned down to kiss him and said, “You stay right there for now. This is the last of my unguent of mendersleaf. I’ll fetch more from an apothecary in Chiestelm while you’re resting. I’ll be back by dark, I should think.”

“Why not send someone for it?”

“The herbalist’s an old friend of mine. I want to have a good gossip with her. She’d like to know that you’ve come home.” And Maegor wouldn’t give Elixir of Painshade to a messenger, but Nyctasia said nothing of that yet.

“Do I know her?”

“You’ve met her, but you don’t know her well,” Nyctasia said evasively. The two had not taken to one another, in fact. “I’ll give her your regards, shall I? And don’t stir from that bed until I’m back, you mark me!”

From long habit, Maegor did not greet Nyctasia by name before her other customers. She merely chided, “Must you bring that monstrous hound of yours in here? There’s scarce room enough as it is. Take him out back at once, and don’t let him dig up my herb beds!” No listener would have supposed that the Rhaicime of Rhostshyl was being addressed in such a way.

“Yes, Maeg,” Nyctasia said tamely. “Come, Grey.” She led him out through the storeroom, pausing to steal a handful of currants from the bin.

Only when she’d rid the shop of everyone else did Maegor join Nyctasia in the kitchen garden. Greymantle, recognizing her scent as that of someone who’d often given him nice meaty soupbones, fawned on her shamelessly until she shooed them both into the kitchen. “I might as well give you a meal too, ’Tasia. You look as if you haven’t eaten in a fortnight, as always, and I see you’ve been into the currants already.”

“No one ever lets me have sweets enough,” Nyctasia lamented. “I don’t need a meal, Maeg. I’ve come for some Painshade.”

Maegor frowned. “Again? If you’re still troubled by sleeplessness—”

“It’s not for me, it’s for ’Ben,” Nyctasia said with a smile. “He’s come back.”

“Oh, ’Tasia, I’m glad for you! But—why does he need Painshade? Is he ill?”

Nyctasia related what little she knew of Lord Erystalben's plight, including his mishap with Greymantle. "I'm not sure what to make of these dreams of his," she concluded. "He's not said much, but I don't like the look of it."

"A spell of Perilous Threshold ..." Maegor mused. "He was fortunate to lose no more than his memory. Still, he's to be pitied. It's a hard welcome, to find you at last, only to be attacked by your dog, and then to learn that you're about to be married to someone else."

"In the *vahn*'s name, how do such rumors get about? I haven't even *met* Aithrenn of Ochram, much less agreed to a marriage-treaty. But the matter seems to have been settled without me. Even here in Chiasm it's common knowledge! I suppose there's nothing for me to do but consent, since it's plain that everyone on the coast approves."

"Erystalben won't approve."

"He wouldn't have liked it before, but now, I'm not sure. He's changed, Maeg. It's as if ... well, do you remember the divination I nearly always used to receive when I cast the lots?"

Maegor nodded. "The number fourteen.

*To thee hath fallen the fourteenth lot:*

*To have thy desire, yet have it not.'*

The most ambiguous of the answers."

"Yes, and the two texts closely agree on the augury for fourteen, though they differ for most numbers.

The Celys Oracle says:

*'Thou hast cast the lot Fourteen.*

*Now good and ill thou liest between.*

*Thy wish the fates will not fulfill,*

*Yet in a manner, so they will.'*

I always favored the interpretation that one may win one's heart's desire, and then discover that one no longer desires it. But since I lost 'Ben, my desire has been for his return, and now I have him back—and yet I don't. He doesn't know me, and I hardly feel that I know him."

"But you care for him still?"

"*Vahn*, yes! As much as ever. Isn't that strange?"

"No, not so very strange. Perhaps you never really knew him."

"Maeg, I know you thought 'Ben proud and cold, but—"

"Never mind, 'Tasia. Certainly you knew him better than I. But sometimes the ones we love best are those we know least. That is no secret." She stood and lightly caressed Nyctasia's cheek. "I'll give you the Painshade, if you insist, but are you sure that he must have it?"

"No, not altogether, but there's none at the Smugglers' House, and I want to have some at hand, in case he should need it while we're there."

"Very well, but don't give it to him unless it's necessary. It's not to be trifled with."

"I know. I'll be careful, though it's never done me any harm."

"You haven't lost quantities of blood—or your memory—recently. And even so, because it's never harmed you before, don't suppose that it never will. You oughtn't to take it any oftener than you can help."

"I don't, Maeg, honestly. And I mix it very weak."

"That's of no consequence. You're so small and slight that a weak draught affects you as a powerful one affects others. Once in a great while, it won't hurt you, but taken any oftener it could be dangerous."

"Well, don't worry, Maeg," said Nyctasia, with a sudden wicked grin. "Perhaps 'Ben won't need it, and once he's healed and has his strength back, I expect I'll have much less trouble sleeping at night!"

But the following night, he woke again, shivering and groaning in terror, as Nyctasia bent over him, softly calling his name. He clutched at her desperately with his good hand, so hard that he hurt her arm, but she only stroked his face and said, "You're all right now, 'Ben. You're here with me."

Again, he had been walking aimlessly through the Forest, listening to the whispers and the distant singing, when a grey bird lit on his shoulder and stole one of his golden earrings. He'd followed it frantically, knowing the danger of letting the Yth keep anything of his, but the bird had led him on, flitting

always out of his reach. It would alight for a moment, then take wing just as his hands were about to close upon it, drawing him ever farther into the depths of the Forest. Finally it swooped low over a pool to drink, and let the earring fall, then flew off into the trees with a liquid trill of song.

When he leaned over the pool to retrieve the earring, he saw his reflection appear, with its one earring on the opposite side from the one he still wore, but the face seemed to smile at him, though he was not smiling himself. It was but a trick of the moving lights and shadows on the water, he thought, yet it frightened him nevertheless, for no reason that he could call to mind. The image shattered and melted away as he reached into the pool, groping for the gleam of gold at the bottom. But what his fingers felt, half buried in the soft silt, was the features of a human face.

Snatching back his arm in horror, he stared down into the pool, but saw only his reflection re-forming as the water grew still again. But now it wore two earrings, and it grinned at him in triumph.

Somehow this nightmare had left him more terror-stricken than all the others, and this time he told Nyctasia everything that he had dreamt from the first. "Could a—a creature of the Yth take on the form and flesh of a human being?" he asked her afterward.

"Yes ..." Nyctasia said uneasily, "but it couldn't leave the Forest, 'Ben. Nothing of Yth-kind will set foot outside the Forest. They believe it would be their death."

"But suppose it no longer knew itself for an Ythling? What then?"

"No, no, put such mad fancies out of your head, love. Such a thing cannot happen, in very truth. It's only the old ballad you're dreaming of, the song of the demon bridegroom—"

He shook his head. "I know no song like that."

"You do, 'Ben, I've sung it for you many times. You may not remember it while you wake, but you know it still, for you've dreamt it from first to last. The true groom is lured away by the spell-song and taken by the Forest, and a demon-creature returns in his place. But it's only a song. Nothing of the sort has happened to you, I promise you! It's as I told you, 'Ben—no Ythling ever shed such human blood as you did!"

She couldn't see his face in the darkness, but she felt him relax a little, and heard his breathing grow calmer. She believed all that she had told him, but she wished she were as absolutely certain as she'd pretended to be. What disturbed her was not the unlikely idea that he might be some inhuman creature spawned by magic, but the realization that she didn't care what he was, as long as he was hers again. "It's the spell of Perilous Threshold that's made you a stranger to yourself," she said confidently. "But you're not a stranger to me, believe me."

"I believe you," he answered flatly, "but I want to leave for Rhostshyl today, do you understand?"

"You're right, I think. We'll go," Nyctasia promised. "I've made arrangements, we can set out whenever we choose."

It might be wiser to wait until his arm was further healed, but his peace of mind was worth the risk of an uncomfortable journey. And even if Rhostshyl failed to fulfill his hopes, still Nyctasia had begun to suspect that he might be better off anywhere than at the haunted Smugglers' House.

## 15

NYCTASIA WAS RATHER alarmed to be met on the road to Salten not only by Corson but by Lord Therisain and an escort of guard as well. Since she and Erystalben were traveling slowly, she had sent a messenger ahead to inform a few of her trusted allies of her coming, but this had been a mere courtesy on her part. She had not expected a retinue to accompany her on her return to the city. She had guards enough from the Smugglers' House in attendance.

They had evidently been watching for her approach, for they galloped to meet her, causing her escort to surround her with swords drawn, until she recognized Corson in the lead. "What is it?" she called, as they drew near. "Is something wrong?"

Lord Therisain greeted her coldly. "Was this necessary, Nyctasia?" he demanded.

Thinking that he referred to her sudden disappearance from Rhostshyl, Nyctasia replied, "It seemed so to me. If the city cannot survive a few days without me, it is in a poor way indeed. Has something

happened in my absence? Is Tiambria all right?"

"There, now do you see?" Corson broke in impatiently. "I told you she knew nothing about it. Nyc, Tiambria's fine, it's the Lady Lhejadis—she's been poisoned, and everyone thinks you were responsible."

"What else are we to think, when you vanished on the very morning Lhejadis was stricken?" Therisain asked in an angry whisper, drawing Nyctasia apart from the rest. "Are you completely mad, 'Tasia? This was the worst possible thing to do at this time!"

"Jade?" said Nyctasia, still bewildered. "Oh, *vahn*, no! Don't talk nonsense. Therisain. I'd no reason to poison her."

He had not actually expected her to deny it—not to him. "Who else had a reason? She maligned you openly, everyone knows that."

"All the more reason for me to spare her! I'd only confirm her slanders if I silenced her. My best defense was to let her be."

"Eh—but that's what I hoped to make you see," Therisain said uncertainly. "That's why I came to fetch you. If you make haste you might be in time to save her."

"What! Do you mean that she's still alive?"

"She was this morning, but the physicians haven't much hope for her. If you—"

"Why didn't you say so at once, man, in the *vahn*'s name? There's not a moment to lose!" Wheeling her horse around, she trotted back to Erystalben and leaned from the saddle to kiss him quickly. "I'm sorry, love, I can't wait for you. I must get to the city without delay. Stay in Salten tonight as we planned and rest that arm—promise me!"

"All right, but what—"

"I've no time—don't worry—I'll see you soon, Therisain, you remember Erystalben ar'n Shiastred. He doesn't remember you, but he'll explain that. See that he reaches his people. Corson, you'll come with me—?" Without waiting for anyone to reply, she spurred her horse to a gallop and was soon riding as fast as she dared through the village, with Corson close behind her and Greymantle racing at her side.

Nyctasia had sent word only that she was coming, not where she had been, but Corson was not much surprised to see that Lord Erystalben was with her. Little could surprise Corson anymore, where Nyctasia and her affairs were concerned. When they stopped to water their horses at a farmhouse, she only asked, "It is him, isn't it?"

She thought Nyctasia hesitated for a moment before answering, "Yes. Oh, yes, it's 'Ben."

"I was afraid of that."

Nyctasia sent her a sidelong glance. "He suspects that you want to kill any man who takes an interest in me."

"Rutting insolent jackass!" Corson blustered, her face flushing. "He's welcome to you—and you to him! The pair of you deserve each other." Determined to change the subject, she asked, "How did you know Lord Collarbone was at the Smugglers' House in the first place?"

"I didn't know. I went there to look for myself, and found him."

Corson didn't ask her to explain this cryptic remark. In her experience, Nyctasia's explanations generally created as much mystery as they dispelled, "Well, why's his arm in a sling? He was all right when I left him."

"Greymantle misunderstood his intentions toward me. I was so shocked to see him there that I all but swooned, and when 'Ben tried to catch me, Grey attacked him."

Hearing his name, the dog trotted over to them, wagging his tail and still panting from his long run. Corson patted him. "Good lad. Grey! I couldn't have done better myself."

"You needn't gloat, Corson, He nearly bled to death."

"I came to warn you he was there—it's your fault if you go haring off like that without letting me know."

And if Jade dies that will be my fault too, Nyctasia thought grimly. If I'd let Therisain know where to find me, he could have fetched me back sooner to save her. And now he thinks I don't trust him. That probably vexes him more than the belief that I'd poison Jade. I must show him some sign of my faith and

favor soon. It won't do to occupy myself so with reconciling my enemies that I forget my friends.

It was just to get away from such concerns that she'd gone to the house by the sea, and she still believed that she'd been right to do so. But perhaps she'd had no right to be so secretive, after all. Did the Principles not say, "The only one who is free is the one who has no heart"?

"You're right, of course," she said to Corson. "I won't do it again, I promise you." In spite of everything, she could still surprise Corson from time to time.

Though Nyctasia had been suspected of poisoning the Lady Mhairestri, the accusation had never been widely believed. The matriarch had been so advanced in years, and her health so uncertain, that folk were ready enough to accept her death as the course of nature. But Lhejadis, who was young and strong, would be another matter. Her death would not only look like Nyctasia's work, but would seem to confirm the rumors about Mhairestri's murder as well. Lhejadis was the perfect target for those who wished to discredit Nyctasia.

"Why didn't I foresee this and warn her?" Nyctasia reproached herself. "I sent the children away, to protect them—thank the *vahn*!—but Jade was always in greater danger than they." As Erikasten had argued, Mhairestri's followers wanted to see Leirven and Deirdras take their places among Rhostshyl's rulers. But Lhejadis was of no great value to them. To check Nyctasia's power would be well worth the sacrifice of a pawn like Jade.

"But she'd never have believed a warning from me," Nyctasia thought. "And if I'd tried to send her away, she'd have refused to go." Lhejadis was not a child, nor a commoner like Rehal, nor was she Nyctasia's ward, like Erikasten. She was of age and might do as she pleased, and if Nyctasia had forced her into exile, it would have been said that she'd been murdered. But now that would be said anyway, and with better reason! It seemed that any action or failure to act would have endangered either Lhejadis or Nyctasia herself.

"I should have protected Jade somehow, in spite of herself," Nyctasia brooded. "I never gave a moment's thought to her safety. Yet how could I have protected her save by dying myself? If I'd died as a child, Jade wouldn't be dying now, and Mescrisdan and Thierran would still be alive. Jade would be Rhaicime, and Mescrisdan's wife instead of his widow. The family would have found a wife for Thorn by now—some girl he scarcely knew, who'd not have come between him and Mescrisdan as I did." Yes, she'd have had to die to save them. Jade had felt cheated of her title, but that alone would not have destroyed her. It was Mescrisdan's jealousy that had doomed them both.

While Nyctasia had been a bedridden invalid, Mescrisdan had not resented his brother's partiality for her, or the time he spent with her. It was Thorn's duty, Nyctasia was his betrothed. He himself was expected to pass time in the company of his cousin Jade, whom he would one day marry, and he, like Thorn, had been taught his duty to his House. And 'Tasia was weak and sickly and lonely—Thorn felt sorry for her, anyone could understand that. She would probably not live many years longer anyway, though he had learned not to say so before his brother.

Sometimes he even went with Thorn to visit her, and she always welcomed him warmly. It was pleasant, on a rainy day, to listen to 'Tasia's songs and stories, to look at the books on falconry or history, with their colorful, detailed pictures. Combing the woods for wormbane or stormcloud mushrooms was a game the brothers could share. And 'Tasia could always tell them apart at a glance, which gratified them both.

But when she'd emerged from her seclusion, everything had changed, leaving Mescrisdan alone and embittered. At first the physicians had allowed her to be carried out to the gardens where she might sit on the terrace, swathed in shawls, to take the sun. But in time she'd begun to walk along the garden paths, with Thorn beside her feeling very important and responsible, because he'd been told not to let her tire herself. Then before long she was running, slowly gaining strength in limbs long unused to any exertion. And each day it seemed she ran a little farther, and Thorn with her, farther away from his twin.

The stronger Nyctasia grew, the less Thorn cared for anything or anyone else. 'Tasia must be taught to ride, to shoot a bow, to fence. She only knew how to play the harp and write like a scribe—she had years of lessons to make up for! She must learn to dance, to hunt. When Thorn wasn't taking her to ride to hounds, or practicing fencing moves with her, or sneaking off with her to go somewhere forbidden, he

was boasting about her or making plans for her. Mescrisdan was soon heartily sick of the sight of her, and of the very sound of her name. If he accompanied them on one of their outings, Thorn hardly seemed to know he was there. If he suggested to Thorn that they go hawking or riding, that they visit the market square, he always wanted to bring Tasia along. It was hurtful, it was unfair—these were the things he and Thorn had always done together.

Mescrisdan was too young to be sent on a diplomatic mission, as Nyctasia was later to do with Erikasten, and he received little sympathy from his elders for his resentment and discontent. It was quite proper for Thierran to be taken up with Nyctasia, he was told—but two could play at that game. He too had an affianced. From loneliness and spite he turned to Lhejadis, and in her he found an unexpected ally, for she had her own grievances against Nyctasia. She was too well bred to admit, even to herself, that she was disappointed by Nyctasia's recovery, which would deprive her of the rank of Rhaicime, but she soon found other grounds for her dislike. Nyctasia was conceited, Jade complained to Mescrisdan. She gave herself airs. She prided herself on her singing and boasted of her learning. She thought herself cleverer than her cousins, and disdained to join in their games. She was only a scrawny, whey-faced little brat, after all. To all of which Mescrisdan readily assented. Already, unwittingly, Nyctasia had made enemies.

Mescrisdan sought out Lhejadis's company more often, and her evident pleasure at his attentions soothed his wounded feelings. Indeed, consoled by one another, the two might well have outgrown their childish jealousies in time, but within a few years Nyctasia had made more powerful enemies among her kin, and their disapproval of her fanned the embers of Mescrisdan's and Lhejadis's rancor. By siding against Nyctasia over the question of the sovereignty of the Edonaris, they won the favor of the Lady Mhairestri and her faction. They willingly joined in the conspiracy against her, which cost Mescrisdan his life, and with his death Lhejadis's resentment of Nyctasia had grown to a seasoned, unrelenting hatred, the hatred that had proved her undoing.

"The *vahn* knows I never meant her harm," Nyctasia said to herself, "but she lost title and husband because of me. She mustn't lose her life as well!" Curse them, they had chosen their time to strike well, when she was not there to work a spell of healing! But she would spare no effort to save Jade, she determined, if it was not already too late.

When she arrived at the palace of the Edonaris, she ran straight to Lhejadis's chamber, ignoring everyone, courtiers and kin alike, who tried to report various matters of urgent concern to her. A petition of redress required her attention. Certain distinguished scholars had arrived from the east. Lord Aithrenn was in the city. Emissaries from Heithskor awaited an audience with her. "I've no time for that!" she snapped. "Corson, see that I'm not disturbed!" She admitted no one but the court physicians, and then, having consulted with them, dismissed them as well.

"Don't let anyone but them near me," she instructed Corson. "Only you and they are to watch over me—and Grey mantle, of course."

"You mean to do one of those healing-trances of yours, eh?" Corson said with a frown. They always left Nyctasia weak and exhausted, sometimes dangerously so.

"There's nothing else to be done, I'm afraid. The physicians are right, it's bloodbane poisoning, there can be no doubt." She lifted Lhejadis's limp hand and showed Corson the grayish tinge at the base of her fingernails. "It's a silver-poison—the same that killed Mhairestri. They've not neglected any detail that might bear witness to my guilt, the swine! Still, it's to my advantage that bloodbane's a slow-working poison."

"Slow? It killed the matriarch quickly enough."

"Yes, but she was old and ill. Jade's in her prime. That's why she's living yet. I commend the physicians—what can be done they've done, but that doesn't amount to a great deal. Only spell-healing can turn the tide now. You didn't object to it when I did it for you, as I recall."

"I was in no condition to object to anything! Besides, that was different. I wouldn't have been dying if not for you and your rutting poisoned earrings."

"And Jade wouldn't be dying if not for me," Nyctasia said sadly, "though I no more poisoned her than I did you. That's why I must do the same for her."

“That’s no reason. It’s one thing to risk your life for a friend, and another thing to do it for an enemy.”

“So it is,” agreed Nyctasia, “for the first risk is undertaken for one’s own sake, and the second for the sake of another. Is not the latter the nobler deed, then?” As she spoke, she never turned her gaze from the still, waxen form of Lhejadis, and Corson could sense that already she was withdrawing from the world of the living, to seek the world of the dying.

At no time in her life had Nyctasia more wanted to live than she did now. Her plans for the city seemed daily nearer to being fulfilled, and new possibilities had presented themselves, beyond what she had imagined when she’d first returned to her homeland. And now Erystalben had returned as well ....

But Lhejadis’s death would jeopardize her position, and with it all her hopes for Rhostshyl’s future. And she owed Jade this chance, surety, whatever the danger. She would take what precautions she could, but her duty in this matter was manifest.

“If I’ve not come to myself by morning, separate us, and summon the physicians to me,” she said to Corson.

“And suppose they can’t rouse you, what then?”

“That will depend,” Nyctasia said distantly, “on what happens to Jade.” She sat on the bed beside Lhejadis and began to pull off one of her own boots. But then, unexpectedly, she chuckled and instead held out her foot imperiously to Corson.

In reply, Corson made an unladylike gesture with which Nyctasia was not familiar, though it was not difficult to interpret its significance. She grinned and shook her head reprovingly as she tugged at the boot again. “I can’t think why I tolerate your disrespect, woman.”

“I’ll tell you why,” said Corson. “It’s because you’re so fond of me, remember?” To Nyctasia’s surprise, she came over and pulled off the other boot for her, then suddenly caught her up in her arms and kissed her roughly. “Be *careful*, Nyc, you mooncalf, will you?”

“Don’t worry, sweeting, I will.” Nyctasia returned the kiss, but as Corson laid her gently back on the bed, she could see the faraway look in her eyes once more. Nyctasia turned to Lhejadis and drew the motionless figure to her, pressing her lips to Lhejadis’s temple, where the heart’s beat makes itself felt. As Corson watched uneasily, Nyctasia settled back with her arms about her cousin, and gradually grew as still and lifeless as she. Corson suddenly saw the family likeness between them, which had never been apparent to her before. With a shudder, she cursed and drew the curtains about the bed.

\* \* \*

Lhejadis discovered that the nearer she approached to the waterside, the closer and more heavy the air around her was becoming, until she seemed to be moving against an almost substantial pressure. It was not easy even to draw a breath of this dense, different air, but she found that if she breathed and moved very slowly, she could continue her progress, little by little, through the thickening atmosphere, toward the sea. The air was gradually turning to water, she realized, and at the shoreline there would no longer be any difference between the two.

She understood, now, that her slow approach to the sea was necessary to allow her to enter it, that by the time she reached the shore she would be prepared, able to dwell beneath the waves as she had dwelt hitherto above the earth. Such a transformation could not be accomplished suddenly; one must grow accustomed to the new element slowly, by degrees. She would stop here for a time and rest before going on. There was not far to go.

She had been aware from the first of the boat, guided by two oarsmen, that had been slowly moving towards land from across the water, even as she had been moving across the land towards the oceanside. But now she saw that this vessel did not so much skim atop the sea as pass through it, as a bird passes through the air, and now it sat offshore not floating on but in the water, as a fish rests, hanging suspended in the depths. This boat would not bear her over the waves but down into them, slowly descending through the shafts of green light that pierced the water, ever lower, carrying her to her new home. She longed for that serene, silent journey, but she knew that she could not hasten to it; she must wait until the sea-air had done its work. She was content to sit and rest for now, breathing deeply, languidly, drawing the sea into herself along with the air, and feeling it enter her as she would soon enter

it. Soon they would be one. There was no hurry. The boat would wait for her, and already each breath was a little easier than the last.

When she heard someone call from far behind her, she turned slowly, with a drifting motion, to look back at the distant figure struggling through the sand towards her. But what lay behind was no longer of interest to her, and she soon turned away, a little more quickly than before, to gaze once more towards the still, calm waters.

Nyctasia called again, but it was useless—she would never reach Jade in time. She was too far ahead, and it was too difficult to move. Not only did the deep, soft sand impede her, but the very air sought to hold her back. Whence this Resistance, what did it mean? Her own limbs seemed to weigh her down, and it was all she could do to raise her head or put one foot before the other. She, who was said to be light as thistledown!

“Float, if you’re tired, *float*,” suggested a calm voice that seemed to come from near at hand. But no one was there. And how could she float when she was so heavy? “I shall never get on,” she thought confusedly, “unless I leave myself behind.”

But had she not already done so? “*Neither shore nor sky*,” she whispered, “*Neither earth nor air*.” Yes, she need not go to Jade, she had only to remember that *she was already with her*. And then she was.

“Sister,” said Nyctasia, embracing her, “come home with me.”

But the other stood and pulled away from her. “Let me be. You have no hold on me.”

“I have. I love you,” Nyctasia answered, and the truth of her own words took her by surprise. “I’ll not leave you.”

“No? Then I shall leave you.” Lhejadis laughed and made for the water’s edge, moving almost swiftly now, with an easy, effortless grace.

And only then did Nyctasia understand what task she had undertaken. Lhejadis had not been poisoned—she had taken poison. She did not want to live, and it would therefore be far more difficult and dangerous to save her ... But there was not time for Nyctasia to consider the consequences of her decision, for Lhejadis was even now stepping from the shore and raising her hand to summon the waiting boat. *Don’t hesitate, act!* Nyctasia thought wildly. She would not have entered those dark waters by choice, but she willed herself once more to join Lhejadis, and seized her arm to pull her back to shore.

“Let me go! You cannot hold me!”

“I must,” cried Nyctasia, gripping her tighter. “It’s my duty! Come with me—please—wait!”

But suddenly it was no longer Lhejadis who fought to escape her, but a hissing serpent whose coils slid freely through her hands. *Neither form nor feature*, Nyctasia gasped, as, almost without thought, she made of her hands powerful talons to clutch the creature fast. A great sea-eagle rose from the shore, with the serpent caught in its claws.

And then the serpent too had vanished, and a tiny white moth fluttered from the raptor’s grasp. But even as the eagle became a bat and swooped after it, the moth was gone, and Nyctasia saw Lhejadis herself beneath her, not falling but slowly sinking down through the liquid air.

At once Nyctasia was beside her, but now it was she who was seized and held, and Lhejadis laughed at her, exclaiming, “Why, if you won’t let me go, you’ll come with me, cousin!”

And as the black waters closed over them both, Nyctasia, despairing, saw the boat gliding swiftly toward them. In the bow, a dim, misty figure leaned forward, his arms outstretched, reaching for her. In the moment before the darkness claimed her, she knew him for Thierran.

## 16

WHEN SHE’D HEARD Nyctasia cry out desperately, Corson had torn open the bedcurtains to find the two women locked in a death grip so fierce that their nails had drawn blood from each other’s arms. Which of them was trying to escape she couldn’t tell, and didn’t care—she meant to take Nyc away *now*. It still lacked some hours till dawn, but her instructions could rot, as far as Corson was concerned. She’d seen Nyctasia’s healing-trances before, and they’d never resulted in a struggle of any sort, much



less a savage conflict like this. This *couldn't* be what Nyc had intended. And even though Corson was far stronger than both of them, she was hard put to force open their rigid hands and separate them.

Once released from Lhejadis's cruel embrace, however, Nyctasia yielded and fell limp and motionless. She scarcely seemed to be breathing as Corson carried her through the torchlit corridors, sending the first guard she passed to waken the palace physicians.

Now she lay in her own bed, sometimes as still as stone, sometimes lost in dreams and delirium, whispering words too soft for Corson to hear, reaching out for something or someone only she could see. Once she sobbed heartbrokenly for a few minutes, but then fell silent and seemed to sleep peacefully for a time, with a half-smile playing about her lips. Greymantle lay at her feet by day and night, despite the physicians' orders that he be removed from the Rhaicime's bed. When anyone but Corson tried to take hold of him, he growled very convincingly, displaying his long teeth, and when Corson tried it, he whimpered so pathetically that she hadn't the heart to put him out.

"He'll let you be, now he knows your scent," she assured the physicians. "He doesn't interfere with anyone who attends to Her Ladyship. Besides, if I don't let him stay, he'll sit outside and howl, and that will disturb the Rhaicime, No, it won't help to take him to the kennels, or anywhere else. If that dog gets to howling, he'll disturb all of Rhostshyl, believe me."

Corson felt like howling herself, less from sorrow than frustration and helplessness. She watched over Nyctasia almost as steadfastly as Greymantle, but she knew that there was nothing she could do to help her. She was afraid for Nyctasia but couldn't protect her—it was maddening! She thought of going back to Chiastelm, since she was doing no good in Rhostshyl, and Steifann had expected her to return in a few days, but she knew she wouldn't leave until Nyctasia's fate had been decided one way or the other.

"She's been in this state three days," she wrote to Steifann, "and the rutting physicians won't say yes or no about her, or tell me how long she's like to stay this way. I don't believe they know any more about it than I do. They just poke her and listen to her heart and look in her mouth and feel how cold her little feet are. Then they mutter together and say she's no worse and no better. I could do that myself. So I don't know yet when I'll be back—" Corson paused to shake her cramped hand, then read over what she'd written. It didn't satisfy her, but she found writing too much of a chore to start over again. Finally she scratched out the last word and carefully wrote "home" in its place, adding, "but don't worry about me."

When she'd rested her hand, she went on with the rest of the news. A letter was an unusual event for her friends at the Hare, and she might as well make the most of it. "I tried to send Trask back with a party of travelers, but he wouldn't have it. He's got my 'Malkin teaching him to read—and the Hlann knows what else—and he says he might not have such a chance again. That's so, after all, and he really is working at his letters, so I let him stay. It's not as if he's much use to you there anyway."

It would be too much trouble, Corson decided, to explain all about Nyctasia's ill-fated meeting with Lord Erystalben and its consequences. She could make a good story of it when she returned, if all went well. She refused to think about the possibility that all would not be well. Nyc would recover, she always did ....

Corson turned resolutely back to her task. "That fellow with no memory," she wrote. "He's giving trouble already, I knew it would be so. It's no secret now. Nyc said he's the one I took him for, a Jhaice of the House of Shiastred, and some of his kin agree, but the rest deny it and claim he's an impostor. Nyc's the only one who can settle it, and both sides want to lay an appeal before her. Half of Rhostshyl is demanding an audience with her about one thing or another. There were rumors about that she'd vanished again, like before the war, so now no one believes that she's just too sick to show herself.

"I know that much because Trask brings me all the news and gossip. That one hears everything, you know, But I haven't left Nyc all this time, I even sleep here. Anyone could do away with her easily while she's so defenseless. Her enemies have been quiet of late, but they might think this a good time to strike. I mean to stay by her till she's come to herself, and then—" *And then I'll kill her myself for putting me to all this worry*, she thought, but she was tired of writing, so she concluded, "I'll fly straight to Chiastelm and not stop for wind or welter. I wish I was there with you right now, even though you make me do the work of three. And you'd better be lonely for me too, else when I get there I'll slaughter you

and that ugly bitch Destiver both!" There. That would do well enough.

Corson folded and sealed the letter, then, hearing Nyctasia call out again, she dropped it and hurried to her bedside. "I'm so tired," Nyctasia said clearly, but she was still asleep, her lips moving soundlessly now, her brow creased with fear or anguish. Greymantle looked up at Corson with a whine, and she stroked his head.

"I know, Grey. I miss her too." There was no one else like Nyc, Corson thought glumly, no one else who could take her place. She was crazy, and she drove Corson crazy, but without her life would be so ruttng *dull*. Corson smoothed Nyctasia's forehead, then bent down and kissed her. "Don't die, Nyc, you silly chit," she said fiercely.

The black waters had engulfed Nyctasia and swept from her all memory of her struggle with Lhejadis, of the fall that had left her drowning in fathomless depths of darkness. She knew only that she had been drifting in the darkness for a long time, and that the darkness was not only all about her but within her as well, for she felt neither fright nor impatience nor curiosity. She was neither contented nor discontented. She was merely a part of the darkness, of nothingness.

But now it seemed that the tide of darkness was receding, leaving her stranded on some unknown shore. She was beginning to grow aware, first of herself, then of her surroundings. She was, after all, someone—a being separable from the shrouding darkness—and she must therefore be somewhere. But where? And how had she come to be there?

She could feel, now, that something hard and unyielding lay beneath her, and as she stared into the darkness her eyes began to grow used to the gloom at last, and she made out the dim shapes of things—arches and columns with great long blocks strewn among them. She recognized the place, then, and with the recognition came remembrance of herself, of her life—but not of her death. She was lying on a bier in the family crypts beneath the palace of the Edonaris.

The only light was the faint glow from a wall-torch in the stairway behind her, but it sufficed, for Nyctasia knew the crypts well. It was the first of the forbidden places she had made Thierran bring her, as soon as she was strong enough, to see if it looked as she had so often imagined it during her illness, when she'd expected that she would soon lie there forever. To visit it living, to visit it and *leave*, had been a triumph for her, and it had become one of their favorite hiding-places, since no one thought to look for them there. She remembered the first time they'd descended the long, winding stairway together, lamps in hand, half-afraid that they'd be caught and sent back, half-afraid that they wouldn't.

Thierran had come there once before, with Mescrisdan, each daring the other to go on, neither wanting to stay. They'd done no more than make their way to the far wall of the innermost chamber, looking around them as little as possible, and then hasten away again, honor satisfied. The venture had done little to dispel his apprehensions about the dismal place, but he had not let Nyctasia see that he feared it. "There's nothing to be afraid of," he assured her boldly, as if every corner of the crypts had long been familiar to him. "It's just a lot of great stone boxes with statues lying on them, that's all."

And Nyctasia had answered confidently, "I won't be afraid if you're there, Thorn." How could he disappoint her after that?

They'd explored everything with growing courage, blowing the dust from the carved faces of their ancestors' effigies—"This one looks like you, 'Tasia"—and trying to make out the ancient inscriptions. It had been daunting at first to think that a like sepulcher waited for them, a tomb they would share since they were to be husband and wife, but the place had soon lost its terrors for them as they found nothing to frighten them but shadows and spiders.

"We might not be buried here," Thorn had said defiantly. "We might be lost at sea. We might be eaten up by wolves."

Nyctasia had taken up the game at once. "We might be captured by pirates and sold into slavery in a foreign land."

"We'd be ransomed," he pointed out.

"So we would," she said, disappointed. Then, drawing on the many stories she'd read, she suggested, "Well, we might wound an enchanted stag, in the hunt, and be changed into trees, or fall

asleep for a thousand years, and when we come back there won't *be* an Edonaris palace, or even a Rhostshyl ...." But that they could not imagine, any more than they could truly imagine their own deaths. They knew that the crypts would one day claim them, but even to Nyctasia that day had seemed unimaginably distant.

But she remembered as well the last time they had visited the crypts together, in secret, on the day of her mother's death. They had stolen away to discuss some childish scheme of their own, but they had not been there long before they'd heard the bells tolling the death-knell, and they'd known that it could mean nothing else. The court physicians had not held out much hope for the Lady Teselescq's recovery, and Nyctasia had been duly warned to expect the worst, but she had not believed them. If she, the weakling, the sickly one, had survived their dire prognostications, how could her strong, iron-willed mother do less? The women of the Edonaris usually lived to a great age.

The message of the bells therefore found Nyctasia unprepared, and came upon her as much as a shock as a sorrow. She could not greatly grieve for her mother, whom she had rarely seen, but the tidings of her death were most unwelcome nevertheless, for Nyctasia had now inherited the rank of Rhaicime. She would not assume the full responsibilities of the title until she came of age, of course, but she would be expected to take a much more serious interest in the family's affairs from this time on. Lady Mhairestri would insist that she be trained to fulfill her future obligations as one of the heads of the House and rulers of the city. There would be endless instruction in civil and municipal government, diplomacy, judicature and magistracy. It was not a pleasant prospect, but Nyctasia was an Edonaris and knew where her duty lay. At the sound of the bells, she and Thierran had only exchanged a stricken look, then resignedly returned to their own apartments to change into suitable mourning clothes. Nyctasia's childhood was over. She was twelve years old.

After that, they had shunned the crypts, without needing to discuss the matter. Now that someone they had known was entombed there, the place had become too real for comfort, no longer a secret retreat from the world for them alone. Nyctasia had not seen it again until her return to Rhostshyl, when she had first paid her respects to the memory of those fallen in battle with the Teiryne, and then returned not long afterwards to witness the formal interment of the matriarch Mhairestri. But she had visited the crypts more than once since then to lay wildflowers at the tomb of Thierran, and see that it was well tended.

She rose and went to it now, finding her way easily despite the murk. As she leaned over the effigy of Thierran, she let her long hair fall about his face, as she had used to do when they were alive, and she saw the white marble of his eyelids darken as her tears touched them. It seemed altogether natural that those stone eyes should open and look up at her, and that his cold lips, when she kissed them, should part and speak to her.

"For shame, 'Tasia, you know it's forbidden to play down here. Will you never learn to behave?"

Was she 'Tasia, she wondered, or Nyc? Was she dead or alive? But these questions did not seem of great importance. "I always led you to do what was forbidden," she said.

"But you're too old for such games now, my dear. You have work to do, and no time to waste. Hurry now, before the curfew rings."

"Oh, Thorn, I'm so tired. Let me stay here with you. You've always taken care of me."

"Rest then, little one, but not here. Come, I'll take you back."

Arms of stone lifted her, and she settled her head on his shoulder gratefully and closed her eyes, feeling safe and sheltered. Soon they were ascending the stairs. "Do you remember, when I fell out of a peach tree in the orchard and hurt my leg?" she asked sleepily. "You had to carry me all the way back."

"I remember."

"And then they punished *you* for letting me climb the trees! It's so unfair. Everyone who loves me suffers for it ...."

"I didn't mind, my heart. I liked to be punished for your sake. It made me feel a hero."

"Ah, there's no pleasing them," sighed Nyctasia. "They bade me learn the harp, and then scolded me for practicing too much. 'A lady ought not to have calloused fingers like a laborer,' Lehannie told me. I said, 'I see. A lady should play the harp, but she shouldn't play it *well*.' And Mhairestri slapped me for

disrespect. Quite right, too, that was no way to speak to my aunt. All the same, Derry and Raven shall climb the trees in the orchard if they like, no matter what the gardeners say. Thorn ...?" She yawned. "Thorn, do you think it was Mescrisdan who told Mhairestri that we went to The Lane Fox? How else could she have found out? But maybe she had us followed, I never thought of that."

He laid her down carefully on her own bed and drew a coverlet over her. "There, now you'll be all right, 'Tasia."

"Mmm, that's nice, I feel much better now. Thorn, I think Mescrisdan told her. He was angry because we didn't take him along. But how could we? I *told* him, it was just that the two of you would have drawn too much notice to us, being so alike. I didn't mean to ... Thorn, don't go—stay with me!" she cried, and opened her eyes, only to find Corson bending over her.

"Nyc? Are you—"

"Corson? Where—"

Both were interrupted at once by Greymantle, who jumped to his feet, barking excitedly, thrashed Corson with his heavy tail, and licked Nyctasia's face repeatedly. By the time they had succeeded in getting him out of the way, both had forgotten their questions. Nyctasia remembered that she had dreamed of Thierran, but nothing that had come before, save that she had attempted to enter into a healing-trance with Lhejadis. But this was her own bedchamber—why was she here, not with Jade? If they'd been separated without her knowledge, it could only mean that she had failed.

"I lost her," she said, grief-stricken. "Poor Jade!"

"No you didn't," said Corson. "She came 'round days ago. She's still weak, but the court leeches say she's out of danger."

"What! How can that be? I don't understand."

Corson shrugged. "If you don't, no one does. She wants to see you, and she's given it out to all and sundry that you didn't poison her, or the matriarch either. She says she took bloodbane herself. She's not been told that she half-killed you too."

"Herself ...!" breathed Nyctasia, "Fool that I am! I should have seen that from the first! But then how—? I must go to her at once." She rose hastily, then, catching sight of herself in the mirror, she threw open a chest and began to pull out fresh clothing. "I suppose a bath can wait," she said regretfully.

"But, Nyc, shouldn't you rest? You can't just—" But Nyctasia wasn't listening, and Corson gave it up. She could see for herself that Nyctasia was perfectly well. "Rutting magic!" she muttered. More dead than alive one moment, hale as a hare the next. It was unsettling, it was contrary to nature. Well, she'd just deliver the letter to Steifann by herself, then. He was rutting well going to see it, after she'd gone to the trouble of writing the thing.

"No, Grey, you stay here," Nyctasia was saying. "Jade doesn't need you galloping about her sickroom. Corson, I shan't be long. Would you wait for me here—and order a bath for me too, please, if you will. I'll just see Jade, and then I want to speak to you. There's so much to be done. Could you raise a force of mercenaries for me, do you think, to augment the city guard? Mostly for show. We'll discuss it presently—"

Corson grabbed her on her way to the door. "If you think to go running about the palace unarmed, without even Grey for escort, you can think again," she said grimly. "I swear you've begun to believe the moonshine you let others believe about you. Take the word of a soldier, Nyc, once you start to think you can't be killed, you're as good as lost."

Nyctasia seemed about to argue, but wisely changed her mind. "Yes, very well—you know best. But I can't bring you into Jade's presence. You see, she's never spoken of it, but she must know that it was you who killed Mescrisdan. She blames me, of course, not you, but for me to call upon her with you in attendance would look like a deliberate insult."

"By all means, far better for you to be in danger than for the Lady Lhejadis to be insulted! I'll see you to the door and send another sentry to stand guard, but Grey's to stay with you, and you'll wear a dagger at the least!"

*Hlann's blood, what am I to do with her?* Corson thought. She'd have to have a strict talk with Nyc before she left, and with some of the palace guard as well. Someone had to keep an eye on Her

Witlessness when Corson was away. But, having seen to Nyctasia's security for the present, she set out to find Trask and tell him to make ready to leave for Chiastelm in the morning.

Lhejadis looked happier than Nyctasia had seen her since they were children. Despite her pallor and her drawn, ailing appearance, she seemed to glow with a new peace and contentment, and she greeted Nyctasia joyously. "'Tasia, I've been longing to tell you—I've had a vision, a Manifestation, and it's healed me in body and spirit!"

"You remember it?" Nyctasia asked, astonished. "But that's remarkable, Jade—I've never heard of anyone who remembered a healing-trance." She sat on the bed and took Lhejadis's hand, saying eagerly, "Tell me everything! What was it like? Did you see me? Did I speak to you?"

"You, 'Tasia? How could you be there? You're neither dead nor dying. No, don't you see, it was Mescrisdan! I was with him. But he sent me away, because the Law of the *Vahn* forbids us to choose death over life."

"So it does," said Nyctasia, and fell silent, lost in wonder. Jade remembered the healing-trance no more than she. *Mescrisdan* ... That was the answer to Jade's recovery, then—the last answer she would have imagined. "What else did he say to you, cousin?"

"If only I could remember it all! I can recall the sense of it, now, but not the words. I only know ... that I was wrong to believe Mhairestri. She was to blame for Mescrisdan's death, not you. She sent him to kill you that night, and she'd no right—"

"Mhairestri sent him? But he and Thorn were together."

"Thorn thought they were to capture you, but she told Mescrisdan not to bring you back alive. He agreed for my sake. She promised him that she'd see you stricken from the family records as a murderess."

"I see. And you knew of this?"

"But, 'Tasia, we thought it was true! She told us that you killed her brother, her twin, and I'd swear she believed it herself. Mescrisdan was to avenge him."

"Great Uncle Brethald," Nyctasia mused. "Did Mhairestri also tell you that he tried to poison me, twice, or did she neglect to mention that detail? Both times he failed because he hardly knew me at all. He offered me poisoned wine at dinner, not knowing that I didn't drink spirits. I only sipped at it, as a courtesy, but that made me ill enough to guess at his game. Then he poisoned a pair of earrings that had been his mother's, for his share of her jewels was to come to me. But the fool didn't take the trouble to find out that I never wore gold. Really, the carelessness of the man was disgraceful," she said bitterly. "If you intend to murder people, you must first make a study of their habits, the greenest assassin knows that much."

"We shouldn't have listened to her, but how were we to know what Brethald had done?"

"You weren't to know, but you may be certain that Mhairestri did. Brethald probably acted at her behest." Nyctasia rose and began to pace about the room. "Mhairestri should never have convinced me it was my duty to concern myself with the interests of our House and the governing of the city. That's what set me to studying the family chronicles and the City History in earnest. But they taught me that there were no grounds for our claim to rule of Rhostshyl, no just cause for our continued feud with the Teiryln.

"Like a little fool, I thought that those facts would change matters, if only my elders knew them. It never occurred to me that they had known them from the start. Before these inconvenient discoveries of mine, Mhairestri and I could tolerate one another, but once I became a threat to her ambitions for the Edonaris, she was determined to be rid of me, and she didn't do things by half-measures. She sent assassins after me more than once. But to try to use Mescrisdan! He was no murderer—I daresay he only agreed from fear of refusing Mhairestri to her face. We were all afraid of her. But he probably never meant to see it through, Jade. Mhairestri should have known that he'd not succeed where skilled killers had failed."

Lhejadis shook her head sadly. "She tried again when we first heard rumors of your return. And even when you were in the city. It was when that failed too that she told me you couldn't be killed, that the

spells protecting your life were too strong.”

“Mharestri believed that?” Nyctasia’s tone seemed to dismiss the idea with contempt, but she did not deny it outright.

“Yes, but she said that no spell could protect your reputation, and that your disgrace would serve our purposes as well as your death. There seemed no other way to prevent Tiambria’s marriage to Jehamias ar’n Teiryn. Mharestri didn’t believe you’d be able to obtain Tiambria’s consent to the match, but when you did—”

“Jade! Do you mean to say that you knew Mharestri meant to take poison? And you did nothing?”

“Did you ever succeed in turning Mharestri from her purpose, when she’d made up her mind?”

“Well, no, but didn’t you tell the others, at least?”

“She was dying already, ’Tasia, or so she said. She told me she hadn’t long to live—mere days perhaps—but now I wonder if even that was true.”

“Very likely it was,” Nyctasia said thoughtfully. “The signs were there. Who but Mharestri would think to make use of her own death to strike a blow at her enemies?”

“We agreed that if her death didn’t put an end to your plans, mine should follow, to confirm your guilt.”

Nyctasia caught her breath. She had thought that nothing could shock her, but this confession chilled her to the bone. “Oh, no, Jade. Mharestri told you to—? She gave you bloodbane?”

“I asked her for it. I didn’t want to live, I only wanted vengeance.”

“My poor Jade, you may have thought it was your own idea, but I’d wager my fortune that Mharestri trapped you into asking for the poison.”

Lhejadis only shrugged. “I hadn’t the courage to take it, after all, even when Leirven and Deirdras disappeared. It was my duty to stop you, in the only way possible, and I thought that if I’d done it sooner I might have saved Emeryc’s children. I despised myself for my cowardice—I, an Edonaris!—but still I couldn’t bring myself to it. Then when Erikasten, too, was sent away—”

“But, in the *vahn*’s name, ’Kasten’s gone to the Midlands, to Vale—there was no secret about that!”

“So he said, but I thought you’d deceived him, that he would never return, like Rehal and the children.”

“I was afraid of that,” sighed Nyctasia. “Jade, Rehal is soon to be married, and I’ll prove to you that she and the children are alive, if you’ll swear to me not to tell the others where they are—at least, not yet.” It was a bold step to take, perhaps a dangerous one, but Nyctasia felt strongly that now, if ever, was the time to confide in Lhejadis despite the risk, and she did not attempt to resist the prompting of her spirit.

It was Lhejadis who hesitated. “No, don’t tell me ...” she said slowly. “I don’t want to know more than the others, but neither do I want to betray your trust. If you assure me that they live, that suffices.”

Nyctasia nodded, relieved. “That is wise.” She kissed Lhejadis and said, “I’ll go, you need your rest. If I send you a cordial to give you strength, will you dare to drink it, do you think?”

“I believe I shall,” she said, smiling. “But, ’Tasia, you must ...” She paused, gathering her resolve, and went on with an effort, “You must understand—Mescrisdan—he meant to carry out Mharestri’s orders if he could, and I encouraged him to it. We believed what we wanted to believe. You must forgive us, ’Tasia, you must forgive us both!”

Nyctasia embraced her. “What does it matter what we’ve done, Jade? We all did things we regret, and failed to do what was right, but we must forgive one another, and forgive ourselves as well. Only the future matters now. When I think of the past, I find I have forgiven all and everything.”

And even as she spoke, she realized that it was true. She had forgiven everyone, even Brethald, even Mharestri, yet when or how she had done so was a mystery to her. She too had been healed, though it was not her healing-trance which had brought this to pass. Her magic had failed completely, but she was not disappointed.

TRASK PROTESTED AT being dragged back to Chiestelm, but he didn't give as much trouble as Corson had expected. "I don't see why I have to go just because you're leaving," he argued. "Why can't I stay here on my own?"

"Because someone at court has to be answerable for you—and don't think that 'Malkin will take responsibility for you, because if I know that one, he won't."

Trask suspected the same thing. 'Malkin had only so much time for his new pupil, and expected him to keep his distance when he wasn't wanted. Trask was not to make demands on 'Malkin's attention. He was not to put himself forward or presume to be familiar with 'Malkin before others. But, all the same, 'Malkin did take an interest in Trask's education, praising his determination to better himself, and his quickness to master what he was taught. And this was more encouragement than Trask had ever received from anyone else.

"How can I learn to read if I leave now?" he complained.

Corson considered. It was hard on Trask to lose such an opportunity, but she couldn't leave him to shift for himself at court—Nyc wouldn't hear of it. "Well, listen, Nyc wants me to muster a troop of mercenaries for her, so I'll be back and forth between here and Chiestelm a good bit, and you can come with me, if Steifann gives you leave."

Trask brightened. "I can deal with Steifann," he said confidently.

"Huh," Corson snorted, "I daresay you'll fare better with 'Malkin like this anyway. He'll grow tired of you if you're underfoot too much. If you come and go, you'll not wear out your welcome so soon." She hesitated, and said uncomfortably, "Trask, don't expect too much from 'Malkin. That one's not to be counted on. He really cares for no one but himself."

"I know," said Trask. "I think a courtier has to be like that, Lucky for me that I am." He grinned. "Truth to tell, he's no more tired of me than I am of him."

Trask felt that he really could do with a rest from 'Malkin's overbearing ways and his insistence on keeping Trask in his place. He was even beginning to understand why both Nyctasia and Corson claimed that court custom and ceremony were a nuisance. Such things fascinated him as much as ever, yet it would be rather a relief to let down his guard for a while, and not have to think every moment about acting and speaking correctly. Always provided that he could come back soon, of course ....

"'Malkin's a high-handed bastard," he agreed, "but he's been nice to me, you know, Corson, in his way. So long as he's willing to teach me, I don't mind playing toady to him. And absence lends charm, they say. Maybe he'll miss me if I'm gone for a while."

"You really *are* a disloyal little cur, aren't you?" Corson said, laughing. How could she have thought it necessary to warn Trask against growing too attached to 'Malkin? He could take care of himself.

"Well, Asye's teeth, Corson! If I don't look to my own interest, who will?"

"Steifann would," Corson pointed out.

"All right, Steifann, I grant you—but there aren't many like Steifann. I'm loyal enough to him, you know, but he can't give me a chance to make anything of myself."

"No," Corson said thoughtfully, "there aren't many like Steifann. Come along and take your leave of Nyc—and don't pester her to let you stay, either, because I happen to know that she'd rather have a mad dog loose at court than you."

"I haven't the least intention of pestering Her Ladyship," Trask said loftily. "Not about that."

Nyctasia was sequestered with her court officials and advisors, all intent on informing her of a great many matters that demanded her immediate attention. Lord Aithrenn had arrived in the city during her unexplained absence, she was told, and to make matters worse, he had presented himself at the palace after her return, only to be told that the Rhaicime was unable to see him. Now it seemed that nobody knew whether he was still in Rhostshyl or had returned to Ochram.

"But why wasn't he offered accommodation here?" Nyctasia demanded, dismayed at this breach of courtesy and hospitality.

“He was, my lady, but he declined. It is to be feared that he interpreted Your Ladyship’s failure to confer with him personally as a deliberate affront.”

Nyctasia sighed. “If he chooses to be offended, it can’t be helped. I cannot be expected to receive people when I’m insensible and half-dead. There’s nothing to be done about it at present, at all events. What else have you there?”

While a clerk gravely consulted a list, Lord Therisain broke in impatiently, “Half the House of Shiasfred is demanding an audience with you.”

With a start of guilt, Nyctasia realized that she had hardly given a thought to Erystalben’s return. “Indeed?” she said. “What do they want of me?”

“Well, some want you to recognize Erystalben formally and restore him to his place, and the others want you to withdraw the impostor you’ve inflicted upon them.”

“Impostor, is it? How dare they! Of course he’s ’Ben—I ought to know.”

“So ought his father to know, one would think, but he denies that this stranger is his son.”

“I see! So Lord Descador finds his nephew a more satisfactory heir than his son. I suppose I ought not to be surprised at that. He never did think ’Ben suited to his position, and now that he’s lost his memory ...” She shook her head. “I can compel the Shiasfred to acknowledge him, of course, but I’d best see ’Ben before I take any steps at all, and learn what his wishes are in the matter.”

“He’s been trying to see you for days,” Therisain observed, but your bodyguard would give entrance to no one.” His tone was resentful, and Nyctasia hastened to explain.

“I expected to recover long before you returned from Salten with ’Ben, else I’d have left orders that you were to be admitted.” She had made a point of receiving Lord Therisain before anyone else. “Though there’s nothing we could have done for one another, after all.” Turning to the clerk, she said, “Send word to Lord Erystalben to attend me this evening, if he will. He’s to be admitted to my chamber whenever he arrives, What more is there?”

“The Lord Anselton desires a word with you, my lady.”

Nyctasia nodded. “I want to see him as well, and the Lady Elissa both. Inform them that I shall be pleased to receive them at their convenience. What remains?”

“Messengers from the governors of Heithskor await Your Ladyship’s notice.”

It might be as well, Nyctasia decided, to let them wait. “Presently, presently,” she said with a negligent wave of her hand. “Ask their business and report it to me. Is that all?”

“No, my lady. The Lohannes have requested a hearing concerning the redress owed them by the Anderleys for the burning of their storehouse.”

“Then the Anderleys have not yet made restitution? The judgment against them was decisive, was it not?”

“Entirely so, my lady, but they have sought to circumvent the obligation by disowning Jacon ash Anderley, and disclaiming responsibility for his deeds and debts.”

“Clever,” said Nyctasia, “but it won’t do. Had they disowned him before the fire, they might have had grounds for appeal, but it’s plain that they were behind the business. They’re only angry with Jacon for being caught at it. Send them a warning letter from me, and another to the Lohannes with my respects, and due apologies for the delay, saying that I’m attending to the matter. Just bring them to me to be approved, signed and sealed.”

“As you will, my lady. And a pair of physicians from Celys, with letters from Your Ladyship, seek to present themselves.”

“Very good. They must be the Master Scholars Anthorne and Tsephis—arrange an audience for them directly. Now—”

But she was interrupted by Corson and Trask, who arrived at that moment, unexpected and unannounced, without having requested an audience or stated their business to anyone.

Nyctasia was officially not to be disturbed while conferring with her advisors, and Corson took considerable pleasure in flaunting her unique position at court by ignoring this prohibition. There was not a guard in the palace garrison who dared deny her admittance to the Rhaicime at any time, and, in Corson’s experience, Nyctasia was only too glad to be disturbed on such occasions.



“Ah, Corson, there you are,” she said, quite as if she had sent for her. “You are in good time—we have just concluded our affairs.” She stood, to dismiss the others politely, remarking in a businesslike tone, “We must discuss the reinforcements to the city guard.” But as soon as the rest had taken their leave, she hugged Corson and exclaimed, “Thank the stars you chased them off, pet! I was on the point of perishing. Do you think you could sneak me out of the city again, as you did before? It won’t be as easy this time, I warn you. I only had to elude my enemies then, but now I want to escape my allies.”

“Poor little Nyc. Are your people bullying you, then? I’ll kill the lot of them, shall I?”

“Ah, would you? I’d appreciate it very much.”

“But if you want to run off again, you’ll tell me first, next time! Is that understood?”

“Yes, Corson. I suppose I must put up with *your* bullying, since I’ve no one who can kill you for me. Except perhaps Greymantle?”

The dog looked up, waved his tail once, said, “Hruf?” and went back to sleep. There were no threatening scents in the room. He was familiar with Corson and Trask, and considered the first a friend, and the other harmless.

Corson pointed a warning finger at Nyctasia. “Not even Grey can save you if I decide to teach you a lesson, so you’d better do as I say, or you’ll regret it.”

Nyctasia laughed and threw herself down on a couch, feeling much refreshed. After the morning’s formalities, Corson’s threats were as welcome as a cool breeze to a laborer. “I never should have made you a Desthene. You were bad enough before, but now—!”

Trask, who’d been awaiting an opportunity, now came forward and made Nyctasia his best bow. It was quite an accomplished and graceful performance.

Nyctasia applauded. “Bravo, brat. Well done!”

“Then can I come to the wedding?” he asked eagerly, “*Please*, Nyc?”

Nyctasia threw up her hands. “If I hear another word about this everlasting marriage—! I am *not* betrothed to the High Lord Aithrenn, I’ve never seen the man, I don’t even know where he is!”

“You don’t?” said Trask, surprised. “He’s staying at The Golden Horn, isn’t he? That’s where he was a few days ago.”

Nyctasia stared. “If you want to know what’s taking place in the city, don’t ask someone in the palace,” she said finally. “It doesn’t do to forget that.”

“And if you want to know what’s taking place in the palace, don’t ask someone in the palace either,” said Corson wryly. “The only folk who know anything are gossipmongering minions like our Trask.”

“No, they’re not the only ones who know tidings of the palace,” Nyctasia corrected her. “They’re the only ones who’ll *tell*. What else have you heard about His Lordship?” she asked Trask.

“Only what everyone knows,” Trask said with a shrug. “They say he’s older than you, but a fine-looking man still, and that he has half-grown children who are his acknowledged heirs, though he’s never had a wife.”

“What everyone knows, indeed! Everyone but me, it seems—I’ve had no time to make inquiries. I’ve sent spies into Ochram, of course, but I haven’t received their reports yet. I might better question one of my own scullions, apparently, or any idler in the marketplace.”

Corson was skeptical. “It’s probably just rumor, Nyc. Why would the High Lord stay at the Horn when he could have lodgings here in the palace?” She turned on Trask. “Tell me that if you know so much.”

“His Lordship didn’t tell me his reasons! I just—”

“Oh, I can guess his reasons readily enough,” Nyctasia put in. “He means to take this chance to have a good look at the city, without interference, and see how badly she was wounded by the war, before he commits Ochram to any irrevocable union with her. And very prudent of him, too. He naturally assumes that I’d show him only what I wanted him to see.”

“Would you?” asked Corson, curious.

“No, I’d insist that he see everything—not because I’m honest, but because his spies have no doubt reported the truth to him already. It shows a commendable diligence on his part to take the trouble to confirm the condition of the city for himself.”

These considerations did not interest Trask. “But aren’t you going to marry him, Nyc?” he persisted. Having seen the splendor and pageantry of the Lady Tiambria’s wedding, he’d been looking forward to Nyctasia’s with great anticipation. And what better occasion for displaying his newly-acquired skills and courtly graces?

“Grey mantle, kill,” Nyctasia moaned, pointing to Trask. “Attack. Maim. Mangle.”

Grey mantle good-naturedly got up and ambled over to Trask, sniffed him, licked his hand, and then sat down beside him, looking to Nyctasia for further instructions.

“Bad dog, Grey,” she said fondly, at which he clambered onto the couch, crowding her into a corner, and laid his great head on her knee adoringly.

Since Grey mantle had failed to rid his mistress of Trask, Corson offered to do so, for a very modest fee, but before they could seal the bargain, their transaction was cut short by the arrival of a page with a letter for Corson.

She recognized the seal—a prancing hare—as the one she sometimes used to send messages from the Hare, but she’d never seen it on a letter directed to herself. The only missives Corson had ever received were instructions from her employers or orders from her commanders, “It’s from Steifann,” she said in wonder, looking at the letter as if she had no idea what to do with it. “He’s never written to me before.”

“How could he?” Trask asked reasonably. “He’s never known where you were before, when you weren’t at the Hare, stupid.”

“That’s so,” said Corson, so entranced that she didn’t even bother to swat Trask for his insolence. Steifann was thinking of her! He’d sent her a letter!

“Aren’t you going to read it?” Nyctasia asked, turning away to hide her amusement.

“Oh. Of course I am,” said Corson, flustered. Suppose it was bad news, she thought suddenly. What if the Hare had burned down, what if Steifann had been robbed, or had broken his leg, or worse? What if he needed her—and her not there? She tore off the seal, and nearly ripped the letter in half in her haste to unfold it.

Trask tried to look over her shoulder, eager to see if he could recognize any of the combinations of letters he’d learned, but Corson pushed him away, mindful of those lessons in reading. He couldn’t have learned much yet, she thought, but one couldn’t be too careful where a sly thing like Trask was concerned.

“Well, what’s he say, then?” Trask demanded. “Don’t be such a bore, Corson! Steifann always reads us *your* letters.”

“Only part of them,” Corson said smugly, savoring the coarse but gratifying endearments with which Steifann addressed her. “And you can hear part of this one. He wants to know what in the name of several dozen perverted demons is keeping me so long in Rhostshyl—and he says that it had rutting well better be something important. He says he hopes you’re behaving yourself, Trask, and—” she turned to Nyctasia with a mocking grin—“he congratulates you on your coming marriage, Nyc.”

\* \* \*

Nyctasia hadn’t time to grant a personal interview to every student or scholar who sought to address her, and she was rather sharp with the clerk who informed her that a group of students was demanding to see her.

“What of it?” she said impatiently. “Students are always demanding to see me.”

But these particular students, she was told, claimed to have been specially invited by Her Ladyship to visit her at court. “Impossible,” said Nyctasia. “I summoned only certain select scholars, and if this lot were among them they’d have letters from me to prove it. You know that.”

“Yes, my lady. But they assert that they met Your Ladyship last week in Rhostshyl Wood, and that you promised to receive them on your return. And they insist that Your Ladyship will confirm their story. Shall I send them away?”

Nyctasia began to laugh. “I beg your pardon, sir, they’re quite right. I’d forgotten them. Show them in.” So they’d found her out already. She must have been pointed out to them at a distance, as the

Rhaicime. It would be amusing to see them again; they'd been a merry crew, and good company. And she was particularly interested in the man Wren, who'd interpreted her dream with such insight.

But to her disappointment he was not with the others, and they seemed to know very little about him. He and his companion had joined them on the road, and left them before they'd made their way to the palace. "But it was he who betrayed you to us, lady," one of them told her with a grin. "He said, 'It's no use your looking for the Rhaicime in Rhostshyl, she's on her way to the coast. That was she who crossed our path in the wood last night.' We thought he was daft, of course, but when we arrived here, we learned that Your Ladyship really wasn't at court, and no one knew where you'd gone."

"And then folk told us what the Rhaicime looked like—"

"We heard that she'd always a great guard-dog with her, too, just like our boastful palace scribe."

"So it seemed that Wren was right after all, but how in the *vahn*'s name did he know, Rhaicime?"

Nyctasia's look was absorbed and pensive. "In the same way that he knew the meaning of my dream," she said quietly. "I hope our paths may cross again one day."

She soon sent the students to 'Malkin, who could be trusted to assess their abilities for her and find them work. He was really making himself quite useful, Nyctasia thought.

But the Master Scholars Anthorne and Tsephis had come to Rhostshyl at Nyctasia's express invitation, and were not to be so summarily dealt with. The pair were among the most celebrated of the scholar-physicians of the Imperial University, and only the opportunity to consult certain long-lost works of the legendary healer Iostyn Vahr could have drawn them from the capital to an insignificant coastal city-state like Rhostshyl.

After an exchange of formal courtesies, Nyctasia bade her distinguished guests be seated, and patiently answered their questions about the manuscripts from the Cymvelan library, before raising a concern of her own.

"I had, I confess, another reason for inviting you here," she said frankly. "A personal matter. My sister Tiambria is with child—her first. The women of my family have no unusual difficulties in giving birth, but as Tiambria is rather young, it would ease my mind a good deal if you would consider acting as her physicians."

"Youth is entirely in a mother's favor," Master Anthorne said curtly. "Are we to understand that you make it a condition that we be midwives to the Princess Tiambria, if we wish to make a study of these texts?" His command of Common Eswaine was stilted but flawless, and Nyctasia had no difficulty understanding him.

But she was accustomed to testing others, not to being tested herself. Matching his tone, she replied coldly, "Rhostshyl is not a monarchy, sir. Tiambria is a *Hlaven*, not a princess, and I have set no conditions whatsoever. It would be criminal, in my estimation, to deny such knowledge to any reputable scholar. I meant to ask as a favor that you undertake my sister's care, but much as I should like her to have the benefit of your skill, I would not allow anyone to attend her who did not wish to do so. That would hardly be to her good." She stood and bowed to her visitors in a manner that conveyed due respect, but little cordiality. "Arrangements will be made at once for you to see any of the Cymvelan books that interest you." *That should satisfy them*, she thought. *And put them in their place as well.*

The two scholars exchanged a look, then stood and returned Nyctasia's bow. "That being so, we shall be honored to serve as the Lady Tiambria's physicians," Dame Tsephis said with a smile.

Nyctasia had barely time to congratulate herself on the successful conclusion of this interview before a page announced the Lord Anselton and the Lady Elissa. She sighed and took a moment to commune with the *vahn*, gathering her strength for another difficult encounter. But, contrary to the expectations of all concerned, the meeting did not prove unduly disagreeable or acrimonious.

Having spoken with Lhejadis, Anselton and Elissa could no longer suspect Nyctasia of poisoning either her or the matriarch Mhairestri, and they had thus been forced to face the likelihood that she was guiltless where Emeryc's children and Erikasten were concerned as well. They found themselves in the uncomfortable position of owing her an apology for their previous accusations, and, being Edonaris, they would not shirk their duty.

But Nyctasia forestalled them by greeting them at once with humble and quite sincere apologies for

having suspected them of poisoning Lhejadis in order to incriminate her. She too was reconsidering her views about the safety of the children.

After receiving her confession, it was far easier for Nyctasia's elders to make their own amends with grace. Mutually reassured, the three parted company on better terms and with more goodwill than at any time in the past.

All in all, Nyctasia felt that she'd earned a rest. She sent her page to order a hot bath.

## 18

FOR THE FIRST TIME, Nyctasia regretted having cut off her long hair, years ago, to defy her family and to allow her to disguise herself more easily as a common student or harper. At last lying once more beside Erystalben in her great bed, she would have liked to sweep her hair across his bare chest, as he'd always loved, but she contented herself with trailing her fingertips down his throat and along his collarbone. Her maid had considered it most improper to admit him while her mistress was bathing, but Nyctasia had thought it an excellent idea. Surely by now his arm must be nearly healed, she'd reasoned

....

He caught her hand and kissed it. "Now you'll have to take another bath," he teased.

"Mmm, so will you. You can share mine. You'll stay the night, 'Ben?"

"I may stay permanently, if you'll have me. I'm more welcome here than among the Shiasfred."

"You've not remembered them, then?" Nyctasia asked, rather guiltily. Really, she thought, she might have given him a chance to tell her that before, instead of greeting him like a starving woman offered a leg of mutton.

He didn't answer at once, but drew her close again and toyed with the soft, crisp hair at the back of her neck. She smelled faintly of mint. "No," he said finally, "but it's not only that I don't remember them ... what troubles me is that I don't particularly *like* them."

"But you never did. I told you that neither of us could get on with our families."

"You did, but I didn't realize ... I've *heard* them at it, in the *vahn*'s name! They either want to be rid of me altogether or use me to influence you. They deliberate over how secure your position is, because they're afraid to offend the ruler of the city by turning away her favorite. But if they acknowledge me as heir instead of Jhasteine, they may forfeit the alliance with the House of Lesevern—and then suppose you fall from power?" His voice was disdainful, but Nyctasia could feel the anger in his hands. "None of them cares a straw whether I'm Lord Descador's son or not, only whether I'd be an advantage or disadvantage to the House of Shiasfred. It's not quite the homecoming I'd anticipated."

"I'm sorry, 'Ben. I tried to warn you. They'd accept you readily enough, I daresay, if you abandoned your claim to the Jhaicery."

"I've done so already, it would seem. They say that Lord Erystalben renounced his position formally before he left the city. But did he—did I? How am I to know?"

"If you did, you said nothing to me about it. Still, you might well have done so. It would have been the responsible step to take, since you didn't intend to return. And you always felt that you'd have no time for your studies, as head of the House of Shiasfred. But if you doubt their word, I can see to it that they recognize you as heir to the Jhaicery, never fear. It's for you to say."

"A pox on the Jhaicery, and the Shiasfred with it! I don't know that I want any part of them, even if they are my kin."

Nyctasia kissed the corner of his mouth. "Then stay with me, 'Ben," she murmured—"

"As your consort, perhaps? You didn't tell me, in Chiasstelm, that you were soon to be married to the ruler of Ochram."

"Am I never to hear the end of Aithrenn brenn Ochram! I didn't tell you of the matter because I never gave it a thought. Nothing whatsoever has been settled, or even discussed yet, but even if I marry the High Lord, that's of no consequence to us. You know a marriage-treaty's purely traditional—it means nothing."

He was silent for so long that Nyctasia grew anxious. She knew that he was not asleep. "Ben?"

Answer me, love. I'd refuse the alliance for your sake if I were free, but I must do whatever's best for the city—I've no choice. Rhostshyl is your rival, not Lord Aithrenn."

"But will your bodyguard allow the union?" he asked with bitter humor.

"That's what she asked me about you."

He sighed. "I've no right to make demands on you, I know that," he said resignedly, but broke out in frustration, "If I could but feel that anything here belonged to me! Rhostshyl promised me all, but it's given me only a family I can't care for, a title I can't lay claim to, a woman I can't make my wife—*Vahn* help me, if only I could feel that I belonged here—!"

*I'm going to lose him again*, Nyctasia thought with a sudden hopeless conviction. She held tightly to him and said, "Perhaps you will remember in time, 'Ben, You've not been here long. The city may yet awaken your memories."

"You don't believe that, do you?" It was not really a question.

The time had come to tell him the truth, Nyctasia saw. "No," she said gently. "I'm not at all certain what to expect, but I don't believe that you'll recover your past without some further sacrifice. A spell of Perilous Threshold does not return what it has taken."

He had grown so still that she could barely feel him breathe. "What sort of sacrifice?" he demanded in a low hiss.

"I don't know. I've made little study of spellcasting, and still less of spellbreaking, but ..." She too let her voice sink to a whisper. "I have books here that belonged to the Cymvelans, and you might find the answer to such a question among them."

"Books? What books are they?"

"Such books as Khressen's *On the Securing and Sundering of Spells*, and the forbidden *Mastery of the Invited Powers*."

"No one has those books, they were destroyed—" Yet until she had named them, he had not realized that he'd ever heard of them.

"The Cymvelan Circle had them still, and I keep them now—under lock and key, you may be sure. I've shown them to no one. I haven't read them myself, nor do I mean to read them, but you may do so if you choose—if there's no other way." It might be a mistake, but it was the only hope she had left to offer him. "You know what they are, 'Ben. Do you want to read them?"

"I have to read them!" he said passionately. "I have to know who I am, now. I could just bear to be a stranger to myself when I was among strangers, but here where I'm known to others, yet know them not, it's maddening. Whatever the price, I must believe I'm Erystalben if I'm to live his life. No one else—not even you—can believe that for me. If the books can give me that, I must have them, don't you understand?"

Nyctasia could only embrace him and promise, "I'll try, love. I'll try." Then they were locked together again. Yet lying in his arms at last, in her great bed, as close to him as she could be, she sensed once more the growing distance between them.

## 19

"WREN ...!" SAID NYCTASIA. "*Aithrenn*, of course. How blind I've been! I can't even accuse you of duplicity, my lord, since I was equally guilty. But you had the advantage of me, it seems. How did you know me?"

Lord Aithrenn chuckled, enjoying her astonishment. "You'd been described to me, my lady—dog and all. And the way you talked of the Rhaicime made me suspect you as well. But I wasn't sure of you until the next morning, when you described your dream, that all of Rhostshyl followed you to the sea, rejoicing."

"But I never told you that! I said only that Rhostshyl marched to the sea, not that I led the way or that it was a festal procession." She had chosen her words deliberately at the time, and remembered them.

Leaning toward her, serious now, he said, "There was no need for you to tell me, Rhaicime, for I knew. I had the same dream that night—that the people of Ochram journeyed with me to the gates of

Rhostshyl, coming after me with song and celebration.” He sat back again, silent, allowing Nyctasia time to realize the significance of his words. He knew exactly what they would mean to her.

Nyctasia too was silent for a time, lost in thought. But now her thoughts were fixed on the future, after dwelling so long on the past. At last she said. “It would seem that this decision has already been made for us. Are you satisfied with your scrutiny of Rhostshyl? You’ve seen the destruction and poverty in the city?”

He nodded. “It was no more than I expected to see. The one thing that surprised me was the talk of invasion from Heithskor.”

“Why, my rumor-mongers have done well, if you heard that! But it’s all moonshine and mirrors, I assure you, devised to unite the troublesome factions in the city. If the governors of Heithskor thought to take advantage of Rhostshyl’s weakened state, the power of the Alliance would soon change their minds, as you know. Only the consequences of our civil warfare need concern you.”

“As to that, this proposal of mine *is* one such consequence. Before Rhostshyl’s ruin, the Rhaicimate would never have entertained the idea of union with another municipality. It is I who seek to take advantage of Rhostshyl’s losses.”

He was right, Nyctasia realized. The very people who now urged her to accept his offer would have scorned it when Rhostshyl’s power was at its height. No other city—not even the thriving port of Ochram—would have been thought worthy to share that power. Not without reason had Rhostshyl been called the proud city.

But now the advantage seemed all the other way. “I see the benefit of such a union for Rhostshyl,” she admitted, “but what does Ochram stand to gain by it now?”

“Oh, a great deal, Rhaicime, I trust. Prestige, for one thing. Rhostshyl has not lost her name and reputation. But that is the least of it. Ochram is built on the rock of the coast—we need grain and dairy-goods that we can’t produce ourselves. We need arable land.” He held up a hand to forestall Nyctasia’s objection. “I’m aware that Rhostshyl hasn’t food enough for her own people at present, but that will not always be so. When her estates are again fully cultivated, they can easily supply Ochram with farmstuffs—at favorable terms of trade, of course. By the same token, we will gain a ready market for our imported goods and fish, offered on the same terms.”

Nyctasia only nodded encouragingly and said, “Yes?” as a polite indication that she was still waiting for him to come to the point. Mutual trading privileges were all very well, but they did not require two cities to merge their interests to the extent of a bond of union.

Lord Aithrenn sipped his wine and continued in the same unhurried manner, “More than prestige or provisions, however, Ochram needs space to grow. We are hemmed in on three sides by the sea and the cliffs, and by Rhostshyl Wood on the fourth. Our success as a mercantile port has swelled our populace beyond what our borders can reasonably hold, but we’re unable to expand those borders. The city’s growing too crowded already, and that leads, of course, to crime and sickness. Now, Rhostshyl has recently suffered a great loss of her citizenry. If the two cities were one, under the law, our people could make good that loss, without forfeiting their guild-rights or violating yours.”

“So you mean to swallow up Rhostshyl on your way east, do you?” said Nyctasia, sounding amused. “Yet my advisors believe—and I agree—that if the two do indeed become one, that one will be Rhostshyl. This city too is growing, sir. Since you traveled here with a band of students, you must know something of the scholarly work being carried out at court?”

“My claims to scholarship are as modest as Your Ladyship’s are renowned, but I have heard reports that you were in possession of the fabled Cymvelan library. It seems to be more than idle talk.”

“It is indeed. Many of the greatest scholars living are gathering here to consult the Cymvelan books, and I intend to make it worth their while to stay. And where scholars go, naturally students follow. My intention is no less than to make Rhostshyl the center of learning in the west, to rival Celys in the east.”

“Why, this becomes more and more interesting,” Lord Aithrenn said thoughtfully. “In a word, you are speaking of the Maritime University.”

“Exactly! If my plans bear fruit, Rhostshyl will become a far more important and illustrious city than she ever was before. Ochram may be no more than the portal to Rhostshyl, in days to come.”

He waved this aside with a smile. "Ochram would be a great trading harbor, with or without Rhostshyl in our backyard, This design of yours, should it come to pass, will be altogether in our interests. The students you anticipate will naturally dock at Ochram on their way to the university. And just as students follow scholars, merchants and artisans follow students. Rhostshyl will need bookbinders, copyists, victualers, clothiers, shoemakers ...."

"Very likely we shall. And of course guild-rights would be extended to the tradesfolk of Ochram, were we bound by such ties as you propose. But do not deceive yourself that you will be allied to a dying city, or that you will build on her ashes."

Lord Aithrenn grinned, "Certainly not, Rhaicime. Such an idea never entered my mind. In witness to which, you will find me as determined as ever to pursue the treaty, despite your plan to restore Rhostshyl's fortunes by bringing down a horde of students upon us. We'll have to double the night watch, I suppose."

"Or lock up our young people," Nyctasia agreed. "But students are free with their money, whatever else may be said against them." She raised her goblet to clink against his. "Then as long as we understand one another, sir, let us leave to posterity to see which city will devour the other. We can relieve you of some of your overflowing populace, and grant tracts of land for your use as well—particularly if you employ Rhostshylid laborers to clear it and harvest your crops."

"Willingly," he said, "but as to clearing the land, now, that brings me to the most important of Ochram's needs that Rhostshyl may fulfill."

*At last*, thought Nyctasia, and said, "I am all attention, sir."

"Wood," said Lord Aithrenn, striking his hand against the arm of his chair. "Wood for the shipyards of Ochram. At present, we have to bring timber from the south, at great expense—with Rhostshyl Wood at our very doorstep! Hitherto, the Rhaicimate has been adamant in its refusal to allow the trees to be felled, but now, surely Your Ladyship will agree, Rhostshyl needs the revenues more than the forestland."

"The woods are valuable hunting-grounds," Nyctasia explained, and this time it was she who gestured for him to hear her out. "But there could be no possible objection to the clearing of a road through Rhostshyl Wood—on the contrary, a road is precisely what my plans require. It's absurd for travelers to have to skirt the wood or brave the bandits. Rhostshyl should be directly linked to the seaways, all the more so if we're to join our two cities. What's wanted is a broad, safe thoroughfare, one that can't easily be ambushed by robbers. It should be patrolled by road wards day and night, so that even a lone student, who doesn't know a sword from a spindle, may travel it without peril. Of course, to accomplish this, a wide swath through the wood would have to be cleared of timber. I've long contemplated the need for a direct route to the coast, but I lack the resources to carry out such an undertaking, since the war has depleted the City Treasury."

"Yet from what I've seen in the streets of Rhostshyl, you have people enough who'd be glad of the work."

"The difficulty is not in finding laborers, but in feeding them. Now Ochram, as Your Lordship has been at some pains to point out, is a wealthy and flourishing city. A roadway to Rhostshyl would benefit your people as well."

Lord Aithrenn surrendered with a laugh. "So you'll have a road and food for the hungry of Rhostshyl."

"And you will have a road and wood for the shipwrights of Ochram. I feel confident that we can reach mutually acceptable terms in this matter." She consulted a list she had drawn up earlier, and asked, "Have you made a study of Rhostshyl's laws? I am not, I must admit, familiar with those of Ochram. There may be differences which will have to be reconciled if our people are to enjoy citizenship of both municipalities."

"The disparities are mainly minor, but in certain cases the laws of Rhostshyl are considerably more lenient than our own. I've been trying to bring about these very changes for some time, and I have been opposed by influential merchant interests on the City Council, but now I mean to take this opportunity to get my way. The Council wants the alliance with Rhostshyl, you see. I shall report to them, with your leave, that you make it a condition of your consent to the treaty that our laws be brought into conformity

with those of Rhostshyl in these particulars. You would oblige me by confirming this fiction.”

“Done.” Nyctasia said with relief. “Consider it an unalterable demand on my part, sir.”

“Many thanks, Rhaicime. Shall we say spring for the ceremony, in keeping with tradition?”

“An auspicious time. My sister’s child is due in the spring. You have been told, I trust, that I myself am barren? You must not look for an heir from this union of ours.”

He shook his head. “I’ve heirs enough to satisfy the city.”

Nyctasia knew a moment’s confusion before she realized that when he said “the city,” he meant of course Ochram, not Rhostshyl. “My late brother’s daughter is my heir,” she informed him, “unless my sister should bear more than one girl-child before my niece comes of age. I’ve never thought that likely, as we are not a prolific family, but then neither did I think to see her with child so soon, so I suppose that anything may yet happen. Our lines of descent must be made clear and indisputable by treaty, lest either side should try to lay claim to rule of both cities, in the future, and set off wars of sovereignty.”

“True,” he said soberly, “We don’t want to repeat the wars of Kehs-Edre. Far safer not to mix our lines, now or in later generations. Perhaps we can establish a prohibition to that effect. But our envoys can attend to these details, if you and I are agreed as to the essentials.”

“I believe we are,” said Nyctasia. “In the spring, then?”

“In the spring. I shall, of course, send you a formal invitation to make a state visit to Ochram in the meantime.”

“I shall look forward to it, sir.”

Lord Aithrenn kissed her hand, and she suddenly began to laugh. At his quizzical look, she shook her head helplessly and said, “Forgive me—everything seems to be happening so quickly. I was thinking of a time when I was first learning to ride, and a horse ran away with me. No one could catch the beast, and I didn’t know how to control its flight, so I just held fast and kept my seat as best I could. In my ignorance, I had great faith that my mount knew what it was about.

“In time it stopped to graze in a field, while I waited to see what it would do next, and my people caught up to me. I don’t recall what my feelings were, but I’m told that I said, ‘How exciting, but it makes one quite giddy, doesn’t it?’ I had no idea at all what danger I’d been in. And now I feel my plans have runaway with me .... We can only hold tight and hope that all turns out well. It’s exhilarating, without doubt, but it *does* make one giddy!”

## 20

MATTERS CONTINUED TO progress at a dizzying pace during the months that followed, and Nyctasia was kept so busy that she was hardly aware of the passage of time, as autumn gave way to winter, and winter wore on toward spring. Preparations for the marriage-alliance alone could have occupied most of her hours, had there not been so many other claims on her attention as well. Not only must arrangements be made for the ceremony itself, but the terms of the treaty necessitated endless discussions of diplomatic precedents and jurisdictions. Dignitaries from Ochram arrived almost daily to confer with Nyctasia and her advisors. It was settled at last that the formalities would begin in Rhostshyl with Nyctasia’s vows, carried out in a simple court ritual, and would then proceed to Ochram for the conclusion of the solemnities, and the festivities to follow. This arrangement satisfied the counselors of both parties by giving precedence to Rhostshyl, but prominence to Ochram. For the court and Council of Ochram meant to host an impressive celebration that would demonstrate to the entire Alliance the importance of their city. A tournament of sporting contests would be held, musicians, acrobats and troupes of actors would perform, and all the city would be feasted amid revelry and splendor. Nyctasia was only grateful that the City Treasury of Rhostshyl would be spared the expense of such extravagant displays. She was officially invited to the court of the High Lord, she duly accepted, and the visit took place and was over all in a few days’ time. Corson accompanied her as bodyguard, but Nyctasia refused absolutely to bring Trask along. She promised, however, to let him come to Ochram for the wedding.

Scholars from near and far continued to gather in Rhostshyl, even during the winter, when the traveling was most difficult. As their numbers grew, so grew Nyctasia’s confidence that her dream of the



Maritime University would indeed be realized. She began to speak of it openly, consulting with those who came from Celys, and from most she met with an enthusiasm for the idea as keen as her own. To be part of the creation of a new university was an unheard of opportunity for a scholar to achieve a position of influence and authority. Nyctasia, who had never been to the Imperial University herself, needed a good deal of advice about how such an institution should be governed, and her learned visitors were more than willing to supply it. She sent for architects, and commissioned plans for the great halls she hoped to have built, just outside the city walls. At times the Fourteenth Divination haunted her with its mocking uncertainty. When she had cast the lots, years ago, to learn whether she would ever attend the University, she had received only that same unsatisfactory answer, but now she was struck by its unexpected fitness. True, she had not been granted her desire to study at Celys, but it began to seem ever more likely that she would, after a fashion, attend the University ....

Corson came and went during the winter months, usually bringing Trask, who was always eager to show Nyctasia his latest accomplishment. "Steifann's vexed with you, Nyc, for letting him learn to read," Corson told her. "Now he has to lock up his letters, or that one will read them out to the whole taproom."

"That wasn't my doing, far from it," Nyctasia objected. "Tell Steifann he'd do better to leave the letters lying about, and lock up Trask instead."

Though the time sped for Nyctasia, to Corson the winter seemed to drag on endlessly. It was a relief to be able to escape to the court now and then, when life at The Jugged Hare began to feel too confining. It was no time for long journeys, but an occasional visit to Rhostshyl helped to satisfy her restlessness, and she was always willing to escort Nyctasia's couriers to and from Ochram. Her appearances were frequently a relief to Nyctasia as well, for Corson often took it upon herself to rescue her from the others, the better to have Nyctasia's attention to herself.

As spring approached, Tiambria complacently grew enormous, but remained as willful and lively as ever, scorning all suggestions that she rest quietly and let others tend to her. She declared that she felt wonderfully well, and worried her young husband Jehamias to distraction. Nyctasia too was rather alarmed for her, though she concealed her fears from Jehamias, but Master Anthorne and Dame Tsephis informed her that nothing was amiss, and that the signs were all favorable.

"The physicians say we're to let her do as she likes," Nyctasia assured Jehamias. "And we may as well accept their advice, since she'll do as she likes anyway."

Corson too had her say on the matter. "Physicians are all very well when you're sick or wounded," she stated, "but your sister's not ailing, she's just carrying a child. What good are a lot of leeches to her? What she wants is a good midwife."

Nyctasia felt as surprised as if Greymantle had offered his opinion. "Corson, you amaze me. How do *you* know about such things?"

"I don't. But Walden does. He said to tell you to send for his wife Omia. She doesn't usually go so far as Rhostshyl, but Walden says she'll come as a favor, since you're a friend of the house."

"I'm honored," said Nyctasia, "but tell them they needn't worry. I have the best midwives in Rhostshyl at hand. The physicians will only assist in case of need."

"The best in Rhostshyl, maybe, but I'll wager that among the lot of them they've not borne as many brats as Omia—nor birthed as many. And she's never lost a babe, nor a mother either. Oh, Walden wants her to have the glory of delivering a baby Rhaicime, I know, but all the same he's right. There's no better midwife on the coast. Anyone in Chiastelm will tell you the same."

Nyctasia asked only one person in Chiastelm, and when Maegor sent back a message warmly confirming Corson's claims, she quickly made arrangements to accept Mistress Omia's services. In days to come, she would employ such magical healing arts as she possessed on Tiambria's behalf, but at present she had done all in her power for her sister.

With all these matters to attend to, Nyctasia saw little of Erystalben, who found that the Rhaicime of Rhostshyl was a different woman from the mistress of the Smugglers' House. It was one thing to be on intimate terms with a stranger who cared for one, and quite another thing to make claims on the time of the ruler of a city. He immersed himself in study of the books of spells and counterspells that now seemed

to hold his only hope. He had not yet remembered anything of his past, and his dreams of the Yth had not ceased. Nyctasia saw him growing more distant and withdrawn, but with the passing of the winter she had less time than ever to devote to him.

When she received word from Corson that another shipment of books had arrived at the Hare, Nyctasia was astonished to realize that the trade route through the Valleylands to the east must have been clear for some time. The spring thaw had come sooner than seemed possible. She could not spare the time to go collect the books herself, but she sent 'Malkin to take charge of them, and gave him a letter to deliver to Corson as well.

'Malkin was still curious about The Jugged Hare. Nothing in Trask's descriptions of the tavern had made it clear to him why the Rhaicime should make a habit of visiting the place, nor had the sight of the Hare itself explained the mystery. It was perhaps a little larger, and cleaner, than most—clearly a prosperous concern—but still it was only a common ale-house like hundreds of others he'd frequented in his student days. Hardly the haunt of Rhaicimes, he thought. 'Malkin had been in far shabbier establishments, and more recently than he'd have cared to admit, but after his months at court, the Hare looked barely respectable to him. He felt an unwonted sympathy for Trask.

He'd arrived in Chiastelm too late in the day to think of starting back till the morrow, so he'd taken a room at one of the better inns, then had a meal, bathed and changed his travel-worn clothes before going about his business. He didn't expect anyone at the Hare to notice or care how he looked, but as the Lady Nyctasia's courier and emissary it behooved him to make a decent appearance nevertheless. It was therefore nearly closing time before he arrived at the Hare, and the taproom was almost empty. Corson was nowhere to be seen, but 'Malkin recognized Steifann from Trask's description and asked him where Corson might be found.

Steifann regarded him with marked disfavor. Not the usual sort of good-for-nothing reaver Corson kept company with, but a scoundrel of some sort, no doubt. "You're not a Rhaicime in disguise, are you?" he asked with a scowl.

"Er ... no, unfortunately," said 'Malkin.

"Good. The last time I threw one of Corson's lovers out of here, it turned out I was dealing with a Rhaicime, and it was an awkward business all 'round. But you—"

"The Lady Nyctasia, do you mean?" 'Malkin interrupted, diplomatically ignoring the threat against himself. "Did you actually lay hands on her? I took her for a servant-wench myself when I first saw her, and gave her a friendly pat on the posterior. Now *that* was awkward if you like—"

"Oh, you're that one," said Steifann. "Well, I wouldn't think you'd want anything to do with Corson, then."

"I don't," said 'Malkin, with unmistakable sincerity. "But I have to fetch Lady Nyctasia's books from her, and deliver a letter to her. If I had my way, she'd be food for crows. Of all the insufferable savages it has ever been my misfortune to meet, that one is the most treacherous and vicious!"

Far from resenting this vilification of Corson's character, Steifann altogether approved of 'Malkin's attitude. There were far too few people, in his opinion, who wanted nothing to do with Corson. "Isn't she, though?" he said genially. "I don't know why I put up with her. Once the City Governors made me close my doors for a week after a fight she started in here. Fined me a pretty penny, too. I sent her packing then and there, I can tell you, but no matter how often I put her out, she always turned up again."

"That's nothing to the trouble she can cause! We were both jailed for nearly a fortnight in Larkmere, once, because she attacked an officer of the night watch. And that wasn't the worst of it—"

Steifann clapped him on the shoulder. "Come have a drink! Corson's in the back. Trask!" he called, "Fetch some of Nyc's fancy wine for our guest!"

"Why, it's 'Malkin. What are you doing here?" Corson asked. "Have you lost your place at court already? We could do with another scullion, if you're out of work."

"I've come for Nyc's books, of course," 'Malkin said curtly, sounding as if he had never referred to Nyctasia in any other way.

Taking his cue from this, Trask said—omitting the "sir"—"Malkin, welcome to the Hare! It's not the palace, perhaps, but we serve as fine a wine as you'll find outside the Valleylands." He poured 'Malkin a

generous measure of a tawny gold wine, and presented it to him with a playful bow.

"This is good," he said appreciatively. "It has a nice bite to it."

"That's why they named it after me," Corson said with a snap of her teeth.

"We were just talking of you," said Steifann. "Our friend here was telling me a most interesting tale. Let's have the rest of it."

He and 'Malkin were soon exchanging stories like old acquaintances, vying to tell the worst tale of Corson's misdeeds and evil temper. Corson denied most of it, but no one heeded her, and the others soon began to contribute details to Steifann's accounts, or relate episodes of their own.

"Don't forget the first time she came in here, either," Walden put in. "We knew then that Steifann had met his match at last."

"Now that was all your fault, 'Malkin," said Corson. "It was not long after I parted from you, and I was doing everything you disapproved of, just to spite you—gambling and drinking and looking for trouble—"

"I remember that night!" Trask said gleefully. "She looked like a drowned cat. Stinking drunk, too, and she ate a lot of food without paying for it—"

"Then she had the gall to flirt with me," Annin recalled. "Without a penny in her pockets, either!"

"Steifann tried to throw her out, but she got the better of him."

"She fights dirty," Steifann explained. "Very dirty. Filthy." It was one of his favorite stories.

"She all but tore the place apart," said Walden. "Chairs and tables went flying—"

"Only one table," Corson protested.

"Then she *chased* Steifann into his room," Trask continued, "and they didn't come out for a week."

"Now *that's* not so," said Steifann. "It can't have been more than two or three days."

Walden took up the tale again. "And then they staggered into my kitchen one morning with their arms 'round each other, grinning like a pair of idiots, and all he said was, 'This is Corson. She's going to stay for a while.' Then they ate everything in sight and disappeared for another few days."

"Well, what could I do?" Steifann asked innocently. "She took advantage of me. I can hold my own against a dozen common brawlers in a fistfight, but that one's a trained killer. I was just a helpless victim of—"

The others hooted him down.

"I was a little wild in those days," Corson admitted, when the tumult subsided.

"Huh—you're not what I'd call a ewe-lamb nowadays either," said Steifann.

"Well, I can't help that. Nyc says I'm encourageable."

"*Incorrigible*," 'Malkin sighed. "Here, I'd almost forgotten, Nyc sent you this letter."

Corson read it through quickly and started to laugh. "It's an invitation to the celebration of the marriage-alliance," she reported. "Nyc wants me on hand, in case there's trouble, and I'm to bring Omia to Rhostshyl because she may be wanted at any time. Then she says that anyone else who wants to see the festivities should come along, and—listen to this—but under no circumstances should you neglect to bring Trask! What do you make of that?"

"Corson! Does it really say that?" Trask demanded.

"See for yourself—you're such a keen reader." Trask grabbed the letter and began to spell it out, muttering to himself. Corson turned to 'Malkin. "I suppose Nyc's betrothal has kept you out of her bed, eh?"

He shook his head regretfully. "No, it's Lord Erystalben who's done that. The betrothal's merely a formality, but Shiadred's another matter. When she has time to think of anyone, she thinks of him and no one else. It's certainly a pity. We were getting on so well before he appeared." He spoke as one disappointed, not of a romance but of an opportunity.

"Cir-cum-stan-ces," Trask read triumphantly, then suggested to 'Malkin, "You could poison him."

"That's not much in my line, I'm afraid. But perhaps someone else will do it for me. I'm not the only one inconvenienced by his return. They say there'll be trouble if he tries to press his claim to the Jhaicery. As for me, I have the University to console me. I'll be one of the Master Scholars of Rhostshyl—a provost at least, if not a chancellor. I could never have attained such a position in Celys, where I'm not

known to anyone of importance. Yes, I know it was your doing that I'm known to the Rhaicime, Corson, you needn't remind me."

Corson grinned. "I was just going to ask, Master Scholar, do you want to see Nyc's books now? They're locked up safely. I haven't let Trask get at them."

"I wouldn't have hurt them," Trask complained. "I've finished with the things you gave me, 'Malkin. There's no library here, you know. How am I supposed to practice?"

"Not with these books," 'Malkin said firmly. "I'll send you some new texts to work on, but you stay out of the Rhaicime's books if you want to stay out of trouble, my lad." He finished his wine and followed Corson to Steifann's quarters to inspect the shipment, checking each volume against a list. When he was done, he replaced them carefully in the chest and relocked it. "It's probably safest to leave them here till tomorrow," he said as they returned to the kitchen. "The *vahn* knows where my escort's spending the night."

"I'll bring them 'round to you in the morning," Corson offered, "so you can make an early start. Tell Nyc I'll—no, I'll give you a letter for her! I need to practice my penmanship."

"Very well. I'm staying at The Golden Arrow," 'Malkin said, with a glance at Trask. He thanked Steifann cordially for his hospitality and wished the company a good night.

Trask looked after him wistfully. If he was really to attend Nyc's wedding ceremony, he had a dozen questions to ask 'Malkin, but there was all the evening's cleaning yet to be done, to ready the tavern for tomorrow. He sighed and picked up a broom, wondering if he could get away without mopping the taproom.

But Annin, who didn't miss much, took the broom from him and shooed him out with it. "Run along then, and catch him—we can do well enough without you," she said briskly. "You'd not do a good job of it anyway."

## 21

NYCTASIA WAS WAKENED by the unexpected warmth of the early spring night. She pushed away the covers, taking care not to wake 'Ben, and drew back the bedcurtains to let in the mild breeze from the open windows. The heavy weight across her feet proved to be Greymantle who, as usual, had managed to climb onto the bed during the night. He jumped down, at Nyctasia's kick, and curled up with a sigh on the sheepskin rug at the bedside.

By hearth-light and moonlight she looked at 'Ben to see if he was sleeping peacefully. She herself was always so exhausted of late that she slept easily and well, but 'Ben often slept fitfully, still plagued by cruel doubts and dreams. She had more than once awakened in the night to find that he was no longer beside her but had gone to pace the garden walks alone, or had returned to the library to pursue his studies by candlelight.

Watching him sleep, Nyctasia was as much struck by his dark beauty as when they had first met. He bore scars now that she had not seen before, but he rarely spoke of what had befallen him during the last two years, and she did not press him to do so. He seemed as anxious to forget his recent past as to remember the rest, and he could no more do the one than the other. His search of the Cymvelan books had thus far suggested only one way to break the spell that bound him—to return to the Yth where that spell was evoked.

"It is, in essence, a question of elemental Balance," he'd told Nyctasia, "To regain what I've lost, I must give up what I've gained. I never won my freedom from the Yth; I took it, and paid too dearly for it. But if I surrender it, I may gain it again—on my own terms, this time." He had determined to wait only until the roads were clear in the spring and start for Hlasven then, if he still had remembered nothing and had discovered no other solution.

He'd informed Nyctasia of this decision only a fortnight before. "I'm not wanted here, you know it as well as I," he said. "For the *vahn*'s sake, Lord Descador has offered to pay me to go!"

"I want you here," Nyctasia had answered fiercely, but he shook his head and looked away.

"No, you want *him*—Erystalben. When you look at me, you see him, and your face lights. But then

you remember who I am, and your look turns to pity. You once told me that Rhostshyl was my rival for your love, but Shiastred is my true rival. Can you understand how jealous I am of the man I was?"

"I know what you suffer, 'Ben, and I suffer with you. It is pain you read in my eyes, not pity. Yes, I want you to recover the past we shared, but I want it for your sake, not for my own. To me you are Erystalben whether you remember or not, and I'm afraid, 'Ben—afraid that if you return to the Yth, alone, you may find yourself again, but I may lose you again. If there's no other way, then wait until I can go with you—"

"What do you take me for, 'Tasia? I'd not let you risk the Yth on my account!"

"Two together are far safer against the Yth, believe me. I know the ways of the Yth now, and I don't fear its tricks. With my help, you may find what you seek, but you know that I cannot leave the city now, with so many things unsettled. Wait a year—less, perhaps. Once Tiambria's child has been born, and Jehamias has come of age ... when the alliance with Ochram is on firm ground, and the University well enough established that I can appoint chancellors to look after its interests in my absence. Wait until then, and I swear this time I'll not fail you."

He had neither consented to this appeal nor refused it, but Nyctasia was confident that she had persuaded him to stay, at least for the present. If only she felt as confident that she had been right to do so .... She was troubled by his continued preoccupation with the dangerous Cymvelan books, and she knew that he was still tormented by nightmares of the Yth. It seemed all too likely that he would not be free of them until he returned there, and Balance was restored ... Even as she lay looking at him now, she saw him shudder in the grip of a dream, and he whispered, "Old, so old! No, it can't be!"

He'd thought he had been wandering through the Forest for an hour at most, but when he saw himself in the pool, his reflection was that of an aged man, and he knew that he had been lost in the Yth for years, for scores of years. He woke suddenly with a frightened gasp, and said wildly to Nyctasia, "I'm old, old! It's too late!"

She drew him to the side of the bed and pointed to her tall, shining mirror, "Look at yourself, love. You've not changed."

He stared into the mirror for a long while, then said with a deadly calm, "I'm sorry I wakened you, 'Tasia, you need your rest. Go back to sleep—I'll get on with my work. I'll not sleep again tonight." He rose to return to the library, nearly falling over Greymantle, but Nyctasia held him back. She suddenly knew just how to make him forget his evil dream.

"You didn't wake me," she said. "The warm spring air did that. Don't you feel it? It's so beautiful, there's a breeze that smells of blossoms, ... It gave me the most splendid idea about how we might pass the rest of the night—a far better idea than yours. I didn't like to wake you, but now that you're awake anyway ..." She leaned close and whispered her suggestion, circling his waist with her arms and nuzzling his ear.

He laughed softly. "Mad Lass, I almost believe you're in earnest."

"But I am. Why shouldn't we? It's a fine, fair night. What better way to spend it?"

"I can't think of one," Erystalben admitted. "Very well, but on one condition—that hound of yours stays here!"

Despite the late hour, there were others stealing through the gardens to enjoy the inviting night, Nyctasia noticed with amusement. "How everyone always carries me about," she murmured dreamily, cradled in Erystalben's arms like a child.

"Everyone? Who else has been carrying you about, pray?"

"Why ... no one else," said Nyctasia, puzzled by her own remark. "I don't know why I said that. I must have been talking in my sleep." But why had she felt that someone had carried her somewhere, not so very long ago? "My brother Emeryc once carried me out here at night, but that was when we were children. He wanted to show me the game of floating candle-ends downstream in the dark, but of course the night air was thought to be bad for me, so we had to sneak out of the palace in the dead of night. Then he carried me, lest my nurse should see my slippers wet with dew."

"A brother's right I'll allow," Erystalben conceded. "But henceforth no one is to carry you anywhere without my leave." His arms tightened around her as he spoke, and Nyctasia smiled to herself in the

darkness.

"I'll issue an edict to that effect," she promised. "I'll appoint you First Bearer to the Rhaicime, with all the dues, duties, obligations, rights, perquisites and prerogatives pertaining to the office."

"And what are the duties and prerogatives of the position?"

"I shall explain them all to you presently—in private," said Nyctasia.

She had shown him the walled garden once, during the winter, and he went directly to it now, only pausing to let Nyctasia take the key from its hiding-place. Not until they were within its walls did he set her down, kneeling to lay her on the young spring grass, and kissing her eyes and lips before he released her. Nyctasia clung to him, but he laughed and said, "I think I should close the door, don't you?"

"Be quick about it, then," Nyctasia ordered. But before he could obey, two darkly cloaked and hooded figures slipped swiftly through the door and blocked the way, daggers drawn at the ready. Nyctasia had time for only a moment's regret that she hadn't heeded Corson's warnings more faithfully. Neither she nor Erystalben was armed. "Teiryne or Edonaris?" she demanded, scrambling to her feet.

"Shiastred, I think," said Erystalben. As the two started forward, he took a step toward them, as if to meet their attack, but the intruders never reached their quarry. They crumpled suddenly to the ground, without a cry, before they even came within striking distance of Erystalben. "You should not have persuaded me to stay, 'Tasia," he said. "The delay has made Jhasteine impatient."

Nyctasia let fall the handful of earth she had seized to throw, and slowly came to stand at his side. One look at the attackers was sufficient. She did not trouble to listen for their heartbeats. "Ben," she said heavily, "what bargain have you made?"

He put his arm around her shoulders. "Do not ask that if you prefer not to hear the answer, love." When she made no reply, he asked, "Should I have let them kill us both?"

Nyctasia turned away. "Do what you must, 'Ben, but not here. Not in my city. Take the books and go."

Outside the garden, he took her in his arms again. "Am I to come back, when I can claim what is mine in my own name?"

Holding tight to him, Nyctasia thought, *'Ben, where are you? Yes, come back to me. You have never come back to me.* But aloud she said, "I command you to do so. Who is to be my Bearer, if not you? And always let me know where you are—always. It may yet be that I shall come to you."

She had the unknown attackers buried secretly in the garden, then locked the door and threw the key over the wall. She knew that it would be many years before anything grew there again.

## 22

NYCTASIA MADE GOOD her promise to bring Trask to Ochram for the celebration of the marriage-alliance. He was not allowed to attend the court ceremony in Rhostshyl, but Corson, who was present as Guard of Honor, assured him that the proceedings had been nothing but dull talk and bowing.

But the festivities in Ochram more than made up for this disappointment. The spectacle and pageantry were all that he'd hoped, even surpassing the magnificence of the wedding of Lady Tiambria and Lord Jehamias. As a member of Nyctasia's retinue, Trask was a guest of the court, and was admitted everywhere. He found himself mingling with folk of every degree, and—thanks to 'Malkin—he knew better than to make any extravagant claims about his own position. When asked about his place in the Rhaicime's party, he merely replied with charming humility that he was no one at all, a lowly commoner of no family, in whom the Lady Nyctasia had been kind enough to take an interest. This ingenuous response had just the touch of truth needed to make it acceptable, without actually revealing anything about Trask's social standing. 'Malkin was of course too occupied with courting patrons of his own to have time for Trask, but when he happened to encounter his pupil he felt that Trask was doing him credit, and gave him a wink of encouragement.

Nyctasia had never taken an interest in him before, but it would seem that she did so now. It must be the manners he'd learned from 'Malkin that had changed her mind, Trask thought. She had sent for him specially, after all, and even seen that he was provided with a suit of beautiful new clothes for the

occasion. Trask loved these elegant garments, though left to his own devices he would probably have chosen something a good deal more showy. 'Malkin had told him that ostentation in dress was in poor taste, and Trask accepted the idea, but he couldn't help thinking it a shame that folk who could afford brightly-dyed stuffs should content themselves with dull colors. Still, he had no fault to find with the butter-yellow silk shirt he'd been given, which made his hair glow like molten gold. Even Corson had been impressed when he'd shown off his new outfit for her. "Look at our princeling!" she'd said with a whistle. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were someone decent, not a piece of filthy Chiastelm wharf scum."

Trask let his fellow guests draw their own conclusions about his origins, and he was taken for a student, or the son of prosperous tradesfolk, or even a bastard of good blood—but not, apparently, for an underling from an ale-house. Caught up in his role, Trask himself all but forgot what he was and where he came from. He was hardly surprised when Nyctasia summoned him to join her for the actors' performance, though he knew that this was an honor any courtier would envy him. He made Nyctasia a low bow and thanked her very properly for this unlooked-for token of her favor, but she only said, "Sit down and watch the play, Trask—the play, not the audience."

She didn't present him to her other guests, but perhaps that was not to be expected. They might be nobles of exalted rank who'd be insulted if Nyctasia introduced a commoner to them. But never mind, he thought—merely being seen in the Rhaicime's company would confer distinction upon him in the eyes of all who saw him. He smoothed his hair and sat up straighter. 'Malkin was always telling him not to slouch.

Then a burst of trumpets announced that the play was about to begin, and before long Trask had forgotten everything else, even his own ambitions and appearance. The actors had partitioned off the far end of the hall with curtains about the dais, and when two of the troupe pulled back the draperies, Trask saw that they'd transformed the platform into a forest glade with trees and grass and flowers—and could that be a pond? He had sometimes seen traveling bands of mummers put on a crude play in the marketplace, but a polished performance like this, indoors, with elaborate properties and scenery, was a completely new and fascinating experience to him. The trees were of painted wood and gauze, the flowers of cloth and wire, the grass a green carpet, and the pond must of course be a mirror, he realized. Yet all was arranged so cleverly, so charmingly, that the scene was somehow thoroughly convincing, without looking at all realistic. Trask was already captivated, but when the actors entered, in their ornate costumes, and delivered their elegant, dramatic speeches, he was awe-stricken, exalted as if by some long-awaited inspiration. Those who portrayed nobles were more lordly than the real aristocrats who were watching them. The swordfighters were more dashing than real soldiers of fortune, who, in Trask's experience, were more likely to be vulgar louts like Corson than debonair, witty bravos. The bandits were more cunning and clever than real robbers—and Trask had known plenty of thieves in his day. And the princess, when she stood revealed (it seemed that the leader of the bandits had been the princess all along, it was rather complicated) was undoubtedly more majestic than any true daughter of royalty. True, Trask had never seen anyone of regal blood, but he had instinctively grasped the secret of the theater: *everything* on stage was better than in reality. Everything was as it ought to be, not as it was.

Trask watched the play from beginning to end in a state of feverish intensity that left him exhausted. While the audience applauded, some throwing flowers, coins, or sweets wrapped in gilded lace, he only sat stunned and speechless, consumed with desire.

It was Nyctasia's duty, as guest of honor, to summon the leader of the troupe and commend the performance on the court's behalf. When all had taken their bows, and the curtains had been drawn again, she turned to Trask as if he were her page, and said, "Go present my compliments to the actors, Trask, and fetch me the man who played the king."

As if in a dream, Trask rose unsteadily, murmured, "Yes, Nyc," and hurried away, his eyes still fixed on the curtain.

The master-actor bowed to Nyctasia with a grace that Trask envied, accepted her congratulations with eloquent thanks, then startled Trask not a little by pointing to him and asking, "Is this the one you mentioned, my lady?"

“Yes. A likely lad, don’t you think? He’s nothing but a nuisance to me, but you might find a use for him, no?”

Trask held his breath.

The director of the troupe looked him over with a professional eye. The boy was at a usefully indeterminate age—young enough to pass for a lass, if they were short a girl, but old enough to fill any number of minor men’s roles with a little padding and a false mustache. They could always do with a spare man-at-arms, a herald, thief, beggar or page. He’d do for an urchin, too, for another year or so. Then with a few years’ training behind him he’d be just the right age for a young hero of romance—and he’d have the looks for the part as well. And besides, a boy who enjoyed the patronage of a Rhaicime might well be valuable in other ways ....

“Can he read?” he asked at last. It wasn’t necessary, of course, but it was useful for learning long speeches.

“Yes!” cried Trask, but both ignored him.

“So I’m told,” said Nyctasia. “And he has a good deal of native ability. He’s an excellent mimic, as I know to my cost. He learns quickly, and remembers what he’s taught. You’ll not regret taking him on.”

“Mind you, he can’t expect a wage till he’s trained, my lady, and not much then. He’ll be working for his keep and training for two years at the least.”

“I would gladly pay you a ’prentice-fee to take him,” said Nyctasia. “Just keep him out of my way!”

“Done!” said the actor, laughing. He bowed again and gestured to Trask. “Come along and make yourself useful, youngster. There’s everything still to be packed away.”

“Yes, sir,” Trask said breathlessly. He too bowed to Nyctasia, imitating the older man’s flourish. “Nyc—I mean, Your Ladyship—” he began, but Nyctasia cut short his words.

“Don’t thank me,” she ordered, “thank Annin. I expect you’ll pass through Chiastelm on your way north. Now please go away.”

Trask didn’t see what Annin could have to do with his good fortune, but he felt so dazed that anything seemed possible. “Yes, my lady,” he said, and followed his new master without another word. Perhaps if he was careful and didn’t question his luck, he thought, he could keep himself from waking up.

## 23

NYCTASIA WAS DREAMING of bells again.

Even deep in the crypts, she had heard the bells heralding her mother’s death, and now, as Tiambria’s time drew nigh, the echo of their knell haunted her dreams and made her start anxiously at any bell that sounded. Her concern for her sister, and for the child who was to unify the city, drove all other matters from her mind, and she allowed more of the responsibility for Rhostshyl to fall to others, and left much of the business of the budding university in the capable and willing hands of ’Malkin. So occupied was she with thoughts of Tiambria that she rarely even found herself brooding over the loss of Erystalben. She devoted herself to study of the great scholarly works on the healing arts, poring over all that was written about childbearing and its dangers, but she learned nothing that Dame Tsephis and Master Anthorne had not told her.

The same fears tormented Lord Jehamias. “Your own mother died in childbed, did she not?” he asked Nyctasia wretchedly. “And Briar is—”

“No, Jehame. I’ve told you, Teselescq would have recovered fully if she’d given herself time to heal, as her physicians advised. She made light of their warnings and went riding far too soon after the twins were born. She was seized with such pains that she lost her seat and suffered a terrible fall. It was her own willfulness that killed her.”

He groaned. “But that’s just the sort of thing Briar would do.”

“Yes, but Briar has you and me to keep her from killing herself, brother. Teselescq’s husband was an old man who took little interest in her—theirs was purely a marriage of duty. But if you ask Briar to do as her physicians order, just to spare you worry, I daresay she’ll oblige you.”

“Perhaps she may, but suppose she refuses?”



“Jehame, Briar knows what happened to our mother. But even if she refuses to listen to reason, nothing of the sort will happen to her, because I’ll have her locked up if necessary! Teselescq was of age, you see, but Briar is still my ward, by law. So you needn’t worry—between us, we’ll take care of her in spite of herself.” It was all perfectly true, but it comforted neither of them much.

“Still, I wish there was something I could do now,” said Jehamias. “You’re a healer, ’Tasia, you’ll have your spells to do, but I can only wait. They won’t even let me stay with her. Mistress Omia says I’d only be in the way.”

“She said much the same to me, and she’s right, I’m afraid. I may be a healer, but I’m no midwife, nor even a physician. I can’t very well put Briar into a healing-trance while she’s giving birth, so I can be of little help till the child’s born—and she’ll probably not need me, then. All I can do when the time comes is undertake a trance-spell myself, to try to create an Influence to lend her strength. It may well come to nothing.”

“Even that’s more than I can do,” sighed Jehamias.

“But you can help me, Jehame, if you will. I need someone to attend me, to see that nothing disturbs me, and to recall me from the trance at the proper time. Someone who cares for Tiambria would best serve the Influence, you see.”

Jehamias had of course been eager to help, to feel that he could be of some use to his wife at such a time. Tiambria’s confinement therefore found him secluded with Nyctasia, watching over her anxiously as she sat stiffly upright in a narrow chair, silent and motionless, unaware of him or of anything save her inner visions. Greymantle lay at her feet, not sleeping but perhaps creating an Influence of his own to guard her.

She had given Jehamias various tasks—most of them quite meaningless—to keep him occupied. He tended the fire carefully, felt Nyctasia’s pulse from time to time, and dutifully tried to concentrate his thoughts on the Discipline that Nyctasia had said would somehow assist her in her efforts. But as the hours passed without word of Tiambria, he paced the chamber more and more, waiting and worrying, while Nyctasia’s trance gave way to mere dreams, dreams of great iron bells.

The tolling of the bells reached her even far beneath the earth, and she turned to her cousin in dismay, only to find that he was not Thierran, but Jenisorn brenn Vale. “There’s nothing to fear, Nyc,” said Jenisorn, laughing. “It’s the harvest-bells. The Royal Crimson are ripe, the Crush has begun! We must hurry, or the fruit will lose its flavor.”

Of course, this dark underground passage was in the wine-cellars of the Edonaris vintnery, not in the crypts of the palace. Her mother had died long ago, she was safe in the Midlands, far from Rhostshyl and its mournful memories. She followed Jenisorn up the stairs at a run, the sound of the bells growing ever louder as she neared the light at the head of the stairs.

She raced through the doorway, despite the deafening clamor, into the abandoned tower on the crown of Honeycomb Hill. The bell-rope thrashed wildly from side to side, but Nyctasia caught it and pulled as hard as she could, lest the bell should fall silent too soon. She was dragged and shaken to and fro by the weight of the bell, and the ground trembled beneath her as the shattering noise fractured the supports beneath the tower. At any moment it might collapse and crush her, but Nyctasia could not abandon her duty. Mortal danger threatened the valley, and only she could sound the warning in time. Someone called to her from nearby, and she wondered, in the midst of her frantic efforts, why he should use her old nickname, when she was known in Vale only as Nyc ....

“’Tasia!” cried Jehamias, shaking her awake at last. “Come, the bells have sounded—the birth-peal! Twice, ’Tasia, they’ve rung it twice. It must be twins!”

\* \* \*

“As soon as one begins to cry, the other joins in,” Tiambria said despairingly. “Did ’Kasten and I do that?”

“You certainly did,” said Nyctasia. “And you didn’t stop it till you were ten years old.”

Tiambria laughed. Sitting up in bed, supported by pillows and cushions, she looked wan and weak, but pleased with herself. “But what ails the creatures now? They *can’t* be hungry again so soon. Jehame, do send for a nursemaid. Tell her to take them away and drown them.”

“They don’t want a nurse, they want their aunt,” said Nyctasia. “Don’t you, my pets?” She picked up one of the swaddled infants and asked it, “Now are you my niece or my nephew?” The child stopped crying and gazed at her in solemn, wondering silence. “Never mind, you’re sure to be one or the other,” she said, tucking it into the crook of her arm and deftly scooping up its twin with her free arm. It too stopped its whimpering as Nyctasia bounced them both gently up and down.

Jehamias, who was still terrified to hold even one of the babies, watched her in awe and alarm, and even Tiambria murmured, “Do take care, ’Tasia.”

“Ho, you forget that I was carrying both you and ’Kasten about when I was twelve. I daresay I could juggle these little mites if I tried.” She knelt down and offered the babies for Greymantle’s approval. “What do you think, Grey? Will they do?” He sniffed them with interest, wagging his tail, then began to lick their faces, pleased with their milky scent. One of the twins gurgled with delight, and the other immediately echoed the sound.

“’Tasia, don’t let him do that!” Tiambria protested. “Anyone would think you were raised in a kennel! Give them to me.” She held out her arms for the twins.

Nyctasia grinned at her disapproval. “Nothing’s cleaner than a hound’s mouth,” she teased. “Oh, very well, Briar, you may have this one.” She let her sister take one of the twins from her arms, and pretended to toss the other to Jehamias. “Do you want one too, Jehame? No?”

“I’ll thank you to stop using my daughter for a shuttlecock,” laughed Tiambria. “And stop tormenting poor Jehame, too. What demon’s gotten into you? Give me that child!”

“I shan’t. I think I’ll keep this one,” said Nyctasia. “Anyone can see that she takes after me, just look how pretty and clever she is.” She sat on the bed near Tiambria and held her tiny niece close to her heart, crooning a song to her as she rocked her. The baby made contented, sleepy, suckling sounds, and yawned.

“Can’t you even sing them a proper lullaby?” Tiambria scolded in a whisper.

“They like it,” Nyctasia retorted, and sang softly:

*“Oh, I could complain  
That my life is a curse,  
That love’s a murrain  
That no healer can nurse.  
But let me explain—  
Things could always be worse!”*

## **About the Author(s)**

J. F. Rivkin is the shared pseudonym of two writers who live on opposite sides of the country. They coauthored the first two books of the Silverglass series, *Silverglass* and *Web of Wind*. The next two volumes, *Witch of Rhostshyl* and *Mistress of Ambiguities*, were written by the East Coast J. F. Rivkin, while the West Coast J.F. is the author of the third volume of the RuneSword series, *The Dreamstone*, and is currently writing two books on time-travel and dinosaurs.